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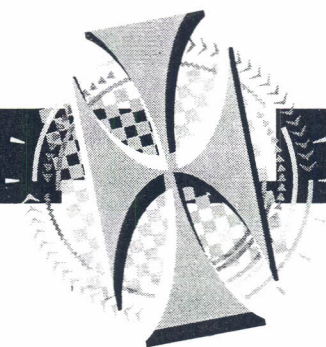
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MODERN CHALLENGES



Mission and Religious Pluralism

Frederick W. Norris

Religious pluralism presses even on local congregations in today's world. Here in East Tennessee, surely in the Bible Belt, a hospital chaplain can expect that most patients and their families will want a Protestant minister's attention. But some of the doctors serving in the hospital in our city are Hindu or Muslim. In fact, although it is only a small remodeled house, there is a mosque in Johnson City. We also have two groups of Baha'i followers. Different aspects of New Age religion can be seen most anywhere on television or in the movies. As we often say about conservative Appalachia, if it's here, it must be nearly everywhere.

In other regions, and particularly in our cities, Islam is a growing presence because it has won the hearts of many African Americans and has been strengthened by immigrants. Chicago authorities find Muslims very helpful since they build strong communities and neighborhoods, often in decaying areas. Islam will soon be—if it is not already—the second largest religion in our nation, replacing Judaism in that rank. At the same time, the Pacific rim of the United States feels the presence of Asian religions, most notably Buddhism, as an alternative for a number of people.

The response of many scholars to this growing pluralism has already been settled through their sense of what

the global situation is. In 1910, Christians meeting at a mission conference in Edinburgh saw this century as one in which all the world would be won to Christ. That hasn't happened. Europe has fewer practicing Christians now than in 1910, but Christianity has grown dramatically in Africa, Asia, and South America. With the majority of Christians living outside North America and Europe, and with world religions in good health and growing, aren't we living in a situation that is drastically different from the beginning of the twentieth century—let alone the first?

The answer from a number of reputable scholars has been a resounding "yes." The inference frequently drawn is that Christian mission should be radically changed, even to the point of suggesting that the missionary's role should be to help others take their own religions seriously. From such a perspective, the most Christian response would be, "We will be happy to help you with social, political, and economic improvements, but our religious call is for you to be a better Muslim, a better Hindu, a better Buddhist—not for you to convert to Christian faith."

There is a series of explanations for why Christian mission has fallen on such hard times. First, part of the above message depends upon a type of guilt. Hasn't the church too often presented the gospel as an invitation to become European and American? Hasn't such mission

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been rooted in a sense of superiority, which we now know is unwarranted? Surely we must confess that Christian mission has too many times been colonial and imperialistic, a destroyer of peoples and cultures. We have reason to feel shame, but the best mission work in every century has affirmed everything possible about other people and cultures, particularly through the translation of Scripture into vernacular languages. At the end of the translation process, the native speakers tell the missionaries whether or not the words in their language say what the missionaries intend. Good translation—proper contextualization—of the good news is finally shaped by the people themselves. It often creates a written language, which the indigenous folk have not had, and thus constructs a medium in which their histories, their stories, their culture can be preserved and circulated far beyond their own boundaries.¹ The best mission converts, but does not pervert, native culture or religion.

Second, Christian mission has fallen on hard times because there is a frontal attack on the statements made within Scripture. Because some know that Christian mission has been faulty, they assume that any claim for Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God is mistaken. Religious wars continue to destroy people. They say that insistence on the final truth of any religion leads to intolerance and hatred. From their perspective, what is needed is mutual affirmation and working together. Again, we must concede that some mission work has incited wars. “Conversions” of whole tribes by conquest, baptisms at the point of the sword, have taken place. But such is not what we think of as mission in our time. The Christ who calls all to himself is the Prince of Peace, not the Lord of War.

An even more subtle erosion of scriptural statements has been a feature of certain historical-critical scholar-

ship. For some, careful investigation of the New Testament reveals that Jesus neither claimed to be God nor insisted that all must be saved in his name. All the stories about Jesus are colored by the resurrection accounts. The historical Jesus did not see himself in such ultimate terms. One of the more remarkable books bears the title *No Other Name?* and strongly argues that salvation in no other name is a claim that must be adjusted, most probably abandoned.²

I myself rejoice that all our information about Jesus comes to us influenced by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The stories about the twelve show how confused they were by the actual events. Only after the resurrection did they fully see and understand who Jesus was. Those apostles and the early congregations worshipped the Christ and witnessed to him. We cannot get behind their faithful response; we have no reason to try. None of us can quote a verse from the New Testament in which Jesus says exactly that he is God, but his words about the Son of Man come very close. He mentions that he is about his Father's work and that he does some of his miracles by the finger of God. At times when I read these scholars' conclusions, I think they are splitting hairs.

Passages from within the church's writings are unambiguous about their sense of who Jesus was. Early hymns are sung to Christ “as to a god” says Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia in the early second century who tortured deaconesses to get the truth.³ Hymnic passages in Colossians (1:19, 2:9) insist that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him bodily. Doubting Thomas confesses that he is his Lord and his God (John 20:28). First Corinthians 8:6 (“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” RSV) probably represents Paul's attempt to split the great Jewish confession, the Shema, so that part of it refers to the Father and part to the Son. The list of such passages is long and not to be translated away. At the same time that the humanity of Jesus is affirmed, the great questions of christology and Trinity are raised. The Father is not the Son, but the two are one. What shall we say?

Good scholarship, careful scholarship, does not encourage us to claim more than is there; it always warns us to be cautious. But the possibility of demonstrating that Jesus never saw himself as bringing in the kingdom of God, that he never considered himself anything more than another prophet or priest, rests on outmoded philosophi-

cal presuppositions behind a view of history that suggests that cold, hard facts are never brought to us by communities. We cannot get behind the earliest believers to a “real” Jesus who is someone totally different from the Christ they lived and died for. Such history doesn’t exist. We must listen to the witnesses. Even Pliny, an outsider, knew that churches sang hymns to Christ as to a god.

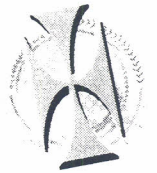
If the modern reality of religious pluralism cannot fairly destroy the ultimate claims about Christ, can its assertion of the new situation, the coming twenty-first-century circumstances, weaken those claims? Are we now in such a new time that the early statements, while present in Scripture, must still be abandoned? On the one hand, we probably should concede that the global extent of religious pluralism could not have been recognized in its fullest force by the earliest Christians. At the same time, we need to remember that Roman engineers built harbors in India and their businessmen traded with China and Vietnam. Yet they had not been around the world and “discovered” the new world of the Americas or the farthest reaches of the old worlds in Africa and Asia.

On the other hand, their world was religiously plural, probably well beyond what we can establish from extant texts. Reading a normal introduction to Greek and Roman deities, we find them described by the dozens. A simple look at the names for Zeus, however, strongly suggests that each temple dedicated to him had a local aspect that implied yet another god. Pausanias’ tale of his trip around Greece during the second century has him noting the local importance of each shrine every bit as much as he assigns the temples to one of the members of the pantheon.⁴ Indeed, Maximus of Tyre, a Greek philosopher in the same century, suggested that there were probably thirty thousand gods worshipped in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵ That is not the thirty million gods of India, but it is a considerable number of deities. Christian communities emerged in the midst of remarkable religious pluralism.

Furthermore, early Christians did not grow within a Christendom in which all other religious options were forbidden or unattractive. Indeed, as we look at mission history, we find Christians preaching Christ while living in the midst of a religious majority that did not find Christian faith the best option. In the eighth century, Timothy of Baghdad was called before the caliph, who wanted to find out why such a good man as he was not a Muslim. Timothy thought Muhammad had some claim to being a prophet of God and should be praised because he wor-

shipped one God, fought polytheism and idolatry, and did many other good things. But he graciously responded to the caliph’s insistence that nothing could be three and one at the same time, as the Christian doctrine of Trinity teaches, by asking the caliph if a three-denarius gold piece must be either three or one. He did not attack Islam and its prophet as totally false, but he also did not give up his faith that Jesus Christ is God incarnate.⁶ The seventh-cen-

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tury Dunhuang documents found in western China were preserved in a Buddhist library. They find truth in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, using Chinese words and concepts already accepted in the culture to speak of Christianity. At the same time, they insist on telling the story of Jesus and singing a Trinitarian doxology.⁷ What we need for our present mission situation is not only the best biblical scholarship, which encourages the texts to speak, but also the best church history, which insists that Christians in religiously plural environments did not give up their mission to call neighbors to conversion.

A final question often raised concerns the problems of syncretism, of so strongly affirming truth in other religions and cultures that the truth of the gospel is lost. Once more we need to return to Scripture and church history. The religion of the Old Testament both attacks some views of Canaanites and affirms others. Names for God take forms from the languages and cultures already there. When Paul preaches in Athens, he can call its people “religious,” say he is going to talk about their statue to an unknown god, and quote two passages from their philosophers as

true statements about God. He does not soft-pedal the resurrection of Jesus; he says things that he knows will not necessarily appeal to their views (their “felt needs,” if you will allow a modern description). But he finds truth to affirm, not just paganism to deny. When Christians began to call Jesus “Lord,” they were using a Greek word that the Hellenistic public had heard in reference to the highest gods of their religions. Christians knew it from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but that word, rather than the Hebrew “Messiah,” let their message ring in Hellenistic culture.

We do live in a remarkable religiously pluralistic setting. The more we go where the people are—around the globe and into the cities—the more we will feel that pressure. But we need not abandon our confession of Jesus as God incarnate, the final revelation. Scripture makes those claims, and Christians in other religiously plural situations have continued to preach and to witness. But to do that in a biblical and church-historical way, we will also have to affirm whatever truth we find in the other religions practiced where we live. Prophets and apostles did that; Jesus did the same.⁸

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Notes

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

² Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985).

³ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.

⁴ See J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chap. 4.

⁵ Maximus of Tyre, *Oration* 11.12.

⁶ *The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi*, Syriac text and English translation by A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies II* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1928), 1–163.

⁷ Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 2d ed. (Tokyo: Academy of Oriental Culture, Tokyo Institute, 1951).

⁸ The arguments of this article are more fully developed in “Theological Resources for Response to Pluralism from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” in *“Grounds for Understanding”: Ecumenical Resources for Response to Pluralism*, ed. S. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 107–21; “God and the Gods: Expect Footprints,” in *Unto the Uttermost: Missions in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ*, ed. Doug Priest Jr. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1984), 55–69; and “Preaching to Pagans: Ambiguity and Clarity,” in *The Gospel Unhindered: Modern Missions and the Book of Acts*, ed. Doug Priest Jr. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1994), 131–41.