

A WORKABLE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

This lecture was delivered by Canon Andrew Wingate at Svenska kyrkans forskardagar

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All faiths have a theology of religions, whether implicit or explicit. Hinduism, for example, in most of its variety of manifestations, holds that 'there are many paths to the one God', however that is expressed, and that all religions practically can live with each other without any need for conversions across faiths. We can each choose our own way, or follow what we are born into. Implicitly this means that their way is superior to those narrower faiths such as Islam or Christianity. Practically this way at its best has enabled faiths to live alongside each other in peace and harmony over the millennia. At its worst, it can be as narrow as any other faith, and as intolerant. Islam has an openly hierarchical theology- Islam first, religions of the book (Christianity and Judaism) second, pagan religions, those involving idol or image worship, third and definitely worst, with a religion like Sikhism somewhere between the second and third category, Hindu in ethos, but clearly worshipping one God, with a strongly prophetic element. Practically, this means that in a minority situation, Muslims can adjust well, as they live in a distinctive way alongside others, in a majority situation, there can be a demoting of others to second class or lower, and at worst not tolerating others at all.

How as Christians we are to relate theologically, spiritually, pastorally and practically, to other religions, is a comparatively recent challenge, for us in Europe. When I studied theology to become a priest in the early 1970's, we did not have a single lecture on Islam nor Hinduism. Our systematic theology course did not take any account of the half of the world which was not Christian. There were some exotic adventurers who went east to find their soul, and either got lost in India, or returned often disillusioned. There was no recognition that Muslims were not far short in numbers globally from Christians. The question of the Jews did touch us, but largely historically, in terms of Jesus and Paul, not in terms of contemporary Jews and Israel, which remained a place of adventure again, for those who fancied a time on a kibbutz. Pastorally, there were very few inter faith marriages, because, with the exception of Jews, there were only small rather hidden other faith communities in Britain, and fewer still in Scandinavia. Our practical training placements were in areas of urban deprivation, or on new housing areas. But the faith make up of so called 'immigrants' was not considered. There were all kinds of theological challenges as we studied the scriptures and the history of doctrine, but not what were to become some of the key questions in the theology of religions. Questions of salvation, revelation, truth, were considered apart from other faiths. The question as to what God was doing allowing them to exist, and indeed to grow, did not cross our horizons.

This was not of course the whole story, and was a very western story. Missionaries had met these challenges for centuries in the so called 'mission field', particularly in India, China, the Middle East. We made no study of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference of 1910, where the documents of Commission 7, are a remarkable testimony to the impact of India and China on the theologies of evangelical missionaries (see Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, Epworth 1995, and Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians*, Eerdmans, 1991). In Kerala, SW India, Syrian Christians had lived for nearly 2000 years surrounded by Hindus, and found their own way of adjusting practically and theologically, in Kerala and beyond. Robert di Nobile in Madurai, in the 17th century,

had reflected on what was essential and what was expendable, as he developed an Indian way of being a Christian in a Brahminic context, working out his own version perhaps of Acts 15, in terms of under what terms higher caste Hindus could convert, what they must dispose of and what they could keep after their baptism. A range of protestant Indian converts wrote outstandingly in the area of Indian Christian Theology, touching on all the major themes of theology of religions, in areas such as Christology, pneumatology, salvation etc (compare Robin Boyd, *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, CLS, 1969). I touch on India only here because it is where I served as a missionary in the second half of the 1970's and the first half of the 80's. Here, I found my horizons widened daily, and my easy going liberal Anglican faith, forced to face the deepest questions of theology and praxis, when living in a highly Hindu context. I was led to a new openness to others, and a deeper rooting in my own faith.

Meanwhile, the context in Europe was changing step by step, towards the present realities of our religious map. Before I went to India we had Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs in growing numbers in Britain, but they were lumped together as 'immigrants.' They were a problem, but not so much a faith problem. By the time I returned, there had been an enormous change. They were building their mosques and temples all over our cities. They were putting up a marker that they were here to stay, and were not just 'guest workers', here today and gone tomorrow. We began to hear about British Muslims and Hindus, more and more born here, and my fellow citizens. My sister married such a British Muslim of Pakistani origin, and I gained two nephews with clearly Muslim names, Daud and Javed. The theological as well as the practical challenge of an inter faith family had come very close.

In Sweden, these developments have come later, and in some ways, the story is thirty years behind practically. Immigrants remain immigrants or foreigners, or at most 'new Swedes'. Engaging with them from a faith perspective has only begun comparatively recently. But theologically we are at the same point, wherever we are in Britain, Sweden, or wherever on the globe. Some of the questions that need to be addressed for a workable theology of religions are listed in my book, *Celebrating Difference, staying faithful- how to live in a multi faith world* (DLT, 2005). These questions come from my extensive experience of running workshops for clergy and lay people, in Leicester and Birmingham, over the last 20 years. They are directly asked by the participants. I list them here:

1. What is the place of Jesus in other faiths? How is Jesus unique?
2. Can people of the faiths be saved, and if so how?
3. How do we evaluate the scriptures of other faiths?
4. How do we account for the great commonalities between religions in the ethical field? Why nevertheless do we fight each other?
5. Other religions appear to thrive. Is this a temporary phase? Or part of God's provision for humanity?
6. How do we account for the evident goodness, love and sense of spirituality, found in people of other faiths? Is this the activity of the Spirit within them?
7. How do we use the Bible in the encounter between faiths? Individual verses such as John 14:6, or the overall picture?
8. How do the various faiths respond to the key question of suffering, and death, as part of the human condition?

9. Do we all worship the same God? The place of the Trinity?
10. Can Christians pray with people of other faiths?
11. Are dialogue and evangelism compatible? Should we seek conversions?

A theology of religions can come primarily 'from above'- revelation, propositional dogmas, scripture- or it can come out of life and experience and context. It can be rigid, or it can be fluid. But what is clear is that it is needed increasingly by all in our churches, whether they live in multi faith areas, with neighbours of different backgrounds, or whether they live in villages and small towns which remain largely monochrome. The same challenges above are there. So also, in the year of the 10th anniversary of 9/11, and in the aftermath of the Brevik perpetrated horror of Norway 2011, we know that making sense of other faiths is a global challenge from which no-one can walk away who is at all sensitive to realities.

Three personal stories. My daughter spent her early years in India, in a very multi faith school, where Christians were few, and she had close friends across faiths, mainly Hindu and some Muslims. She went to secondary school in Birmingham, and was confirmed. She then began attending the Christian Union, the only association available at school, and conservative evangelical in its outlook. One day she came home crying- the leaders had ruled out from heaven, from salvation, those who did not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. She had asked about her faithful Hindu friends. The dogmatic answer was no, they could not be saved. This prayed deeply on her mind- she ceased to be part of the church to this day, 20 years later. In similar vogue, I was asked by the Islamic Society to go to Leicester University, and to have a dialogue with an Imam whom I know well. They told me the Christian Union would attend. They did. But when it came to the questions and answers, while the Muslims were respectful to both of us, the Christians attacked me for the way I was not using Biblical texts to rule out any possibility of truth or salvation for my Muslim friends. I told them in the end that I would not answer any more of such intra-Christian questions- please address the Imam, and learn something from him.

A third is about prayer. My wife had a brain haemorrhage, and was awaiting an operation in hospital. In the next bed was a Muslim man, awaiting the same life threatening surgery. He was being attended on by his son. I was leaving hospital visiting, not having revealed I was a priest. The son asked me where I was going, and I said to church. Why? To go to pray for my wife- and I added, should I also pray for your father? 'Yes, please.' I added, 'For we all worship the same God.' 'Yes, of course, there is only one God,' he replied. And he asked if he could pray for my wife in the mosque on Friday. I thanked him, and said, Yes, certainly. The result was that they called me round the bed when father was going to have his operation, and asked me to pray, which I did, using the name on this occasion, of the healing power of Jesus. Both got better! Whose prayers, whose God?

These are the kind of practicalities that demand a workable theology of religions.

I would begin with the Trinity, as the distinctive Christian understanding of God. This does not derive from dogma, but from experience, and can encompass much of what lies behind the questions above. God the Father is God the Creator, and God the Judge and much much more. From this aspect, there comes the fundamental belief in our common humanity, as expressed in Genesis 1 and 2, and how that humanity is intentionally good, as also the good earth, and the environment and the living creatures we are created alongside. From this stems the belief that

there is no God created hierarchy of race or colour, or, indeed, of creed, or sexuality. Such hierarchies are part of the nature of evil which leads to the divisions we see in our world at all levels.

From this experience of faith, comes also the oneness of God- again no hierarchy, no higher and lower gods. And under that one God there comes the common ethic, as portrayed simply in the 10 commandments. There is also the common responsibility for the weak, the alien, the widow- and the idea that we are judged for how we fulfil both our ethical and spiritual challenges. This becomes, in the New Testament, the imperative to Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength- and our neighbour as ourself. For me, the parable of the Good Samaritan is at the heart of a Christian theology of religions, as is the belief that God is love, and that he loved us first, and so we are to love one another. And that love is without boundaries. It is also indivisible- hence the Samaritan, a person of non Orthodox Jewish faith, is the example of entering eternal life- we are to be like him. Very powerful, if we think of the good Muslim or Hindu or Sikh- can they be in heaven also?

I note here the 2007 letter from 138 Muslim scholars from around the world, to the Pope, the Orthodox patriarchs, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the World Council of Churches, and to Christian leaders everywhere. Now signed by well over 300 scholars, it focuses on the two great commandments of Jesus, to love God, and to love our neighbour. Here it quotes the Jewish scriptures, taken up by Jesus in the gospels. It says the future of the world depends on our fulfilment of these commandments, and that we will be judged alike on how we respond. It is a remarkable document, and numerous Christian leaders have responded, together and in groups, including the Vatican- the Pontifical Council- and the Archbishop of Canterbury and the General Secretary of the WCC, and many Lutheran Churches. These are now a source for at least one Doctoral thesis, and represent a joint practical theology of religions.

Other gospel parables and stories point in the same inclusive direction. An example is the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18.9-14). It is the publican who goes away justified, for his simple prayer 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' What of the 700 Muslims who go each Friday, and 250 every day, to our local mosque, and pray such a similar prayer, as they prostrate? Another passage is the parable of the sheep and the goats, in Matthew 25. 31-46, and the surprise there about who are included at the final judgement, on the basis of their works of compassion and mercy. And many more such passages, for example, Jesus' words to the centurion- 'I have not found such faith, no not in Israel (Matthew 8.5-13).

At the heart of a Trinitarian theology of religions, there needs to be a theology of the Spirit. This is a key, for me, as we unlock the power of God to be present and active across all humanity. The character of the Spirit is, of course, for a Christian, that seen in Jesus. But the Spirit has been active since creation, since God is Spirit, and has been moving over the waters from the beginning of time. The Spirit blows where the Spirit wills, and this means beyond the barriers of the church. So it should not surprise us to see the fruit of the Spirit in people of other faiths, and to rejoice in this. 'God is closer than our jugular vein', in the Qur'an, and within us, as well as beyond us, in Hindu schools of thought. This is recognised in the Gujarati greeting *namaste*, and in the Tamil greeting *vanakkam*, 'may the God in you be blest'. Can the charismatic spirit seen in worship can also be seen in Hindu *bhakti* movements? This can be a deep representation of the saying, 'our common

heart beat connects us all. It depends, I suppose, to whom such devotion is offered, beyond the image that seems to be the focus for prayer. Is this true devotion to a God beyond all images?

Crucial also is the place of the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus came primarily to preach, and to act out in his life. And the values of the kingdom- love, justice, compassion, healing- are at the heart of an inclusive theology of religions. Where we find people of other faiths working for such ends, a practical theology will guide us into working with them. It is natural therefore to rejoice that Muslim Aid are part of the Disasters' Emergency Committee in the UK, along with Christian Aid, and other agencies. They work together for the relief of famine in East Africa, for example, at the present time. A succession of British International Development Secretaries have said that it is the churches and mosques that are their greatest allies in delivering development to Africa.

Other key values in Christian theology are hope, forgiveness and reconciliation. These were tested to the fore in the aftermath of 9/11, 7/7 (the London bombing), and events in Norway in what is now known as 22/7 (the Brevik massacres of 22nd July 2011). On each occasion, a practical theology of religion has meant that Christians have been to the fore in enabling the way forward, working with people of other faiths and no explicit religious faith. We can think of the amazing service in Oslo Cathedral in July, for example. Cries for vengeance have been drowned out by voices of compassion, and engagement in the tough work of reconciliation, many of them from young people. These again are not a Christian monopoly. Three Muslim young men were murdered in the riots in Birmingham in August 2011. The speech of one of the father's of the deceased, to 20,000 Muslims at prayer, calling for restraint, community cohesion and reconciliation was truly astonishing. For a Christian, this can only be described as the Holy Spirit at work on that occasion, though it would not be so named by Muslims.

What then of the place of Christ? A Christian theology of religion, should never weaken our Christology, in order to make accommodation easier. The stumbling blocks between Christians and people of other faiths focus above all on questions related to Jesus, who he is, and what he did- in theological terms, to the incarnation, and atonement, birth, death and resurrection. These are stumbling blocks to Jews and Muslims. For Hindus, it is the uniqueness that is the stumbling block, not the concept- God in Christ yes, but not only in Christ, what of Krishna or Rama or Lakshmi? His death was indeed special, but not the only one. Gandhi memorably wrote, 'God did not bear the cross only 1900 years ago, but he bears it today, and he dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be a poor comfort to the world if it had to depend on a historical God who died 2000 years ago. Do not then preach the God of history, but show him as he lives today through you.' And for Muslims, to make anyone equal to God is *shirk*. And Jesus was not on the cross in the Qur'an. God alone can save, and not by means of God made human, or by death on the cross for others. For a Theravada Buddhist, also, the cross can be an example of deep compassion, but not be one which can save others. We are each responsible for our own fate.

There is no space to discuss further these central areas of difference, but in the interests of a workable theology, we should not water them down, but face them head on. Questions of truth are part of a theology of religion- truth is not purely relative to each faith. As we agree to differ, we can then put this discussion in brackets, and focus on our working together for the betterment of humanity. As the title of my book says, we can only learn to *Celebrate difference and stay faithful-*

how to live in a multi faith society (DLT, 2005). Overall, no religion has the whole truth, and we need the other in the journey to find a deeper truth.

Finally, I draw attention to the four principles of dialogue, derived from the World Council of Churches (1984), which have stood the test of time. Dialogue begins when people meet people (not when religions or philosophies meet each other); dialogue depends upon removing misunderstanding and building up trust- this includes reaching the point where, in St Paul's words, 'we can speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4.15) to each other; dialogue leads to common service to the community; dialogue is the way of authentic witness. A workable theology should be about praxis, and here is a balanced way of engagement. Dialogue, in these terms, is not about duty or burden, but about joy and communication and surprise. It stems from the kind of open inclusivism I have written of above. And all this is centred upon Christ who reaches out to the other in love, and whose arms on the cross are open arms, as he demonstrates the compassion and forgiveness that lie at the heart of the Christian understanding of God. Questions of ultimate salvation, so often seen as being the be all and end all of a theology of religion, can be left in the hands of such a God revealed in Christ; hence the title of another book I contributed to *The Mystery of Salvation*, (the Church of England Doctrine Report, Church House Publishing, 1995). There I quoted an old English hymn that summarises the above theology: 'There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea; There's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind. But we make his love too narrow, by false limits of our own; and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not learn.'

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