

Towards a public theology of religious pluralism

Pavel Hosek ThD.

ETS, Praha

SUMMARY

In this article the author deals with the challenge of religious pluralism. In the introduction the author suggests what he considers to be an appropriate methodology for public theology: a careful application of the method of correlation between the questions raised by contemporary situation and answers found in Revelation. In the first part of the paper the author describes the contemporary situation of religious pluralism at local, national and international levels and points out the issues raised by this situation. The next section of the paper deals with the theoretical response to religious pluralism: different

* * * *

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel behandelt der Autor die Herausforderung des religiösen Pluralismus. In der Einleitung schlägt der Autor vor, was er für eine angemessene Methodologie für öffentliche Theologie hält: Eine sorgfältige Anwendung der Methode der Korrelation zwischen den Fragen, die die gegenwärtige Situation aufwirft, und den Antworten der Offenbarung. Im ersten Teil des Artikels beschreibt der Autor die gegenwärtige Situation des religiösen Pluralismus auf lokalen, nationalen und internationalen Ebenen und verweist auf die Problemkreise, die dadurch erzeugt werden. Der nächste Abschnitt behandelt die theoretische Reaktion auf diesen Pluralismus:

* * * *

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur se penche sur les problèmes que pose le pluralisme religieux. Dans son introduction, il propose ce qu'il considère comme une méthodologie appropriée pour la théologie socio-politique : une application rigoureuse de la méthode de corrélation entre les questions qui surgissent dans le monde contemporain et les réponses fournies par l'Écriture. Dans sa première partie, l'auteur décrit la situation contemporaine de pluralisme religieux, au plan local, national et international, et signale quels sont les problèmes posés par cette situation. La section suivante examine quelle réponse théorique on apporte au plura-

paradigms of the so called theology of religions. The next part of the paper moves from theory to practice: it deals with the different types of actual encounter with religious others, i.e. interreligious dialogue. The concluding section of the paper moves back from practice to theory and suggests topics, themes and questions which have been raised (by the actual involvement in inter-faith dialogue and cooperation) for Christian public theology. The social-ethical type of dialogue is suggested as the most promising and most appropriate type of dialogue, both for biblical-theological reasons and because of the contemporary political, economic and ecological world situation.

* * * *

verschiedene Paradigmen der so genannten Theologie der Religionen. Der nächste Abschnitt bewegt sich von Theorie zur Praxis: er befasst sich mit den verschiedenen Typen tatsächlicher Begegnung mit dem religiösen Anderen, d. h. mit interreligiösem Dialog. Der abschließende Teil geht zurück von der Praxis zur Theorie und schlägt Themen und Fragen vor, die (durch tatsächliche Teilnahme am interreligiösen Dialog und Kooperation) für eine christliche öffentliche Theologie aufgeworfen werden. Der sozioethische Dialog wird als verheißungsvollste und angemessenste Art des Dialogs sowohl aus biblisch-theologischen wie auch aus Gründen der gegenwärtigen politischen, ökonomischen und ökologischen Weltsituation vorgeschlagen.

* * * *

lisme religieux : les paradigmes différents de la soi-disant théologie des religions. Ensuite, il passe de la théorie à la pratique et s'intéresse aux différentes approches du dialogue inter-religieux. La dernière partie revient à des questions théoriques et indique des sujets, des thèmes et des questions qui se posent en matière de théologie socio-politique chrétienne par suite de l'implication dans le dialogue et la coopération avec des gens se réclamant d'autres convictions religieuses. Le dialogue sur les questions sociales et éthiques est présenté comme le type le plus prometteur, à la fois pour des raisons bibliques et théologiques, et à cause de la situation politique, économique et écologique contemporaine. Introduction

As a way of introduction, before I focus on the main topic of this article, I want to make some methodological comments on how I understand the appropriate method of doing theology. These methodological ideas will then be applied on the theme of this paper.

The three essential sources for systematic theology are the Scripture, tradition and contemporary context or situation.¹ In a sense the second and especially the third source need some justification. There is no question concerning the validity of the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*. Yes, theology has only one norm: God's revelation as recorded in God's written Word, the Bible.² Yet, we have no unmediated access to the Bible and its meaning. Without disregarding the illuminating activity of the Holy Spirit as a necessary factor in biblical interpretation, we must take seriously the testimony of our ancestors in faith,³ in other words, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the biblical text over the centuries, giving rise to multiple forms of worship, church structures, creeds, patterns of Christian life, witness and spirituality. Tradition gives shape to our preunderstanding, forms our communal and individual Christian experience and therefore determines the particular quality of our hermeneutical circle, of our interpretive horizon.⁴

Moreover, as the Christian community moves across the centuries towards the *eschaton* and as it grows into new territories and environments, it encounters differing cultural contexts and different kinds of *Zeitgeist*. This fact is related to its incarnational character – in one sense, the church as the body of Christ is the continuation of Christ's incarnation, of God's descent into history. The differing cultural and historical contexts must be taken seriously, just as Christ took seriously the culture of his contemporaries. This is why, in a sense, every generation of Christians has to develop its own systematic theology,⁵ under the authority of the Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, drawing on the tradition of its predecessors, and (last but not least) drawing on its contemporary historical and cultural situation.⁶ In this sense we can legitimately say that situation is a necessary third source for systematic theology, or, in other words, that theology must be construed in correlation with the particular context, surrounding Christian community in a given time and place.⁷ Every new generation comes to the Bible with new eyes, the shifting historical horizon of believing readers interacts with biblical

message, bringing out new and fresh dimensions of its meaning.⁸

This fact forces us to rethink the common understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in theological work. The work of a theologian is not just the deductive ordering and organizing of abstract biblical principles into systematic wholes.⁹ It starts with careful exegesis, but it does not end there. The relation between theory and practice is dialectical.¹⁰ We need to be involved in practice in order to do sound theory, application is a necessary component of understanding.¹¹ Christian theology rises from the dynamic interaction between practice and theory, between our practical involvement in contemporary world and theoretical reflection in light of Scripture and tradition. This is true, I believe, about systematic theology as a whole. It is even more important for public theology. By definition, public theology must interact with the particularities of contemporary situation, both in the church and in the world.¹² It must be incarnational in the fullest sense of the word, otherwise it betrays its task.¹³

In this paper I want to focus on one particular feature of our contemporary situation, which until recently, has not been taken seriously enough in Evangelical theology,¹⁴ namely the progressive globalizing of contemporary world¹⁵ and the related multi-cultural and multi-religious character of most contemporary societies,¹⁶ both eastern and western. Religious pluralism is, I think, one of the most urgent topics for contemporary theology. We, Christians of the 21st century, have to be ready to deal with this significant and growing phenomenon on both theoretical and practical levels. It is not just about who can be saved and under which conditions. The theological discussion about non-Christian religions has been overloaded and preoccupied with this particular soteriological concern for several decades, unfortunately.¹⁷ The soteriological concern is very important, perhaps the most important, but it is certainly not the only relevant concern. We must do much more than ask who and how can be saved, we must build a solid theological foundation for a truly public theology of religions, which will give us practical guidelines for interaction, cooperation and dialogue with religious others on local, national and international levels.¹⁸ We need to reflect deeply (in light of the Scripture) on how to relate to our non-Christian yet religious neighbours, colleagues, schoolmates

and family members. We have to develop theological basis for interreligious dialogue and mission,¹⁹ for solving ethnic and/or international conflicts with religious background. It is the most practical and most public issue.

So after illustrating briefly the contemporary situation of religious pluralism (Section I.), I want to focus on the various theoretical responses to that situation, i.e. on the diverse theologies of religions, which have been developed (Section II.). After dealing with the theoretical responses I want to focus on the practical response to the situation of religious pluralism, i.e. the various types and forms of interreligious dialogue (Section III.). Finally, I want to move back to theoretical considerations, which (I suggest) must be enriched and partially shaped by the insights gained from practical involvement in interreligious dialogue (Section IV.).

I. Situation: religious pluralism

Let me give three examples of interreligious issues on local, national and international levels for which we need to find adequate theological criteria. In my country, Christians are divided concerning the attitude to Muslim attempts to build an Islamic centre and mosque in Teplice, a place where there are virtually no local Muslims. Of course, the situation after September 11th and the attacks of Muslim fundamentalist terrorists worldwide add to the heat of the debate. Some argue out of fear and xenophobia, some Christians would not even grant Muslims the religious freedom they themselves enjoy. There are petitions initiated and signed by Christians addressed to the local government asking to forbid building of the mosque. Are we ready (theologically) to respond to such situations?

In an international Christian educational organisation for which I used to work (IICS), the leaders had to deal (practically and theologically) with a particular interfaith issue in Nigeria. In that country, AIDS is a terrible problem. Both Muslim and Christian religious leaders eventually decided to join forces and design a common educational program helping to prevent the fast spreading of the HIV virus. They refer in their materials to spiritual principles, carefully formulated in such a way as to apply to both Muslim and Christian believers without offending anybody. How should we operate in such situations, so that we don't compromise our faith and at the same time, meet the needs of our neighbours?

The most urgent and also best known are the international conflicts with (at least to some extent) religious background. To mention just one: the highly complex Near Eastern conflict, complicated by the sacredness of the Holy Land, which makes both Christian and Jewish Zionists and fundamentalists as well as Muslim fanatics to approve of or even use violence and terrorism and employ the rhetorics of holy war. Are we moving towards a clash of civilisations (Huntington)? What theological criteria should we apply on this issue, which is at the same time political, religious and global? Let us look briefly at the relevant traditional resources and contemporary options for a Christian theology of religions.

II. Theoretical response: theologies of religions

The topic of non-Christian religions is not new. It is addressed in both Old and New Testaments, it has been discussed and variously dealt with in the patristic period, medieval times, Reformation and afterwards.²⁰ It has grown in importance since the Enlightenment, partly because of a growing interest of intellectuals in non-European cultures, partly because of the missionary movement of the last two centuries.²¹ Yet, as I already mentioned, until relatively recently the discussion of non-Christian religions focused primarily on speculation about the possible eschatological destiny of those who, by no fault of their own, have not received the Gospel. This concern also gave rise to the basic categories or types of Christian theology of religions, namely exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.²²

Exclusivism²³ has been the traditional view of non-Christian religions over most of the church history.²⁴ It builds on the exclusive claims of both Old and New Testaments, particularly on the anti-idolatrious critique and polemics of Israelite prophets,²⁵ the Old Testament notion of chosen people and the central idea of *Heilsgeschichte* against the background of general world history. In the New Testament, the exclusive claims of Christ ("I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me", John 14, 6, see also John 10, 7-9 etc.) and the apostles ("Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved", Acts 4, 12 etc.) are used to support the exclusivist paradigm,²⁶ as well as the claims of Christ's uniqueness in mediating between sinful humankind and God ("For there is one God and

one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus", 1Tim 2, 5 etc).

In the patristic period, the exclusivist view was combined with ecclesiological and sacramental considerations (Cyprian, Augustine) which gave rise to the well known principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,²⁷ confirmed officially at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and at the Council of Florence (1442). The Reformation preserved this generally negative view of other religions, though it loosened the tie between the salvation and (visible) church, so the Protestant dictum would rather sound "outside of Christ no salvation". The exclusivist view was and still is one of the strongest motivational factors in the world-wide missionary movement – it is the desperate lostness of non-Christians which makes evangelism particularly urgent and necessary.²⁸ Exclusivism, perhaps better called particularism (because the exclusivist label has negative connotations and was coined not by exclusivists but by their despisers) is well biblically founded and remains the most common view among Evangelicals.

The second paradigm, inclusivism,²⁹ has become the official view of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly after the II Vatican Council.³⁰ The proponents of this view claim to have a solid biblical support for their more soteriologically optimistic perspective.³¹ They point to the common origin of all humankind in God's creative act, to the universal dignity of man as a bearer of God's image (Gen 1-3), to the universal horizon of God's covenant with humankind (particularly Noahic covenant,³² which for believing Jews constitutes the theological framework for a Jewish form of inclusivism). They also point to the so called pagan saints of the Old Testament (Danielou), i.e. the individuals who have (in some cases most likely salvific) knowledge of God yet they don't belong to the chosen people of Israel and didn't even receive any previous instruction from God's people (see Job, Melchisedek, Jethro, Bileam, Abimelech, and in a sense Abram himself³³). Inclusivists also point to prophetic utterances about God's self-communication and providential care for non-Israelites (Amos, 9, 7, Malachi, 1, 11, Isaiah, 19, 23-25, and particularly Jonah with his mission to the Ninivites etc.³⁴), to the universalist tendency of wisdom literature, suggesting universal accessibility of (divine) wisdom and of "desire after eternity" (Eccl 3, 11). Similar claims about God's providential activity and self-communication can be found also in the New Testament ("The true light that gives light to every

man was coming to the world" John 1, 9, "...the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past He let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving You rain from heaven and crops in their seasons, He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Acts 14, 15b-17, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, We are his offspring." Acts 17, 27-28, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse", Rom 1, 20, "Indeed, when the gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." Rom 2, 14-15) as well as the insistence on God's universal salvific will ("...God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of truth." 1 Tim 2, 4 etc.).

Inclusivists also draw on patristic resources,³⁵ such as Justin Martyr's notion of universally present *logos spermatikos*, which allows him to speak about "Christians before Christ" (he names Heracleitos and Socrates). Clement of Alexandria and Origenes put strong emphasis on the omnipresence and universal though limited accessibility of divine truth. Their ideas are also employed by inclusivists, just as Aquinas' notions of *fides implicita* and baptism by desire, used by the Tridentine Council.

Among the cross-cultural missionaries of the 19th century, there arose the so called fulfillment theory of the relation of Christian faith to non-Christian religions.³⁶ These are viewed not as the lies of the Devil or human errors and idolatry, but rather, as providential preparations of cultures and peoples to receive the Gospel when it eventually arrives (*praeparatio evangelica*).³⁷ There are, therefore, in this kind of inclusivism, many *Anknüpfungspunkte* or elements of truth, goodness and beauty in non-Christian religious traditions (of course mixed with human errors and idolatry). Some inclusivists therefore believe that non-Christians can be saved (because Christ died also for them), yet in a sense in spite of their religion. Other (more

radical) inclusivists say that non-Christian religions in their social reality are God's providential instruments of salvation.³⁸ So non-Christians are saved not in spite of, but by means of their religiosity. Saved by Christ, of course, this is why they can be called anonymous Christians or anonymous candidates for baptism.³⁹

This is the point which presents a stumbling block to the proponents of the third paradigm of interreligious relations, namely pluralism.⁴⁰ Why should Buddhists or Muslims be saved by Christ, however unconsciously? This is an arrogant, imperialistic and paternalizing claim. We have no right to such claims, say the pluralists. All human knowledge is situated, it is historically and culturally conditioned and limited.⁴¹ There is no central or normative universal religious doctrine, no privileged access to divine truth and/or revelation. All religions are basically equal, all fulfilling their redemptive-transformational role for their respective adherents.⁴² Religious traditions are symbolic responses to ultimate Reality, bearing marks of the geographical, historical and cultural circumstances of their birth and development. Jesus is the only Savior, yes, but only for Christians.⁴³ Other traditions have their own founders and salvific figures. Needless to say, pluralism cannot really claim biblical support for its presuppositions, in spite of such attempts as Hick's *Myth of God Incarnate*, his *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Stendhal's notion of love language accounting for biblical exclusivist claims for Christ's uniqueness,⁴⁴ Ariarajah's *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* etc. The core of the pluralist argument is not and doesn't even try to be exegetical, but rather it is the ethical (humanistic) argument based on God's justice, love and universal salvific will.⁴⁵

III Evaluation and proposals

Let me offer now some evaluative comments: Besides the fact that there are differences among all three paradigms in exegetical plausibility (Exclusivism being strongest in this regard and pluralism the weakest), all three paradigms have one in common: they all deal primarily with the soteriological question (who will be saved?) and, unfortunately, they don't really take seriously the other religions themselves, in their particularities and differences.⁴⁶ All three paradigms are essentially aprioristic, their proponents have no reason to study what the other religions actually teach and how they understand themselves.

The alternative typology, which attempts to be more theological (i.e. less soteriological) doesn't really solve this problem. It suggests the label ecclesiocentrism for the traditional approach, chris-tocentrism for (Christian) inclusivism, and theo-centrism for pluralism⁴⁷ (later the pluralists realized the monotheist assumption behind the label theo-centrism and so they suggested Reality-centrism or soterio-centrism⁴⁸ in its stead).

In the last decade, many theologians became understandably dissatisfied with these and similar labels and propose several significant shifts in the-ology of religions, with which I wholeheartedly agree:

- 1) preventing the soteriological concern (though it is very important) from dominating the entire discussion and determining its framework.
- 2) studying carefully the non-Christian religions in the particularities of their creeds, ethical codes, patterns of common life and worship, spirituality, religious art etc.⁴⁹
- 3) taking seriously the differences, or, in other words, the otherness of the Other.⁵⁰
- 4) reflecting theologically on the various interfaith encounters which are already going on around the world, such as interreligious dialogue sessions on all levels, common social and humanitarian action, mutual witness in cross-cultural contexts.⁵¹
- 5) listening carefully to Christians living in coun-tries where they are a religious minority.⁵²
- 6) taking seriously the dialectical relationship of practice and theory – i.e. not just doing a theol-ogy for dialogue, but also a theology of dialogue – taking the interreligious encounters as a given contemporary global situation and working also inductively, not just deductively.⁵³

IV. Practical response: interreligious dialogue

Let us look now a little bit more closely on the interreligious encounters going on in contempo-rary world. They can be classified into three basic types:

- 1) interreligious dialogue on doctrinal, conceptual level,
- 2) common spiritual practice, or as some call this, dialogue on spiritual, experiential level,⁵⁴
- 3) dialogue on social and ethical issues and press-ing needs of contemporary world.

Ad 1) In both formal and informal contexts adherents of different religions meet to discuss about their respective beliefs. All religions make implicit or explicit truth claims, some of these truth claims are of course similar or convergent, but many are conflicting or mutually exclusive. On this level of dialogue, there is space for polemics, apologetics and mutual witness.

Ad 2) Some religious believers organize multi-religious prayer and worship meetings. They say that common spiritual experience helps the participants, representing different traditions to focus on what is common, i.e. the spiritual or mystical depth of religion,⁵⁵ which is more important, they say, than the surface of seemingly conflicting doctrinal statements.⁵⁶

Ad 3) Some believers emphasize the social-ethical level of interreligious dialogue. It is an indirect dialogue, since it doesn't really focus on the doctrinal or spiritual content of respective religions, but rather on their ethical resources necessary to solve actual needs and crises of contemporary world. The goal of this kind of dialogue is not creating a syncretistic global religion, but rather to join forces to implement highest ethical ideals of religious believers like peace, justice, solidarity, or, in Christian terms, to implement the principles of God's kingdom (while respecting and actually insisting on the irreconcilable divergencies and differences of participant religions).

V Evaluation and proposals

At this point, I would like to offer some evaluative observations on all three levels of interreligious dialogue. I will start with the second: the spiritual. I must say that I see no scriptural basis for this activity and no actual meaning in common worship of people, some of which worship the one Creator-God, some many gods, some no god at all. It makes sense only with the highly questionable pluralist assumption, that all religions refer to the same absolute reality, which some call Allah, some Brahma, some Tao, some Yahweh etc. However, I see no problem in praying to the God of the Bible while people of other faiths are present (this could actually be an effective form of witness⁵⁷). But it must be understood by all that we are not engaging in a syncretistic common worship addressed to the one (common) Absolute beyond all symbolic expressions.

Concerning the first type of dialogue, i.e. dia-

logue on doctrinal – conceptual level, I think it is meaningful and desirable, but we must be very careful here. And we should not be over-optimistic concerning its possible results. Some scholars assume that religions can meet on a common platform, that their adherents can speak a common language, or rather an interreligious meta-language. They suggest that religious creeds are mutually translatable and comparable. So they want to develop an “interreligious Esperanto”⁵⁸ or construe an interreligious “global theology”.⁵⁹ Yet I think this is highly questionable. I think we have to respect the idiomatic character of each religion's particular linguistic system.⁶⁰ We have to respect the otherness of the Other, not to translate it (too quickly) into just another case of the Same. It is desirable to look for trans-contextual criteria of truth and meaning,⁶¹ but we must be aware of the limits which the idiomatic nature of religious linguistic codes puts on such efforts.

The most common (and to a large extent justified) criticism of these attempts to establish an interreligious common platform or meta-language is that it is not “pluralist” enough. Indeed, it presupposes an all-inclusive theory which gives account of the vast diversity of world religions, putting them all under the same umbrella of a universal notion of religion (i.e. religion as a generic term). Many contemporary thinkers question (and rightly so, I suggest) the common presupposition of most proponents of this approach, that the core (“essence”) of religion is a prereflective and preverbal religious experience, which only secondarily takes a verbal, externalized form.⁶² Cultural anthropologists like C. Geertz suggest that the externalized and verbalized tradition is actually not secondary, it is one of the decisive and most important factors in every religious community.⁶³ Religions are systems of symbols that give meaning, sense of identity and direction for the individual's life and for the community. Religion is a socially construed reality, says the sociologist P. Berger⁶⁴ (without excluding the possibility of revelation from above, of course). It is a symbolic universe or semantic code which shapes the lives of religious believers, including their life style, ethics and patterns of religious experience. Some scholars fruitfully apply on religions (rightly so, I think) the Wittgensteinian concept of language games.⁶⁵ A religious tradition is a particular use of language, with its own depth grammar, and with a corresponding form of life which it encourages and shapes in religious believers.⁶⁶

It is interesting and surprising to many that the

work of some of the most influential philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists of the twentieth century (Wittgenstein, Berger, Geertz and their followers) supports what has been traditionally known as religious (Christian) particularism.

The famous Protestant theologian K. Barth also insists (though for different, i.e. theological reasons) on the decisive importance of proclaimed message (*verbum externum*).⁶⁷ The shared linguistic paradigm, the common meta-narrative or the particular verbalized vision of reality is the defining factor of each particular religion. And it is exactly this *verbum externum* that creates corresponding inner experience and shapes the forms, patterns and structures of religious practice. From the perspective of this cultural-linguistic view of religion⁶⁸ it is impossible to assume a priori a common essence of all religions in the depths of mystical experience.⁶⁹ Such an assumption is speculative and aprioristic. Religions are as different and incompatible as the languages they speak. Their languages are to a large extent idiomatic, and so are their corresponding life forms.

What does this imply for mutual translatability? One cannot take a religious claim (such as the Buddhist *karuna* doctrine) out of context and compare it with another seemingly corresponding context ridden concept (such as the Christian *agape*) or translate one into the other. All religious claims derive their meaning and actually only make sense in the context of the entire symbolic universe (language world) of the particular religious tradition. One cannot divorce the alleged prelinguistic experiential (spiritual) stratum of religious life from its linguistic (outward) stratum (as the pluralists do), these two are closely tied and actually inseparable.

The doctrinal-conceptual dialogue therefore has serious limits and our expectations concerning its success should be rather modest. But I believe Christians should engage in it. We have to know religious others well, from first hand experience, in order to be able to share the Gospel in a way that is meaningful (and not unnecessarily offensive) for them and in order to be able to cooperate with them in common tasks.

To conclude my evaluation of different types of interreligious dialogue, I have to say that I see the third type, i.e. the social-ethical (indirect) dialogue as the most fruitful and necessary kind of dialogue⁷⁰ and the one that is most relevant for public theology: its goal is not to establish a common platform of all religions, to undermine differences, to create a common meta-language or to move towards a

syncretistic unity of religious believers. Its goal is to join forces to work for peace and justice on local, national and international levels, broadly in terms of Niebuhr's famous notion of "Christ transforming culture".⁷¹ In other words, to cooperate in transforming the world in accordance with the principles of God's kingdom. Therefore, the eschatological regno-centric (Kingdom-centered⁷²) approach seems to be the most appropriate paradigm concerning the goals of interreligious dialogue. This approach allows Christians to face and to respond to the urgent needs of contemporary world without compromising in the area of doctrine and without waiting for basic agreement with other religions on doctrinal level. In other words, if we are able to find agreement concerning basic human rights and ethical guidelines⁷³ (Golden Rule for example), it doesn't matter that the justification for this consensus will be tradition-specific, what is important are the ethical and motivational resources of living religious traditions (i.e. their high and noble ethical standards and ideals⁷⁴). If we are able to agree with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists on basic principles of global ethics (in the sense of H. Küng's now famous notion of global ethics, see the documents of the Parliament of World Religions, Chicago, 1993, and following meetings in 1999 and 2004), we can join forces in implementing these principles without compromising the integrity of participating religious traditions.

Moreover, the rich motivational resources of religions are not just creative and positive. They can actually be very violent and destructive⁷⁵ (terrorism, oppressive fundamentalism etc). Encouraging interreligious dialogue on the social-ethical level has therefore a double purpose: addressing the needs of contemporary world and pacifying or taming the potentially destructive power of religions, which very often derives its appeal from xenophobia (either we engage in dialogue, or we shoot at each other⁷⁶).

VI Reshaping theory in light of practical involvement in dialogue

But it is not enough to just cooperate with the non-Christian believers on common ethical and social issues. Such encounters are necessarily transformational, as those who are involved in them unanimously witness. That is why I want to dedicate the final paragraphs of this paper to suggestions and claims made by Christian theologians, who are actively involved in interreligious dialogue. This is

what is meant by the dynamic dialectics of practice and theory or, by doing not just theology for dialogue, but also a theology of dialogue. What follows then are some of the most important themes of systematic theology which may perhaps need some rethinking in light of the ongoing interreligious encounter in our fastly globalizing world. This is at least what the systematic theologians involved in interreligious dialogue suggest as they reflect on what is going on.

Revelation: what is the scope and possible salvific value of general revelation,⁷⁷ or original revelation,⁷⁸ or revealed types⁷⁹ and what is the relation between this and special revelation?

Trinity: does the trinitarian plurality in deity provide a basis for an inclusivist theology of religions?⁸⁰ How should we respond to the claim that the trinitarian doctrine is just a particularly Christian expression of the universal cosmotheandric reality?⁸¹

Anthropology: what are the implications of humankind's unity and dignity based in being created to God's image? What is the nature of human cognitive capacity after the Fall and what is the nature of man's perceptivity towards God's universal self-communication (Tillich contra Barth, Netland contra Plantinga)

Hamartiology: does the biblical doctrine of the Fall and human depravity allow for the soteriological optimism of Evangelical inclusivists?⁸²

Soteriology: are the Roman Catholic notions of implicit faith and baptism by desire (Tridentinum) or even anonymous Christianity⁸³ biblically defensible? Can we speak of universal translatability and presence of the Christ principle (orig. "the name of Christ"⁸⁴)?

Christology: is the proposed shift from traditional Christology to sacramental Christology or Spirit Christology biblically defensible?⁸⁵ How should we respond to the proposal to demythologize the myth of God incarnate and decipher the metaphor of God incarnate?⁸⁶

Pneumatology: can we defend biblically an independence of the Spirit on the Word or even reject the filioque phrase in our trinitarian creed?⁸⁷

Ecclesiology: who belongs to the invisible church?⁸⁸ What is the balanced biblically founded relation of its mission and dialogue?⁸⁹ How should we develop a contextual, incarnational theology in non-European contexts?

Eschatology: can we legitimately join forces with responsible adherents of other religions in the eschatological movement of implementing

the principles of God's kingdom and work on transforming the world to its likeness and prepare thereby its eschatological coming?⁹⁰

As we can see there is a lot of work ahead of us.⁹¹ In fact, I believe that developing an Evangelical public theology of religions and interreligious dialogue is one of the most important tasks for Evangelical theologians in the next decades.⁹² As I tried to show, it concerns all main topics of systematic theology, not just minor revisions of missiological strategy.⁹³

Conclusion

I think it is safe to conclude in light of what has been said so far that we certainly *should* engage in interreligious dialogue. And we should do it on both doctrinal-conceptual and social-ethical levels (not on the spiritual level in the syncretistic sense, I suggest). We need to know and study other religions well, not just from textbooks, but from first hand experience, in order to witness to their adherents effectively and cooperate with them in common tasks. Moreover, dialogue meetings are actually a good opportunity for our witness to take place. Yet we must not be naively optimistic about the mutual translatability of the languages different religions speak. We must respect the otherness of the Other.

And finally, I think the many problems, tensions and crises of contemporary world should motivate us to join with all people of good will⁹⁴ to work for justice, peace, love and solidarity (i.e. to develop and apply a solid public theology) on local, national and international levels. In this effort, we should be open and able (i.e. qualified) to work with honest adherents of other religions, because religious traditions have ethical and motivational resources, usually much stronger and more effective than those of secular humanism. These motivational resources are ambivalent,⁹⁵ they can be both very positive and very negative. The desirable outcome of the social-ethical dialogue is therefore twofold: 1) to address together the needs of contemporary world and 2) to reduce xenophobia and tame the related interreligious animosity and work thereby for global peace. This should all be done within the eschatological horizon of *missio Dei*, of God's command to implement the principles of His eternal kingdom, until He comes.

As we are faithful in this engagement, the foundations for a public theology of religions will gradually emerge and take shape, as we interact with

our neighbours of other faiths and reflect on that interaction in light of Scripture.

Notes

- 1 Grenz S., Franke J., *Beyond Foundationalism*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001, 16, 24ff.
- 2 Grenz, Franke, *Beyond*, 57ff.
- 3 Grenz, Franke, *Beyond*, 93ff.
- 4 Thiselton A.C., *The Two Horizons*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, 314ff.
- 5 Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 306.
- 6 Grenz, Franke, *Beyond*, 130ff.
- 7 Tillich P., *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, The Univ. Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1955, 1ff, 85, see also on Tillich's notion of correlation Grigg R., *Symbol and Empowerment*, Mercer UP, Macon, 1985, 53ff.
- 8 Lundin R., Thiselton A., Walhout C., *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985, 79ff, Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1992, 515ff.
- 9 Dupuis J., *Christianity and the Religions*, Orbis, New York, 2002, 10.
- 10 Dupuis, *Christianity*, 8.
- 11 Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 308.
- 12 Stackhouse M., *Public Theology and Political Economy*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, xi.
- 13 Atherton J., *Public Theology for Changing Times*, SPCK, London, 2nn, 13ff.
- 14 Netland H., *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2001, 309. A short history of the Evangelical debate on the issue of religious pluralism (till 2000) see in McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2000, 21ff.
- 15 About these trends see Atherton, *Public Theology*, chap. 3.
- 16 About these trends see Hexham's essay 'Evangelical Illusions', in Stackhouse, *No Other Gods Before Me?*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2001, 137ff.
- 17 Dupuis, *Christianity*, 3, Netland, *Encountering*, 308.
- 18 Stackhouse, *Public Theology*, 157ff.
- 19 Anderson N., *Christianity and World Religions*, IVP, Leicester, 1984, 176ff.
- 20 For the historical survey of these developments see Dupuis J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis, New York, 1997, and also Kärkkäinen V., *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2003.
- 21 Netland, *Encountering*, chapters 1.-4.
- 22 For the (as many suggest) first formulation of these three paradigms see Race A., *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London SCM Press 1993, 10ff.
- 23 Knitter P., *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Orbis, New York, 2002, 19ff.
- 24 Netland, *Encountering*, 24nn, see also Richard R., *The Population of Heaven*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1994.
- 25 Rommen E., Netland H., *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, W. Carey Library, Pasadena, 1995, 56ff.
- 26 Rommen, Netland, *Christianity*, 72ff.
- 27 See Kärkkäinen, *Introduction*, 63ff.
- 28 Netland, *Encountering*, 29.
- 29 Knitter, *Introducing*, 63ff.
- 30 On the development of Catholic official teaching on this issue see Fornberg T., *The Problem of Christianity in Multi-religious Societies Today*, E.Mellen Press, Leviston, 1995, 15ff.
- 31 Pinnock C., *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, Grand Rapids, 1992, Sanders J., *No Other Name*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, for a response to these two proponents of Evangelical inclusivism see Richard, *The Population of Heaven*.
- 32 Heim M., *The Depth of the Riches*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001, 83-84.
- 33 Daniélou J., *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*, Longman, Green and Co., London, 1957.
- 34 See Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, WCC, Geneva, 1993, 6ff.
- 35 Dupuis, *Toward*, 53ff.
- 36 Farquhar J.N., *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford UP, London, 1913.
- 37 Boublik V., *Teologie mimok es anských náboženství*, Karm. Nakl., Kostelni Vydri, 2000, 237.
- 38 See Rahner's essay in Hick and Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980, 52ff.
- 39 Boublik, *Teologie*, 320.
- 40 Knitter, *Introducing*, 109ff.
- 41 Hick's essay in Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Orbis, New York, 1989, 16ff.
- 42 Hick in Hick and Knitter, *The Myth*, 23, 30.
- 43 Ariarajah, *The Bible*, 19ff, and also Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, Orbis, New York, 1981, 88ff.
- 44 See Stendhal's essay in Anderson G. and Stransky T., *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Orbis, New York, 1981, 14.
- 45 On this idea see Hillman E., *Many Paths*, Orbis, New York, 1989, 24ff.
- 46 Heim, *The Depth*, 17ff.
- 47 See more on this alternative typology in Kärkkäinen's *Introduction to the Theology of Religions*.
- 48 Dupuis, *Toward*, 193f.
- 49 Netland, *Encountering*, 325ff
- 50 This basic principle of Lévinas' philosophy is taken into theology of religion by David Tracy, see his *Dialogue with the Other*, Eerdmans, New York, 1991.
- 51 Knitter, *Introducing*, 222.
- 52 Adams D., *Cross-cultural Theology*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1987.
- 53 Dupuis, *Toward*, 9.

- 54 Dupuis, *Christianity*, 236nn, see also in this context Cornille, *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, Orbis, New York, 2002.
- 55 Hick and Knitter, *The Myth*, 53ff.
- 56 On Smith's notion of personal truth, i.e. truth as expressing existential commitment, without necessary ontological reference, see W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1962, 153, and his *Towards a World Theology*, Macmillan, London, 1981, 94, 190.
- 57 I was kindly reminded about this by Dr. P. Parushev (IBTS, Prague), when I was presenting an earlier version of this paper.
- 58 Swidler L., *Toward a Universal Theology of religions*, Orbis, New York, 1998, 20ff.
- 59 See W.C. Smith's essay in Swidler, *Toward*, 51ff.
- 60 Lindbeck G., *The Nature of Doctrine*, Westminster John Knox Press, Philadelphia, 1984, 129.
- 61 Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 379nn, see also Netland, *Encountering*, 284ff.
- 62 Lindbeck, *The Nature*, 52ff.
- 63 See his 'Religion as a Cultural System', in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, 87-125.
- 64 See his and T. Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, Doubleday and Co., 1967.
- 65 Lindbeck, *The Nature*, 33.
- 66 For an example of how Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy applies on religion (Christianity) see Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 386ff.
- 67 See a similar view in the Barthian study of interreligious relations in D. Lochhead, *Dialogical Imperative*, Orbis, New York, 1988, 31ff.
- 68 Lindbeck, *The Nature*, 32ff, see also Hillman, *Many Paths*, 4-23.
- 69 McGrath A., *Intellectuals Don't Need God*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1993, 110ff.
- 70 See Atherton, *Public Theology*, 10-12.
- 71 Niebuhr, R.H., *Christ and Culture*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 190ff.
- 72 See Dupuis, *Toward*, 193n, Knitter, *Introducing*, 143.
- 73 Atherton, *Public Theology*, 14ff.
- 74 See Küng H., *Global Responsibility*, SCM Press, London, 1991, 55ff.
- 75 Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, 121ff.
- 76 Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 71ff, 107ff.
- 77 See Demarest B., *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982.
- 78 The so called *Urmonothetismus* (W. Schmid), see W. Corduan, *Tapestry of Faiths*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2002.
- 79 On this notion see McDermott's book *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, and also McDermott's essay in Stackhouse, *No Other Gods*, 17ff.
- 80 For this question see particularly D'Costa's *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Orbis, New York, 2000 and Heim's *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001.
- 81 See Panikkar R., *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, Orbis, New York, 1973.
- 82 See particularly from the above mentioned books Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* and Sanders, *No Other Name*.
- 83 See Pandiapallil J., *Jesus the Christ and Religious Pluralism*, Crossroad Pub. O., New York, 2001, 91ff.
- 84 See Dawe's essay in Dawe D. and Carman J., *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World*, Orbis, New York, 1978, 13ff.
- 85 See Knitter, *Introducing*, 150ff.
- 86 Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993, 99ff.
- 87 About this proposal, see the book by A. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2003.
- 88 See the ecclesiological shift of post II Vatican Roman Catholic Magisterium.
- 89 See especially the book *Mission and Dialogue* by M. Nazir-Ali, SPCK, London, 1995.
- 90 See Knitter, *Introducing*, 134ff.
- 91 Netland, *Encountering*, 313. For a proposal or a project of an Evangelical theology of religions see Stackhouse, *No Other Gods*, 189ff.
- 92 Similarly Burkhardt, *Ein Gott in allen Religionen?*, Brunnen/Verlag, Giessen, 1993, 8.
- 93 Similarly Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, xi.
- 94 Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 36ff.
- 95 See Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 36.