

Revelation and the Religions

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Editors Introduction

Since the days of George Fox, one of the most fundamental characteristics of Quakerism has been a belief in continuing revelation. Such revelation may come through what early Friends alternatively called “the Inner Christ,” “the Inner Light,” or “that of God in everyone.” Whether it comes only to those who believe in the divinity of Christ or whether it is available to all sincere seekers of the Divine, whatever their religious tradition, has been a point of division among Quakers for nearly two hundred years.

Friends are not the only ones to have struggled with this issue. As Avery Dulles points out, Christianity proclaimed itself from the beginning as “good news about God’s saving designs for humanity as a whole,” and it therefore contains “an inbuilt tension between particularism and universalism.” The question has assumed an ever keener edge in the 20th century, as the world has moved toward becoming a single global community, and as followers of multiple religious traditions have struggled to find common ground. Here Father Dulles sets forth with meticulous scholarship the various positions on Divine revelation that have been taken by a number of modern theologians, both Protestant and Catholic.

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1. The Problem

Many members of the human race have not known Jesus Christ and have not believed in him, at least explicitly. Does revelation come to them? If so, how is that revelation related to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ?

These questions have been chiefly discussed in connection with those major religions which have, over the centuries, performed for millions of people functions broadly similar to those performed by Christianity for Christians. Religion typically involves prayer, worship, belief in higher powers, self-denial, and ethical commitment. If revelation is anywhere evident beyond the realm of Christian faith, it should be discernible in the religions.

In the case of one such religion, Christian faith has a fairly definite stance, based on the New Testament. Christ and the Church are seen as radicalizing the Law and the prophets. The religion of ancient Israel is viewed as a divinely given preparation for Christianity. The Bible, however, does not encourage a similarly favorable appraisal of paganism. It portrays the religions of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, the Greeks and the Romans, in a negative light bordering on caricature. Since the age of the apostles, Christian theology has vacillated between looking on other religions as providential preparations for Christianity and as idolatrous perversions. In recent discussion, as we shall see, still other options have emerged.

Several preliminary observations may be in order. In the first place, it should be obvious that the question is here being treated from the standpoint of Christian theology, not from that of a “nonaligned” history of religions. Even as theologians, moreover, we shall not here seek to appraise

any given religious tradition in detail, but rather to see whether, in principle, the Christian theological warrants give us reason to think that revelation is present or absent in nonbiblical religions.

I say “nonbiblical” religions because the Christian can readily admit that Judaism and Islam, as “religions of the Book,” contain revelation insofar as they accept sacred texts which Christians also recognize as Scripture. Although the relationships between these biblical faiths are complex and problematical, they will not here be the primary focus of attention. To pose our question in sharpest form, we shall concern ourselves with the presence or absence of revelation in other religions to the extent that they are untouched by historical contact with Judaism or Christianity. Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism present special problems since they do not make any claim to be founded on divine revelation; they are, in the phrase of Robley Whitson, not “overtly revelational.”¹ Islam, by contrast, does claim to be founded on the word of God in the Qur’an, but this revelation has not been acknowledged by Christians as authentic.²

To define the term “religion” in a way that includes everything commonly so called, while excluding everything else, is notoriously difficult, perhaps impossible. Among the major world faiths, Hinduism and Islam fulfill the requirements of religion by any definition. Whether Buddhism is a religion could be disputed, and the same is even more obviously true of Confucianism. The fundamental issue of this chapter does not depend on precisely what qualifies as a religion. Since our concern is whether and how revelation is mediated under auspices other than those of Christian and biblical religion, we need not limit our attention to the religions. They have been selected for special consideration only because they would seem to be more likely

bearers of revelation than philosophies such as neo-Platonism or ideologies such as Marxism.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that we are asking only about revelation. We are not trying to determine whether there is truth or ethical value in these other faiths, religions, ideologies, philosophies, or movements, nor are we seeking to lay down rules for fruitful interreligious dialogue, except insofar as presumption about revelation could help or impede such dialogue. Finally, we are not directly asking about who can be saved. Although revelation and salvation are presumably not unrelated, it would be inappropriate to assume at this point that the presence of revelation in a religion makes it a channel of salvation, for it could be that revelation is given therein only in a measure that suffices for condemnation.³ Conversely, the absence of revelation in a religion does not by itself rule out the possibility that its adherents achieve salvation. It is at least theoretically possible that a Buddhist would have access to a saving revelation not through the Buddhist tradition but through the order of creation or through the voice of conscience. Or perhaps a case could be made for holding that one could make an act of saving faith through an upright will elevated by grace, without dependence on any specific revelation. To discuss the various theories of salvation would take us into a series of problems beyond the scope of this work.

The question of revelation in the religions might seem to be a very simple one, with a yes or no answer. Most theologians, however, answer with distinctions. Some say that without biblical revelation one may have natural revelation rather than supernatural, or general revelation rather than special, or cosmic revelation rather than historical, or general historical revelation rather than special historical revelation. If any kind of revelation is acknowledged, it must further be asked how this is related

to biblical and Christian faith. Here again many different answers are possible. Some see all other revelation as preparatory to Christianity. Some think that it can only be a dim participation of what is given more fully in the Christian revelation. But others hold that the revelation in other religions is different from, and complementary to, that found in biblical religion. Then further differences arise between some who see the religions as being different perspectives on a revelation that is unitary and others who see the different religions as holding different revelations in trust for the benefit of all. If so, each religion, including Christianity, could learn revealed truth from the others. Perhaps none could claim to be essentially superior to the rest.

The difficulty Christians experience in answering questions such as these is in substance theological. On the one hand, Christianity proclaims Jesus Christ as the center, summit, and fullness of all revelation. On the other hand, Christianity is good news about God's saving designs for humanity as a whole. It is not just good news for Christians. Christianity contains, therefore, an inbuilt tension between particularism and universalism. Hence it is not surprising to find some Christians saying that there is no revelation apart from Jesus Christ, and others saying that God reveals himself to every human being. Tensions such as these are evident in the way theologians speak about the relationship between revelation and the religions.

From the following survey, it will be apparent that the first, second, and fourth models, which tend to be reserved toward the category of symbol, are the least inclined to admit revelation in the world's religions. Models three and five, which favor the symbolic approach, find it easy to acknowledge that revelation is present in all religions, but in so saying they frequently relativize the traditional claims of Christianity.

2. The Propositional Model and the Religions

The propositional model, in its appraisal of the religions, is concerned with the question whether they can receive revealed propositional truths in any way except through biblical revelation. This question is answered in similar but slightly different ways in Conservative Evangelicalism and in Catholic neo-Scholasticism.

Conservative Evangelicals hold that special revelation is accessible only through the Bible, but they hold on the basis of certain biblical texts, such as Acts 14:17, Acts 17:22-31, Romans 1:18-20, and Romans 2:15, that God has not left himself without witness to all peoples, which constitutes a kind of “general revelation.” This general revelation, however, is not salvific. The Lausanne Covenant, a profession of faith issued by the International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, declares:

We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies.⁴

Waldron Scott, commenting on this text, holds that God does indeed reveal himself in nature, and that this light may well be reflected in the religions. “Yet people reject the awareness they have. They do not acknowledge God in truth. They utilize their religiosity to escape from God.”⁵ Gordon Clark holds that the contradictions among the pagan

religions prove “the beclouding effects of sin upon the mind as it tries to discover God and salvation in nature.”⁶ Thus Conservative Evangelicalism, while it makes use of the distinction between general and special revelation, tends to look on extrabiblical religion not as revealed but as a “depraved answer to the revelation of God.”⁷

Neo-Scholasticism characteristically makes the distinction not between general and special revelation but between natural and revealed religion, taking a moderately optimistic view of the former. Gerardus van Noort may be quoted as illustrative of this position:

“There are two types of religion: natural and supernatural. Natural religion stems necessarily from the very nature of God and of man, is known and regulated by reason, and leads to a natural goal. Supernatural religion rests upon some sort of revelation. Note, however, that supernatural religion does not destroy, or take the place of natural religion, but is added to it and perfects it.”⁸

The fact that all peoples, from the most primitive to the most civilized, have always practiced religion can be explained, according to Monsignor van Noort, “only on the grounds that all peoples in this matter were following the dictates of sound reason.”⁹ But the religions that actually exist, he concedes, bear the marks of sinful corruption. They are found in “the perverted forms labeled fetishism, animism, manism, totemism, and so on.”¹⁰

Some neo-Scholastics, including van Noort, fortify the idea of natural religion by appealing also to primitive revelation. On the basis of Scripture they hold that revelations were made to the first parents of the human race and to the patriarchs in the period before Moses.¹¹

Traces of this original revelation, they hold, are the best explanation for the nobility and purity of the religion found among some primitive peoples, even in our own day. In support of this many authors allege the findings of the Viennese cultural anthropologist, Wilhelm Schmidt, S.V.D., in his monumental *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (twelve vols., 1921-55).

Contemporary ethnologists and historians of religion appear to be highly skeptical of the thesis, essential to the position of Schmidt, that the more primitive peoples were outstanding for their monotheism.¹² However that may be, the propositional model is too narrow in assuming that revelation outside the biblical religions would have to rest either upon rational deduction from the order of creation or upon some kind of primitive positive revelation, passed down in immemorial tradition. In contrast to other theories we shall examine, this model takes too little account of the workings of God in the history and experience of the unevangelized.

3. Revelation as History and the Religions

The second model, that of revelation as history, must likewise be discussed in two forms, salvation history and universal history. Oscar Cullmann, exemplifying the first approach, holds that the line of salvation history, from the beginnings to the time of Jesus Christ, became increasingly narrowed down to a representative minority until, with Jesus, only a single individual stood for the whole. Since the Resurrection of Jesus the line of salvation and revelation has expanded outward again from its midpoint in Jesus. The missionary proclamation of the Church gives meaning to the entire period of history from the Resurrection to the Parousia.¹³ The Church, as the bearer of revelation, is “the

instrument of the divine redemptive activity.”¹⁴ According to Cullmann the Church does not encounter in the pagan world people who have already accepted revelation, but on the contrary only those who have rejected it. He interprets Acts 17:22ff. and Romans 1:18ff. as teaching that “the Gentiles after Abraham, just as previously, close their minds to the revelation of God in the works of Creation.”¹⁵

Jean Danielou, who professes a modified salvation history approach, finds it possible to make some room for revelation in the nonbiblical religions. He holds that prior to the historical revelation given in biblical religion, God had already revealed himself universally through the cosmos, conscience, and the human spirit. The “cosmic covenant” between God and Noah, as attested by Genesis, Chapter 9, extends, according to Danielou, to all humanity. “The cosmic religion,” he insists, “is not natural religion, in the sense that the latter means something outside the effective and concrete supernatural order.... The cosmic covenant is also a covenant of grace, but it is still imperfect, in the sense that God reveals himself therein only through the cosmos.”¹⁶ The Bible itself, he points out, celebrates the holiness of many “pagans,” such as Abel, Enoch, Daniel, Noah, Job, Melchizedek, Lot, and the Queen of Sheba. Yet it must also be admitted, he says, that the religion of nature is invariably found, in the forms known to us, in a more or less corrupt condition.¹⁷ Thus he feels authorized to make a sharp contrast between Catholic Christianity and all other religions:

Thus, the essential difference between Catholicism and all other religions is that the others start with man. They are touching and often very beautiful attempts, rising very high in their search for God. But in Catholicism there is a contrary movement, the descent of God towards

the world, in order to communicate His life to it. The answer to the aspirations of the entire universe lies in the Judaeo-Christian religion. The true religion, the Catholic religion, is composed of these two elements. It is the religion in which God's grace has made answer to man's cry. In other religions grace is not present, nor is Christ, nor is the gift of God. The vanity and illusion of syncretism lies in its belief that universality is a common denominator of all religions.¹⁸

Neither Cullmann nor Danielou, therefore, seems to credit the idea of revelation in the non-Christian religions. Yet there is nothing in the concept of salvation history that requires the limitation of historical revelation to the biblical peoples. Even prior to the Noahic covenant, God, according to Ben Sirach, made an everlasting covenant with Adam and Eve (Sir 17:10). This was followed by a whole series of further covenants with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and ultimately with Jesus Christ. Each covenant may be interpreted as involving a revelation of God's care and intentions for his people. The successive covenants do not abrogate one another for, according to Paul, God's gifts are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). The "new and eternal covenant" in Jesus (1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:13,12:24) may be seen as a criterion by which all other covenants are to be measured and interpreted. The history of the covenants could perhaps provide the basis for a wider biblical theology of salvation history than is found in authors such as Cullmann and Danielou while not relativizing the Christian revelation. A number of recent authors, such as Hans Kung, Raimundo Panikkar, Heinz Robert Schlette, Eugene Hillman, and Donald Dawe, have asserted that all the nations are under a salutary cosmic covenant, but the consequences of this assertion for the theology of revelation remain as yet

unclarified.¹⁹

The idea of revelation through universal history, championed by Pannenberg and his circle, might seem to offer great promise of finding revelation in nonbiblical religions. If God is conceived from the outset as related not simply to the history of a single elect people but to world history, he might be expected to disclose himself to all. Pannenberg, however, rejects the idea of revelation in a multiplicity of religions. Beginning from the Hegelian premise that universal history is an indirect revelation of God, he concedes that the meaning of universal history is knowable only at the end. This concession would seem to exclude all revelation within history were it not for the fact, recognized by Christians alone, that the end of universal history has already occurred proleptically in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Pannenberg therefore agrees with Barth that revelation, as the self-disclosure of the one God, occurs only in Christ, in whom the divine breaks into the historical continuum.²⁰

While reserving revelation to Christ, Pannenberg accords a special place to Israelite faith. Israel's history of promises, he says, is unique because it was open to future fulfillment, and indeed to that very fulfillment which occurred in Jesus. "In contradistinction to other peoples and their religions, Israel, in the light of its particular experience of God, learned to understand the reality of human existence as a history moving toward a goal which had not yet appeared."²¹ By contrast, the myths of the religions are related to primordial time and thus closed to the future. These other religions, however, are not mere fabrications. They manifest in a confused manner the same reality which has revealed itself in Jesus.²² Religious dialogue can strive to make the religions open to their own historical transformation, and thus also to the definitive manifestation

of God in Christ. Concurrently such dialogue can prevent Christianity from clinging timidly to its own past forms and can actuate its inexhaustible assimilative powers.

Whereas Pannenberg, with his idea of revelation through universal history, restricts revelation to the Christ-event, Rahner, combining historical universalism with a symbolic approach to revelation, is able to find revelation in religion as such. Thanks to the Incarnation, Rahner maintains, the entire human family is constituted as God's people and is involved in a supernatural relationship with God. All men and women are called to eternal blessedness in Christ, whose grace is offered always and everywhere. Any naturally good act is elevated to the supernatural order by God's saving grace.

Rahner holds that grace, when accepted, never remains suspended in a "metaempirical sphere," disconnected with the tangibility of history. On the contrary, grace will inevitably "try to objectify itself in explicit expressions of religion, such as in the liturgy and religious associations, and in protests of a 'prophetic' kind against any attempt by man to shut himself up in a world of his own categories and against any (ultimately polytheistic) misinterpretations of this basic grace-full experience."²³ Because religion is the normal way in which one's relationship to the absolute becomes thematized, supernatural grace cannot fail to show itself in the religions, even when accompanied, as might be expected, with distortions due to human sin and frailty.

In holding the salvific and revelatory a character of the religions in general, Rahner does not relativize biblical revelation and Christianity. In his terminology, the religion of the Old and New Testaments constitutes the "special" history of revelation and salvation inerrantly directed toward Christ, in whom God and the world enter into "absolute and unsurpassable unity."²⁴ Christ, the incarnate Word, is the

absolute religious symbol in whom the aspirations of humanity for a definitive and irrevocable self-communication of God are fulfilled. The religions can be interpreted as expressions of a “searching memory” which somehow anticipates God’s culminating gift in Jesus Christ.²⁵

Rahner’s theology of symbol as the revelatory self-expression of grace enables him to construct a theology of salvation history that gives not only salvific, but also revelatory, importance to the extra-biblical religions. In this respect Rahner goes beyond the typical representatives of the revelation-as-history model.

4. Revelation as Experience and the Religions

Theologians of the third model hold that a revelatory experience of God underlies all religions, and that they differ, not by being different revelations, but by differently symbolizing the same revelation. While not affirming that all experiences of God are equally pure or intense, or that all symbols are equally expressive, these theologians regard the differences among the religions as accidental rather than essential. The revelations accorded in different traditions differ in degree rather than in kind.

Friedrich von Hugel, though he departs from the third model in his firm commitment to the historical and institutional features of Christianity, laid great stress on the mystical element. God, he held, was experientially revealed in all religions, but this experience is found “at its deepest and purest” in Christ.²⁶ Among the “great Revealers and Incarnations of the prevenient love of the Other-than-themselves,” he wrote, “Jesus Christ holds the supreme, and indeed the unique, place.”²⁷

Evelyn Underhill, the tireless explorer of mystical literature, was convinced that mysticism has so far found

its best map in Christianity.²⁸ But the map, she added, is not the reality.

Attempts, however, to limit mystical truth – direct apprehension of the Divine Substance – by the formulae of any one religion, are as futile as the attempt to identify a precious metal with the die which converts it into current coin. The dies which the mystics have used are many.... But the gold from which this diverse coinage is struck is always the same precious metal; always the same Beatific Vision of a Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is *one*. Hence, its substance must always be distinguished from the accidents under which we perceive it: for this substance has an absolute, and not a denominational importance.²⁹

For William Ernest Hocking, too, revelation was “the empirical element in religious knowledge.”³⁰ There is no religion, for him, without a basis in revelation, and therefore it must be possible for such religion to be reconceptualized in the light of the revelatory ingredients in the others. In such a rapprochement, he suggested, “the concept of Christ is extended to include that unbound Spirit who finds and has stood at the door of every man, and who, in various guises, still appears to him who opens, both as an impersonal word and as a personal presence.”³¹ In the coming world faith, as Hocking envisaged it, the name of Jesus Christ would no longer be insisted on.³²

In many recent theologians an approach to extra-biblical religion is attempted on the basis of the patristic doctrine of Christ as universal Logos. Paul Tillich, for example, held that all living religions rest upon revelatory experiences of the same omnipresent divine reality, differently symbolized in each. In one of his last works Tillich

sought to show that the Buddhist symbol of Nirvana and the Christian symbol of the Kingdom of God are two ways of expressing the gulf between ultimate reality and the conditions of actual existence. Through a three-way dialogue, Tillich believed, the Eastern religions, the Western religions, and the new secular quasi-religions could achieve mutual enrichment and purification. "In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence."³³

This combination of an absolutism of revelation with a relativism of symbols continues to be pressed by distinguished scholars of our day. John Hick, for example, maintains that since God is the God of the whole world, we must presume that the whole religious life of humanity is part of the continuous and universal human relationship to God.³⁴ The major religious traditions all rest on revelatory experiences of the absolute, but reflect this differently in view of the variety of cultural and historical conditions.³⁵ The unifying factor in all religions is God, about whom they revolve. The many different analogies of the divine reality may all be true, though expressed in imperfect human comparisons. Although we may not be able to bring about a single world religion, the situation created by worldwide communications may lead to "an increasing interpenetration of religious traditions and a growing of them closer together."³⁶

In this model, therefore, revelation is sharply distinguished from symbol. The revelation is seen as unitary and divine, the symbol systems as diverse and human. Jesus Christ is viewed as a Christian symbol, highly meaningful to Christians, but lacking the universal value of the experience of God to which the symbol points.

This model has limitations for inner-Christian theology. It may now be added that the attempt to separate the experience of revelation from symbol and concept is inhibiting for interreligious dialogue. As Hick, for example, is not unaware, there is an interpretative element in every experience of revelation. The effort to bypass the historical and cultural factors can therefore lead to an unwelcome reduction. Theism itself would be threatened since it has been in great measure shaped by the symbols and conceptual structures of biblical religion and Hellenistic philosophy, and is not widely accepted in the Eastern religions. Consistently applied, the effort to eliminate the culture-related specifics thus dissolves theocentrism as well as Christocentrism as a basis for dialogue. The common platform therefore becomes uncomfortably small.

5. Revelation as Dialectical and the Religions

Wary of the reductionistic trends in liberal and modernist theology, the dialectical theologians, under the leadership of Karl Barth, advocated an approach to the religions that would be deliberately controversial and critical rather than compromising and irenic. For these theologians Christ as the Word of God stands in judgment against all human achievements, including religion itself insofar as it proceeds from man. Leading from a position of strength, authors of the fourth model held that the supreme norm of all theology, including the theology of the religions, must be Jesus Christ in whom God had definitively disclosed himself.

Barth, in his Epistle to the Romans and in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics* (part 2), eloquently set forth his position that revelation stands against all the religions, but that, in condemning, it heals and justifies, so that, in

Christ, there can be a “true religion” rescued as a brand from the fire.³⁷ While rejecting any easy continuity between Christ and the religions, Barth’s dialectical theology allowed for a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* (abolition and sublimation) of that religion upon which the light of Christ is made to shine. But he felt obliged to point out how even Amida Buddhism and Bhakti Hinduism, in spite of real anticipations of Pauline and Protestant Christianity, lack the one thing necessary for true religion, the name of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Even in the last volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*, in which he emphasizes the far-reaching effects of Christ’s reconciling action, Barth retains a posture of reserve. Religions such as Islam, he declares, are humanly and ethically imposing.

Missions presuppose both that they will be valued and taken seriously, with a complete absence of the crass arrogance of the white man, and yet also that they will not be allowed to exercise any pressure on the Gospel but that this will be opposed to them in all its radical uniqueness and novelty, with no attempt at compromise or at finding points of contact and the like. Missions are valueless and futile if they are not pursued in strict acceptance of these two presuppositions, and therefore with a sincere respect and yet also an equally sincere lack of respect for the so-called religions.³⁹

Emil Brunner, who developed an “eristic” theology of the religions, insisted that only the prophetic religions of the Near East could be understood as making a serious claim to revelation.⁴⁰ But the other living prophetic religions, Judaism and Islam, reject the claims of Christianity, thus

compelling a choice.⁴¹ The claim of Christianity to be the revelation given by God through Incarnation sets it totally apart from both Judaism and Islam.⁴² In the view of Christian faith, Christ is both the fulfillment and the judgment of all the religions. He fulfills them by being the truth, the advocate, the sacrifice, and the ritual meal for which they seek in vain.⁴³ But he also judges all the religions inasmuch as he shows up the falsehood in their doctrines and the superstitions and cruel legalism of their practices. Called into being by God's self-manifestation in creation, religion is always perverted by human pride and selfishness.⁴⁴

The dialectical theology of the religions, as proposed by Barth and Brunner, was applied to missiology by Hendrik Kraemer. His book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*,⁴⁵ written at the request of the International Missionary Council, was very influential at the Tambaram Conference in India in 1938, and retains much influence in World Council circles to this day. Kraemer held that the message of God, which is not adaptable to any religion or philosophy, should be forthrightly announced, though always in a manner intelligible and relevant to the evangelized. While not decrying all signs of revelation in the religions, Kraemer focused on Christ as God's only full revelation of himself. He was generally critical of non-Christian religions as human achievements.

Dialectical theology is to be commended for its insistence that Christians should bring the full resources of their faith to bear on the encounter among the religions. Taking the teaching of the New Testament at face value, and accepting the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas without equivocation, this theology holds to the incomparable richness of God's self-disclosure in his incarnate Word. These theologians rightly remind us of the importance of signs and testimonies which proclaim Jesus as universal

Lord. Yet if God's grace in Christ has a universal redemptive efficacy, as Barth seems to admit, one might well suspect that all human religions, to the extent that they proceed from grace, might bear a mute or indirect testimony to God's Word in Christ. At this point Rahner's theory of "searching memory" and the Logos theology of Tillich and others might be able to supplement, and somewhat qualify, the more polemical statements of Barth, Brunner, and Kraemer.

6. Revelation as New Consciousness and the Religions

The fifth model defines revelation dynamically in terms of its impact on human consciousness. Revelation is seen as a divine summons to transcend one's present perspectives. Since this summons is always correlated with the actual situation as well as with the basic dynamism of the human spirit, revelation comes in new ways in each period of history. In our own day, many of these theologians assert, revelation involves a call to put aside the limitations of cultural self-centeredness and to be open to the working of the divine Spirit in alien cultures. Open to new currents in secular and religious experience, Teilhard de Chardin, Gregory Baum, and Paul Knitter have proposed radical revisions of conventional Christianity, with major implications for the dialogue between the religions.

Teilhard de Chardin was convinced that the present encounter between the religions could not fulfill its promise unless the critique of religion by secular humanism were taken into account. Yet secular humanism, lacking the transcendent focus provided by revelation, could not provide the kind of faith needed to sustain humanity in the dawning planetary age. The Eastern religions, imbued with a mystical sense of universal unity, provided a transcendent focus, but

failed to give meaning to human effort and evolutionary progress. Christianity in its usual forms (“paleo-Christianity,” Teilhard sometimes called it), suffered from some of the same unworldliness. He therefore called for a “neo-Christianity,” a “new mysticism,” one “for which we have as yet no name,” to serve as a “privileged central axis” about which the religions might converge.⁴⁶

A general convergence of religions upon a universal Christ who fundamentally satisfies them all: that seems to me the only possible conversion of the world, and the only form in which a religion of the future can be conceived.⁴⁷

Unlike the false monisms at work in Eastern and Western forms of pantheism, an authentic pan-Christism, according to Teilhard, could combine the Eastern concern for universal unity with the Western concern for individual dignity and freedom. In spite of some passing remarks to the effect that Christ must be reinterpreted in such a way as to “integrate those aspects of the divine expressed by the Indian god Shiva,”⁴⁸ Teilhard spoke more often of the limitations than of the merits of the “road of the East.” When asked whether a Buddhist or a Hindu should become a Christian, he replied: “It would be better to try to carry its truth [that of your previous religion] with you, and transform it if you could, though of course sometimes this might not be possible.”⁴⁹

Baum describes the acceptance of revelation as “an entry into a new self-consciousness and a new orientation toward the world.”⁵⁰ Jesus “makes known to us God’s redemptive involvement in the whole of human life.”⁵¹ Religion, as Marx and Freud pointed out, can be a screen shutting us off from responsible life in society,⁵² but religious worship can also serve to protect us from the demonic power

of sex, money, nation, and social philosophies. Without holding that nonbiblical religions are divine, we can find in them something “that offers salvation to men, detaches them from idolatry, elevates them to higher understanding, creates in them faith in a gracious transcendent reality, and initiates them into love and care for other people.”⁵³

Logos Christology, which viewed other religions as mere preparations for Christianity, is no longer adequate, according to Baum. The Church, he declares, must abandon its absolute claims, which inevitably breed aggression and conflict.⁵⁴ Each religion must strive to liberate itself, with the help of others, from its own idolatries.

The Church’s mission may then be understood as an ongoing dialogue with other religions, designed to liberate all partners, including herself, from the ideological deformation of truth. Through conversation and action men may learn to attach themselves to the authentic, life-giving and humanizing elements of their religious tradition.⁵⁵

Such an ideal, Baum maintains, will make it easy for people belonging to each religion to make friends across the boundaries, to share important experiences, to feel united in the same basic struggle, “and never think that anyone should change from one religion to another.”⁵⁶

In the United States, another Roman Catholic, Paul Knitter, has in several recent articles challenged the view that Christianity commits its adherents to the finality and superiority of God’s revelation in Christ. Such a tenet, he holds, is unjustifiable in terms of a modern approach to Scripture and a revisionist method in theology. It is also disastrous for interreligious dialogue.⁵⁷ Following a consistent consciousness theology, he argues that revelation and salvation occur when the individual is “sucked into” a world constituted by myth and symbol.

Myth-symbols save. Historical facts do not....
 It is only when we are grasped by and find ourselves responding with our whole being to a symbol, myth, or story that we are encountering the divine, touching and being touched by “the Ground of Being,” and experiencing grace.⁵⁸

Symbol and myth, Knitter maintains, are salvific not because they correspond to some antecedent objective reality, but because they reach into a person’s innermost being, thereby renewing the whole self. Once this is recognized, Christians no longer have to take the symbol of the Incarnation as a factual statement. It is a myth in the same sense as stories of the wonderful birth and exaltation of the Lord Buddha and the Lord Krishna. “If it is true that it is the myth-symbol that saves, not historical facts as such, then Christianity is placed essentially on the same level with other religions.”⁵⁹ Knitter adds: “Such insights will open new avenues in the present-day dialogue among world religions.”⁶⁰

If symbol is equivalent to myth as a product of creative imagination, then the doctrine of the Incarnation, being mythical, cannot be taken as a cognitive statement about Jesus himself. To hold that salvation is given by such a myth, rather than by the redemptive action of God in his incarnate Son, radically shifts the center of Christian faith. Many contemporary theologians, with whom I associate myself, deny that such a transposition is called for by sound developments in hermeneutics or theological method. Charles Davis had good reason to write, not many years ago: “Frankly, I do not myself see how the universality and finality of Christ can be denied without emptying the Christian tradition of meaning.”⁶¹ For a Christian to say what Davis here says is not to deny that Christ is a symbol, or that the Christ-story is in some sense a myth, but it is to

imply that the myth or symbol is disclosive of the meaning inherent in the Christ-event itself.

Could a Christian affirm that the same divine Lord whom Christians worship in Jesus is worshiped, under other symbols, by the devotees of the Lord Krishna and of the Lord Buddha? Fidelity to the Christian confession, it would seem, excludes the idea that there is any Lord except Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 8:6). In company with Lucien Richard, I would reject an extreme “archetype Christology” that would see the Jesus-story as “the historicization of an archetype which is already found at work everywhere.”⁶² On the other hand, it need not be denied that the eternal Logos could manifest itself to other peoples through other religious symbols. Raimundo Panikkar, who proposes a “universal Christology,” stands in continuity with a long Christian tradition of Logos-theology that goes back as far as Justin Martyr. On Christian grounds, it may be held that the divine person who appears in Jesus is not exhausted by that historical appearance. The symbols and myths of other religions may point to the one who Christians recognize as the Christ.

Would the interreligious dialogue be helped if Christians were to abandon the claim that Christ is universally and definitively normative? Obviously no dialogue would be possible if Christians demanded, as a condition of participation, that Christ be acknowledged by all as the supreme norm of truth. In an interreligious dialogue the particular convictions of any one party cannot be presumed as either true or false. For Christians antecedently to surrender their traditional claim might be injurious to the dialogue since it might prevent them from making what is potentially the most important contribution.

Christians who are convinced of having in Jesus Christ his definitive revelation can enter the interreligious dialogue with full consciousness of having something to contribute.

But can they enter it with the expectation of having something to learn? According to the principles advanced in this essay they can. They can expect to find signs and symbols of divine grace and human greatness in any major religious tradition. This is not a purely formal concession. The Christian cannot set limits to the heights of holiness and insight that God's grace may bring among those who do not recognize Christ as the incarnate Word.⁶³

As living, incarnate symbol, Jesus Christ fulfills what is sound and challenges what is deficient in every religion, including Christianity. Christians, no less than others, are subject to him as norm. He detracts nothing from the revelatory meaning of other religions, nor do they detract from him. Even while questioning the adequacy of other religious symbols, Christ can place them in a new and wider frame of reference. As Carl Hallencreutz has said:

For when confronted with Christ the symbols of the religious man are related in a new way to that "sacred reality" to which they have referred within their particular framework. They are brought together to their very centre and so "concentrated" that they can become new expressions of the richness of Christ.⁶⁴

This recontextualization may be beneficial to all the religions, including Christianity. When the West, as a "Christian culture," was relatively isolated from contact with other religions, it may have been sufficient to construct Christology in terms of explicitly Christian symbols, but the present stage of world history seems to call for a further advance. The present encounter of the religions can have positive significance for the interpretation of what is revealed in Christ. In the words of Gabriel Fackre:

There is a sound instinct in all of the models that respond to the new pluralism by attempting to reformulate the Christian doctrine of redemption in a more universal fashion. Doctrine does develop in response to new settings in which the Christian community finds itself. Plural shock can so impact our received theological traditions that we are led to a deeper insight into basic faith. But doctrine which develops does so always along the lines of the original trajectory. It renders more explicit that which was implicit and coheres with the primal norm of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶⁵

We cannot accurately predict what we may learn from the dialogue that seems to be getting underway. There is no reason, however, to think that it will diminish the revelatory importance of Jesus Christ. It may well be that in the light of other revelatory symbols, the universal and abiding significance of Christ will be more strikingly manifested. Even though it already is the supreme and definitive self-disclosure of God, the Christ-symbol cannot be adequately appreciated for our time except in the context of many other symbols, including those of the extra-biblical religions. If disruptive change is avoided, the present encounter of the religions may well lead to an enrichment of the Christian symbolism and thus of the theology of revelation.

Notes

1. R. E. Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions* (New York: Newman, 1971). p. 145.
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposes a sense in which Christians might be able to admit that the Qur'an is the word of God. See, most recently, his *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster; 1981), pp. 163-64. On the basis of a study of the Hindu sacred books, Ishanand Vempeny holds that the "nonbiblical Scriptures are truly yet analogically inspired by God" in "Conclusion" to his *Inspiration in the Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973), pp. 177-78.
3. Paul Knitter in his "European Protestant and Catholic Approaches to the World Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12 (1975), pp. 13-28, points out (pp. 21-22) that P. Althaus, C. J. Ratschow, and other Lutherans admit the existence of revelation but not the availability of salvation in religions which do not preach faith in Christ. He could have added, perhaps, that for Barth the adherents of these religions can apparently receive salvation without revelation.
4. Text in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), pp. 3-4.
5. W. Scott, "'No Other Name' — An Evangelical Conviction," in G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (eds.), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981). p. 66.
6. G. H. Clark, "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," in

- C. F. H. Henry (ed.), *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1958), p. 27.
7. G. C. Berkouwer, "General and Special Divine Revelation" in C. F. H. Henry (ed.), *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 17.
 8. G. van Noort, *The True Religion (Dogmatic Theology, vol. 1)* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1969). p. 9.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 107.
 12. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 160-61.
 13. O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950; rev. ed., 1964), p. 157.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
 16. J. Danielou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1957), p. 20.
 17. J. Danielou, *The Lord of History* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), p. 119.
 18. J. Danielou, *The Salvation of the Nations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962). p. 8. For a similar position contrasting the descending movement of divine revelation with the ascending movement of human religion, see H. U. von Balthasar, "Catholicism and the Religions," *Communio* 5 (U.S. edition) (1978). pp. 6-14.
 19. See, for instance, D. G. Dawe, "Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World," in D. G. Dawe and I. B. Carman (eds.), *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978). pp. 13-32.
 20. W. Pannenberg, "Introduction" to *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 6-8.
 21. W. Pannenberg, "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions," *Basic Questions in Theology, vol. 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), p. 113.

22. Ibid., p. 115.
23. K. Rahner, "History of the World and Salvation-History," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), pp. 97-114; quotation from p. 105.
24. Ibid., quotation from p. 107.
25. Cf. K. Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *ibid.*, pp. 115-34; K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 311-21.
26. F. von Hugel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion*, Second Series (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1926), p. 39.
27. F. von Hugel, *The Reality of God and Religion and Agnosticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1931), p. 146.
28. E. Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 12th ed., rev., 1930), p. 104.
29. Ibid., p. 96.
30. W. E. Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 166.
31. W. E. Hocking, *The Coming World Civilization* (New York: Harper, 1956), pp. 168-69.
32. Ibid., pp. 169-70.
33. P. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia, 1963), p. 97.
34. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 101.
35. Ibid., p. 106.
36. Ibid., p. 107.
37. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 356.
38. Ibid., pp. 340-44.
39. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/3, Second Half (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1962) p. 875.
40. E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), p. 227.

41. Ibid., pp. 229-32.
42. Ibid., p. 236
43. Ibid., p. 270.
44. Ibid., pp. 261-64.
45. Third ed., London: James Clarke, 1956. The first edition of 1938 was introduced by a glowing foreword by William Temple, then Archbishop of York.
46. Ursula King, *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 181-89.
47. Teilhard de Chardin, *How I Believe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 85.
48. U. King, *Towards a New Mysticism*, p. 181.
49. Ibid., pp. 225-26.
50. G. Baum, *Faith and Doctrine* (New York: Newman, 1969), p. 27.
51. G. Baum, "The Religions in Catholic Theology," in his *New Horizon* (New York: Paulist, 1972), p. 105.
52. Ibid., pp. 102-03.
53. Ibid., p. 96.
54. G. Baum, "The Jews, Faith, and Ideology," *Ecumenist*, vol. 10, no. 5 (July-Aug. 1972), p. 74.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 76.
57. P. Knitter, "World Religions and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Kung's On Being a Christian," *Horizons* 5 (1978), pp. 151-64.
- 58: P. Knitter, "Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (1979), pp. 651-71, esp. p. 657.
59. Ibid., p. 664.
60. Ibid.,
61. C. Davis, *Christ and the World Religions* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), p. 237.

62. Lucien Richard, *What Are They Saying About Christ and World Religions?* (Ramsey, NJ.: Paulist, 1981), p. 67.
63. Cf. K. Rahner, "The Charismatic Element in the Church" in his *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964). p. 63.
64. C. F. Hallencreutz, *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1970). pp. 93-94.
65. Gabriel Fackre, "The Scandals of Particularity and Universality," *MidStream: An Ecumenical Journal* 22 (1983), pp. 32-53; quotation from pp. 46-47.