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Religious Language and Religious Pluralism

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Introduction

It is not surprising to find that the contemporary encounter of religions has led to a great deal of self-questioning, especially on the part of Christians, over the nature of religious language. In particular, Christian conviction of the capacity of doctrine to state the truth about God, man and the world has come under severe strain, in the light of our acquaintance with the teachings of other faiths and with men and women of other faiths. Unlike the case of natural science, where agreed methods and agreed results yield a common, growing, body of knowledge, shared by scientists from England, China, Pakistan and Japan, who all, as we say, speak the same language, world-wide religious encounter has produced no common, agreed, agenda, let alone results; and each religion's claimed 'truths' seem relative to the histories and cultures that have produced them.

One reaction to this situation has been the growth of 'expressivist' analyses of religious language, including talk of God and including the Christian creeds. On such views, what look at first like fact-asserting beliefs about the world and God are held to consist rather in picture language, expressing religious commitments and moral and spiritual ideals of life. Saying the creed in a religious service is a ritual act, binding those who say it to a particular religious tradition and community, reinforcing, by reference to a set of hallowed stories, a particular way of life. Religious language is not a matter of articulating how things ultimately speaking are believed to be, now or in the future, but a matter of expressing our highest values and ideals. Since very different histories and very different cultures have shaped the values and the forms of life of the different religions, it should not surprise us to find no common language, no agreed results in world religion. In so far, of course, as human nature and needs are much the same the world over, the religions may be expected to co-operate on practical projects; but otherwise we should no more expect religion or religious language to be the same the world over than we should expect art or poetry to be the same the world over. A well known Christian advocate of such a view is the Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the Reverend Don Cupitt.

Another reaction to the fact of religious pluralism is to try to work out a pluralistic 'global' theology of religion and religious language. On such a view, the long search for truth and salvation, seen to characterize the whole history of religions, is not to be interpreted in purely expressivist terms; for it is recognized that, in most religions, the way to human wholeness, blessedness, or fulfilment is inextricably linked to some vision of how things ultimately are, and of what has been done or revealed to enable men and women to achieve liberation. So 'pluralist' theologians seek to penetrate beneath the surface differences between the religions for intimations of a common transcendent, ultimate, reality, partially disclosed in each historical and cultural stream. On such a view, religious language is indeed culturally shaped in each case by a particular historical tradition; but it remains 'cognitive', yielding some apprehension, however partial and inadequate, of the transcendent. Pluralist theologians, therefore, recognize that religion is more than just a human construct, and that religious language can only be understood as expressing man's response to ultimate reality. But they suggest that, behind the surface differences, lies the same ultimate reality. Examples of such pluralist theologies of religion are to be found in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick.

The pluralist approach is certainly to be preferred to the purely expressivist approach; for it acknowledges a pervasive reference beyond the human world as something very near the heart of religious experience. But, as the examples of Cantwell Smith and Hick show only too clearly, the history of religions in fact proves highly resistant to the idea of a single underlying truth. In Cantwell Smith's case, a theistic bias is to be discerned. The religions are all vehicles of what can become authentic human response to the God who transcends them all. It is hard to see that justice is done here to the non-theistic religions, or, for that matter to the incompatible beliefs about the divine within the family of theistic faiths. In Hick's case, an increasing effort to characterize the ultimate in terms that do not beg the question between theistic and non-theistic language or between personal and impersonal language marks his more recent work. But the cost of this is greater and greater vagueness. An unsympathetic observer may begin to wonder whether the cognitive force of religious language is being retained at all. So much weight is now being put by Hick on the culturally relative forms of faith's expression that his most recent views are hardly to be distinguished, after all, from the purely expressivist views of Cupitt.

Our basic problem, therefore, remains. The world of the religions – each sustaining the faith and spirituality of millions – contains not only common insights into man's nature and needs and a common sense of the transcendent, but incompatible beliefs as well, including, especially, incompatible claims to revelation from or about that transcendent reality and its bearing on human destiny. The language of religion is incurably universal in its implications yet undeniably relative to a particular history and culture.

Ways of Construing Religion and Doctrine

One of the most interesting attempts to come to terms with this problem, from within the perspective of Christian theology and without abandoning the peculiar dogmatic claims of the Christian tradition, is Professor George Lindbeck's book, *The Nature of Doctrine.*[1] He suggests that there are four ways of construing religion and doctrine. According to the first, religious language is 'cognitivist'; that is to say, it is propositional in character and consists first and foremost in informatively meaningful assertions. According to the second, religious language is 'experiential-expressive'; that is to say, it expresses, symbolically, certain feelings, attitudes or existential orientations. The third way is a combination of the first two: religious language articulates the informational assumptions or implications of basic religious experiences. Lindbeck himself proposes a fourth way, according to which a religion is a 'cultural-linguistic' system or idiom for constructing a whole life-world. On this view it is not experience that is basic. Rather the inherited religious framework determines how people experience the world religiously.

Lindbeck's 'cultural-linguistic' view clearly does justice to the culturally relative nature of the the different religious traditions, including their doctrines, which so perplexes us in the light of the modern encounter of religions, and which has driven many modern theologians in the direction of either pure expressivism or undifferentiated pluralism. But does his view fare any better than these in preserving the peculiar content of an allegedly revelation-based religion such as Christianity? In an interesting chapter, entitled 'Many Religions and the One True Faith', Lindbeck suggests that even on a 'cultural-linguistic' view a particular religion may still claim 'unsurpassability' – not in the propositional sense, that its beliefs correspond more closely to the ultimate facts, nor in the expressivist sense that its symbols express more powerfully the experiential heart of religion – but rather in a sense comparable to that of a map, whose system of projection is more capable of guiding the traveller to his destination. Different maps, with different projections, may be strictly incommensurable, but one may succeed better than others in enabling the traveller to find his way. Similarly, it may not be possible to compare religions in any straightforward way – so different are their respective axioms, basic categories and projections – nevertheless it may be the case that only one religion provides the ultimate way of salvation. Lindbeck suggests a specifically Christian eschatological theory of all men's ultimate future salvation, beyond death, through Christ alone, as preferable to Karl Rahner's theory that all religions here and now contain 'anonymous Christians', whatever their explicit beliefs.

Lindbeck recognizes that such a view, despite its 'cultural-linguistic' perspective, implies some propositional truth-claims: for example, 'Christ is Lord'. But, he suggests, their ontological truth – their correspondence with ultimate reality – cannot be asserted apart from their role in constitut-

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1   SPCK, London 1984.

ing a particular form of life – in this case, the Christian way. Since we have no direct access to divine truth, we can only use doctrinal language regulatively in the context of moulding lives through worship and obedience.

This leads Lindbeck to develop a theory of doctrines as rules, providing the grammar of the first order religious language of prayer, preaching and living under the inspiration of the Bible stories. Doctrines are second order propositions, organizing systematically, as it were, a particular religion's map of the world and of life. They do not make, so Lindbeck avers, ontological truth claims. This rule theory of doctrine and the comparison between doctrine and grammar are derived from the later work of Wittgenstein, who himself threw out the enigmatic suggestion, 'theology as grammar?' [1]. Such a view appeals to those conscious of the primacy of the 'negative way' and of the fact that our human language cannot possibly represent God as he is. It seems also to offer a way out of the otherwise irresolvable problem of the conflicting truth-claims of the religions.

It is very difficult to see that this rule theory of doctrine constitutes a way forward for Christian or any other theology. There is no denying the culturally relative nature of the language of doctrine in Christianity as in other religions, but there is also no denying the ontological truth-claims explicit or implicit in both the language of the Bible and the language of doctrine. When Lindbeck tells us that his theory allows us to affirm that 'God is good', despite the 'informational vacuity' of such an affirmation, we have to protest that there seems no way at all of differentiating this account from sheer agnosticism.

Lindbeck's admission of 'informational vacuity' comes in a paragraph supposedly interpreting St. Thomas Aquinas' theory of analogy, whereby we may use words like 'good', of God, not in precisely the same sense as we use them of human beings but in an analogous sense. On Lindbeck's view, this means that we can affirm the transcendent goodness of God without knowing anything positive about it at all. This, however, was not Aquinas' view. Aquinas held that we can affirm the transcendent goodness of God analogically on the basis of our knowledge of human goodness, just because human goodness mirrors or images, albeit imperfectly, the supreme goodness of God; for man is made in the image of God. Moreover, if we focus our attention especially on the goodness of Christ, then we can hardly hold to the qualifier 'imperfectly'; for Christ's goodness mirrors God's supreme goodness as perfectly as human goodness can. For Christ is the image of the invisible God.

Neither Christian theology nor Christian religion, therefore, can rest content with such a tenuous account of Christian doctrine as Lindbeck's rule theory offers. So, while we cannot deny the 'cultural-linguistic' character of Christian doctrine, we have yet to find a satisfactory account of its ability to yield informational content, notwithstanding its cultural relativity.

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1 *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1958, ¶ 373.

Religious Language and Cultural Relativity

A satisfactory account of Christian discourse, in its more cognitive, truth-affirming aspects, must fulfil three tasks. It must explain the cognitive capacity and force of Christian doctrine. It must explain why cultural relativity is not so damaging a fact as it at first appears to be. And it must explain why some key aspects of religious truth are not, and cannot be, universally accessible in the way scientific truth is.

Language is used in religion, admittedly, in many different ways – to pray, to worship, to express attitudes and feelings, to say how life should be lived, to preach – as well as to affirm the deepest truths about God, the universe and man. But certainly, in Christianity's case, the last of these has an indispensable structuring role. For it is Christianity's conviction that God is real and the source of the world's being, the giver of the world's meaning, the architect of man's salvation, and the goal of all human aspiration and endeavour – it is this conviction that creates and controls specifically Christian ideals of life, both ethically and spiritually. The language in which this conviction is expressed is undeniably cognitive. It affirms who God is, what he has done and what he will do. Not that doctrine is the only way in which the cognitive content of Christianity is conveyed. It is also conveyed much more indirectly, imaginatively and figuratively, in and through stories, myths, parables, models and metaphors. Christianity is by no means unique among the world's religions in claiming cognitive significance for such figurative modes of discourse, whose indispensability in religion lies precisely in their imaginative power. But, more than most religions, Christianity tries to tease out more directly the truth content of such stories and metaphors in the form of doctrine.

The question arises how the more direct, though still inadequate affirmations of doctrine are possible. Do not all human words acquire their meaning from ordinary, everyday life and interpersonal relation? How can such words convey the truth of God except indirectly in myth and metaphor? Now it is easy to be misled by an exaggerated sense of the universality of myth and metaphor in the language of religion. The fact is that not all words used in religion are transferred from everyday use to religious contexts. Words like 'transcendence', 'holy', 'mystical', 'incarnation', 'god', all have their primary sense and reference in the context of religion. Moreover there is a class of terms used of God in Christian discourse – 'Creator', 'Father', 'Lord', 'good', 'wise', 'love', for example – which, although they do get their meaning in the first instance in the context of ordinary human life, nevertheless are held to be capable of direct, albeit extended, 'analogical' use, in our talk about God. As indicated above, such terms were understood by Aquinas to retain something of their ordinary human meaning when predicated of God because, according to Christian belief, man, for all his finitude and imperfection, resembles God, being made in God's image. Indeed, such concepts in reality should be thought of as applicable primarily to God; for God is the supreme exemplar of creativity, fatherhood, lordship, goodness, wisdom and love.

Human exemplification of these attributes, though first in the order of knowing, is only secondary and derivative in the order of being.

The doctrine of analogy permits us to go beyond the vague intimations of metaphorical and mythical discourse and make some more positive, informative, affirmations about God's being, actions and purposes. It secures the necessary conditions of cognitive, fact-asserting, beliefs and propositions about God and his will, namely the conventions enabling successful reference and appropriate predication in talk of God as the ultimate source and resource of the Christian life.

Admittedly this theory is a thoroughly Christian theological theory about the cognitive force of 'God-talk' in the context of Judaism and Christianity. It relies on thoroughly Jewish and Christian premises, such as the belief that man is made in the image of God, that God is personal and not impersonal, and indeed that God is revealed supremely and finally in Jesus Christ, the perfect human image of God, himself the Son of God incarnate. All these Jewish and/or Christian affirmations share the historical and cultural particularity and thus the relativity of first the Jewish and then the Christian stream in world history. But in turning to my second task of a satisfactory account of Christian discourse, we must ask whether such relativity is really as disturbing and problematic a factor as our modern expressivists, pluralists, and even cultural linguistic analysts suppose. Is it not of the essence of specifically Christian God-talk that it is rooted in and shaped by the particularity of the Incarnation in its Jewish context? After all, the scandal of particularity is no new thing. Our modern acquaintance with other faiths and with men and women of other faiths only reinforces and makes us vividly aware of a problem that has been there all along. And the explanation of that particularity is precisely the same as it has always been, namely that if God is to make himself known in the most personal and specific way possible by coming amongst us himself in person, to rescue us from our predicament, then that coming had to involve a particular story – a particular historical context, a particular tradition of faith, and a particular life history. There is no way in which this personal self-revelation, this specific atoning and reconciling act – we are speaking of the Cross of Christ here – could be equalled or replaced by a universally available set of general truths. Christian discourse, therefore, is bound, in the nature of the case, to reflect the particularity of divine self-revelation by way of the Incarnation and the Cross.

A high degree of cultural relativity is an inevitable consequence of such a necessary particularity. The history and faith of Israel, developing over centuries of encounter with the peoples and religions of the ancient near east, entails a very particular 'cultural-linguistic' context for the Incarnation in the first place. The reception of Jesus as the Christ (a term only intelligible within that context) creates a new and equally specific cultural-linguistic context. It may have broken the bounds of a particular people in history and claimed a universal significance and accessibility, the new religion spreading rapidly all over the known world, east as well as west.

But this history too created its own culturally relative context, which deter-mined the manner of its dominant forms of articulation – in fact pre-dominantly western. As has often been pointed out, if the eastward spread of Christianity had prevailed over the westward, involving engagement with Hindu philosophy rather than Platonism, a very different kind of theological appropriation of the story of the divine/human Saviour would have developed. But either way it was bound to be particular.

This means that the historically shaped and culturally relative character of the Christian tradition is not an unfortunate accident. It is of the essence of Christianity and of what it has to offer the whole world. But it is no use limiting that unsurpassable significance to the practical primacy of love as determining the Christian life way. For, as I have been stressing, Christian ethics and spirituality are inextricably bound up with and dependent upon the ontological truth of God's providence in the history of Israel, the Incarnation of his Son in Jesus of Nazareth, his death on the Cross, the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the constitution by the Spirit of the living God of the Church as the Body of Christ. When we affirm these things in specifically Christian discourse such as that of the creeds and the doctrines which spell them out further, we are articulating, however inadequately and incompletely, the truth of God.

Once we have appreciated the fact that the cultural relativity of the Christian tradition is a consequence of the historical particularity of the Incarnation, we can see that, far from being a scandal or a stumbling-block, it is itself a necessary instrument in the hands of divine providence. For only in and through the historically conditioned medium of a particular tradition of faith and faith's expression can the universal significance of the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ be conveyed to men and women all over the world, generation after generation.

These reflections enable us at the same time to fulfil the third of my three tasks and explain why some key aspects of religious truth are not and cannot be universally accessible in the way in which scientific truth is. I say, some key aspects, since, as I shall argue shortly, *some* aspects of religious truth *are* universally accessible, irrespective of time and place. But the truth of what God has done by way of self-involvement in history, reaching a climax in the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection, can only be appreciated or articulated on the basis of the actual historical witness to those particular events. The kind of religious language which speaks of a universal sense of God, a universal spiritual dimension, or of numinous and mystical experiences that can occur at any place or time, cannot begin to capture what comes to expression in the language of the Bible or the Christian creeds. The creeds sum up the Church's witness to God's special acts in history and to the hopes and expectations grounded precisely in those acts. Scientific truths, by contrast, concerns the nature, structure and powers of material substance everywhere. Even when we pass beyond the natural sciences into the human 'sciences', it is the nature and activity of man the world over that constitutes their subject matter. One way of bringing out

the difference would be to say that Christian discourse, in its particularity, is more like the language of history than that of anthropology or physics.

It might appear that these reflections are leading us inexorably in the direction of the kind of Christian exclusivism typified by the theology of Karl Barth. So convinced was Barth of the crucial role of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, in making God knowable and known, that he denied outright all knowledge of God by other means and he denied outright all revelatory or salvific significance to other religions. On a Barthian view, the only appropriate religious language is language which bears witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. For this is the way in which alone God gives himself to be known and spoken about. Our human minds, in science and theology alike, have to conform themselves to the given, but, unlike the case of natural science, where the given is the basic substance of the world and the same everywhere, in theology's case, the given is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word and none other. Only in response to the Church's witness to the Incarnation, therefore, can men and women find salvation.

These exclusivist consequences, however, do not necessarily follow from recognition of the unique and indispensable role of the Incarnation and the historical witness to the Incarnation in the story of God's self-revelation. For one thing, the initial reception of Jesus as the Christ required the prior knowledge of God mediated by the faith of Israel. For another, the language of both Jewish and Christian God-talk is only intelligible against the wider background of God-talk in the history of religions generally. And in the third place, the God revealed in Christ is such that he cannot be thought to have been entirely inactive or inaccessible to man in other streams of human history. Reflection on these three points will enable us to relate our defence of the particularity of the language of Christian doctrine to the fact of religious pluralism in a more positive and balanced way.

The Faith of Israel

There is no doubt that Christian doctrine requires a reading of the history of religions and especially the history of Israel and of Israel's developing faith as the providential preparation for the Incarnation. It is clear that God could not just break into the human scene out of the blue and take the form of man. That would not have been a real incarnation, and the point of self-revelation through a real human life (and death) would have been missed. A real incarnation in a human individual requires a particular life history in a particular cultural and religious context. It matters to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that Jesus was a Jew, brought up in the Jewish faith, inheriting and learning the developed spirituality, beliefs, concepts and language of Israel. He could only fulfil his providential role on the basis of this genuine participation in the life and faith of Israel, which provided the raw material for his transforming, revelatory and salvific words and deeds.

The Incarnation of God the Son could not have happened until the chosen people's understanding of God's nature and God's intentions had developed to the point where such a life made sense, and where, moreover, the death and Resurrection of this man, Jesus of Nazareth, could be interpreted as God's saving act.

God-talk in Religion

Just as the Incarnation could not have happened anywhere or at any time just out of the blue, so the concepts and the language of the faith of Israel could not have appeared just out of the blue in the history of the world. Only if man had already discovered himself to be a religious animal, creating and sustaining over generations different forms of the religious life, could a particular chosen people's faith be fashioned in and through both positive and negative encounter with surrounding religious ideas. This is not simply a question of the borrowings and differentiations that occurred in the history of Israel's relations with her ancient near eastern neighbours. The same point can be made on a world-wide scale, once we proceed to consider not only the formation of Israel's faith, but the reception of Jewish and Christian ideas in the subsequent history of the world. This is not only to argue for the necessity and value of religion all over the world, if special divine revelation is ever to find both a natural and a receptive context. It is also to hold that a real engagement with different forms of religion is necessary for any progress in religion. The significance of an ultimate personalism can only be discovered and appreciated by contrast with impersonal monism. The linear significance of history, as it moves, under God, towards an intended eschatological goal, can only be discovered and appreciated by contrast with more cyclical, passive forms of faith. The significance of an incarnational faith can only be discovered and appreciated against the background of, and by contrast with, non-incarnational forms of personal theism.

God in History

It has to be stressed once again that this very dependence of Christian incarnational theism on a religious world with which it can be contrasted indicates the folly of trying to assimilate all these forms of faith into an undifferentiated global unity. There may be elements of each religious form in all the others, and there may be some degree of complementarity between the different faiths, but the doctrines of the Christian creed are simply not being understood if it is not recognized that they represent a response to God's special self-revelation by Incarnation. From this revelation we are bound to conclude that ultimate reality is not impersonal but personal, that the world does not emanate from God but is created, that reality is not cyclical but linear, historical and directed to a future consummation, and that God does not make himself and his will known only through seers and sages, prophets and saints, but also and supremely by coming amongst us in person in the Incarnation of his Son.

Religious Pluralism

Despite these contrasting and definitive elements that defy assimilation with other forms of religion, Christianity has no interest whatsoever in depreciating the other forms of faith. Karl Barth correctly perceived the uniqueness and finality of Christ in God's plan of revelation and redemption, but he incorrectly deduced that this rendered everything else religiously insignificant. On the contrary, it is essential to stress the necessity and value of religion in all its forms if ever the conditions for the Incarnation and its reception are to be realized. Moreover, once we have appreciated from the Christian revelation itself that God is love, we cannot suppose that men and women before Christ, or outside the sphere of Christian response to him, are without revelatory and salvific contact with the divine. No Christian, admittedly, can give *equal* status to impersonal and personal concepts of the transcendent, to emanationist and creationist concepts of the world, to cyclical and linear concepts of reality, to non-historical and historical forms of faith, or even to non-incarnational and incarnational forms of personal theism. But in the light of Christ he can certainly see the value and importance of all forms of spirituality, all mysticism, all numinous, prophetic and devotional experience. For they are all marks of God's approach and address to man and points of contact for the sharing of the GospeL

The positive acceptance of the value and significance of other religions involves seeing Christ in all-inclusive rather than exclusive terms, and thus recognizing other modes of this same God's activity than his incarnate presence and acts in Jesus of Nazareth. This point deserves elaboration.

An inclusivist understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ entails the recognition that the one who was and is incarnate in the man Jesus is none other than the universal Logos, present and active, albeit in hidden ways, in the ethical and religious life of man the world over. He is admittedly not known as God incarnate in those other contexts and there may well be factors in them which inhibit rather than promote the conscious reception of him as the incarnate Word. This means that there is a sense in which the Christians do explicitly bring Christ – certainly the knowledge of Christ – to the other segments of humanity. But there is also a sense in which they find him there already; and indeed they have to school themselves to recognize him in the most unlikely places. Moreover if he is indeed the saviour of the world, then indications of the unknown Christ elsewhere in history and religion are indications not only of God's revelatory presence but of his salvific action in and for the whole life of mankind.

There is no reason at all why Christians cannot admit and welcome the fact of God's revelatory and salvific activity throughout the human world. Believing, in the words of St John, that no man comes to the Father but by the Son, they will no doubt take such activity in fact to be mediated by the same divine Logos who was and is incarnate in the man Jesus. Certainly they believe that it is he, Jesus Chirst, who gives them the key for the correct interpretation of God's acts at all times and in all places; and they

affirm, in faith, a future consummation in which the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will be acknowledged as the God of the whole earth. But because they believe that God in Christ is no stranger to man in any ethical and religious context, they will not only co-operate with men and women of other faiths on practical matters; they will share in their practices of spirituality, meditation and worship as well.

Conclusion

The fact of religious pluralism, on the view advanced here, does not require admission of equal status to every historically and culturally conditioned form of the religious life. We learn rather to appreciate the fact that, if God's self-communication to the family of man is to reach its intended climax in the Incarnation, then there is bound to be a pronounced asymmetry in the history of religions, as a particular human context was prepared for God's coming in the person of his Son. Correlatively we have to affirm that religious language is capable, not only of expressing, in a whole variety of ways, man's manifold sense of God's reality and God's action, but also of articulating the further and deeper truths of God that the Incarnation alone makes accessible to man. The language of Christian incarnational and trinitarian doctrine, of soteriology, of ecclesiology and sacramental theology, and of Christian eschatological hope, brings to expression a far greater human knowledge of God than anything given to man elsewhere. Christianity is bound to make this claim. As I have tried to show throughout this paper, such specific knowledge could not, in the nature of the case, be made generally available and accessible to any religiously sensitive mind irrespective of time or place. Unlike the truths of science, the deepest religious truths depend on what could only be a unique historical event – the Incarnation. But the very greatness of the claim for what is specially revealed there makes it quite unnecessary as well as unjust to belittle the truths that do come to expression in the language of religion everywhere. I hope to have shown also that Christianity requires there to be at all times and in all places some more general knowledge of God, expressed in the very varied modes of religious discourse to be found in the world religions, both in order to provide the necessary conditions for the Incarnation and its reception, and in order to confirm the truth of what is actually revealed through the Incarnation, namely that God is love and the God of all men everywhere.

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