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An Evangelical Theology of Pluralism

Dewi Hughes

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AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF PLURALISM

It would be extremely pretentious to call what follows 'An Evangelical Theology of Pluralism'. What it is, rather, is a sketch of some of the issues that need to be considered in formulating such a theology and an outline of some of the basic principles that should condition such a theology.

To begin with the title. I take it that what is meant by 'pluralism' is the pluralism of religions or even worldviews that is characteristic of Western democracies in particular, or the consciousness of a plurality of religions or worldviews which modern communications makes it impossible to ignore. A range of worldviews is now available to us from which we are perfectly at liberty to choose. That this is so is partly the result of certain historical developments in British Protestantism. As a result of conflicts in British Protestantism in the 17th century, a society became conceivable in which people were free to choose what they believed. Initially this freedom was granted to various types of Protestants with limitations on the role which certain types of Protestants could play in the state. But little by little the religious and political limitations were removed so that by now we are free to adopt any worldview we choose as long as that worldview when put into practice does not contravene the law of the land, e.g. we would not be allowed to adopt a religion which practises human sacrifice. The choice now available to us in the UK is enormous. Not only can we choose from a very large range of different Christian denominations and sects but there is also a large number of Christian heresies and also groups representing non-Christian religious traditions.

One of the most significant results of the availability of a variety of worldviews is the fact that adherence to one worldview rather than another is becoming much more a matter of choice than a matter of tradition. However much we might like to put up barriers to insulate us and our children from contact with worldviews other than our own it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. We may do everything in our power to educate our children in the Christian worldview, and we may p. 180 warn them of the dangers and errors of other worldviews but in the last analysis they have to choose from a number of possible alternatives. This is 'the heretical imperative' which Peter Berger writes about in his book of that title. We live in a supermarket of worldviews. Just as we can choose from a range of twenty or more different types of aspirin when we have a headache we can choose from a whole host of different ways of understanding the world in which we live, our role in it, its past and its future. Practically speaking, as with the aspirin, the number of alternatives that are actually tried is probably very small but a choice is made and has to be justified. Once made the choice has to be continually justified as new alternatives come to light unless there is a fairly drastic withdrawal from the world.

That there is freedom to choose what worldview we adopt and that we are free to propagate our worldview must be good. But this freedom is good not because of the equal truth of all worldviews but because it makes possible the open propagation of the true worldview and adherence to that worldview without coercion. It is because we value this freedom that we would defend the right of others to believe as they do. Yet we should

understand that other worldviews might not share our view of freedom in a pluralist society. For example where Marxism has gained the upper hand restrictions are almost invariably placed on the freedom of those with a religious worldview to propagate their faith, and where Islam is in the ascendancy severe restrictions are placed on the freedom of the adherents of all other worldviews. Universal toleration is, therefore, both risky and challenging because it entails giving their freedom to those who would destroy our freedom if they were in a position to do so.

Things become somewhat more complicated when we begin to think of this pluralist situation in the context of education. One of the basic questions here is whether or not it is the responsibility of the educational system, as it has developed over the last century or so, to introduce pupils to a representative range of worldviews that they are likely to encounter. It would be very difficult to argue against such a responsibility. The difficulties arise when we begin to think how this responsibility should be carried out. One opinion which has become very popular during the last ten years is that pupils must be presented with a range of alternative worldviews objectively. What is meant by 'objectively' is that the teacher must hide his own worldview and present the various alternatives as if there was no such thing as truth and error in the last analysis. But this ideal of an objective presentation of various alternatives fails because everyone either implicitly or explicitly is forced to express their worldview in their teaching whether [p. 181](#) they like it or not. The only way objective teaching is possible is by doing away with the teacher, which would rather undermine the whole educational process, and leaves us with the noble savage learning virtue directly off the bosom of nature! If we must have teachers, and I believe we must, then we cannot have an objective presentation of various worldviews. The education of pupils in worldviews cannot be a matter of directing pupils to the supermarket with 'objective' instructions in their hands as to the different types of aspirins that are available and listing totally fairly the virtues and vices of the various types. Any instructions formulated by a teacher must inevitably be conditioned by personal experience, however minimal or maximal—minimal probably in the case of worldviews—of the different types of aspirin and their effectiveness in the relief of headaches. The analogy with aspirins breaks down here but I would say that the most unobjective teacher is the one who is convinced that all aspirins are equally valid as a means to relieve headache. That teacher is dangerous not because the view held is necessarily false but because it is deluded—the teacher thinks he is being objective while being totally conditioned by a very definite worldview. (The issue raised here will be more fully discussed theologically in due course.)

To return to the relationship between the educational system and a society in which we have a pluralism of world views. The glory of such a tolerant society for the Christian is the freedom it gives to propagate Christianity without fear of persecution and the fact that in such a society Christianity can stand on its own merit without any coercion against anyone to become an adherent. The question is whether or not a Christian teacher can claim the freedom to propagate the faith in the classroom. I would say yes—but not in order to claim a special privilege for Christian teachers but because all teachers are inevitably propagating some worldview or other. The difference between Christian and other teachers very often, it seems to me, is not that the Christian has a definite worldview which he wants to share while other teachers have no worldview but that Christian teachers are rather better thought out in the area of worldviews than their colleagues! But having emphasized the Christian teacher's right to propagate the faith we must also emphasize that the propagation must never be coercive. No teacher of any integrity should use his position, his superior knowledge and argumentative skills to coerce his pupils in the direction of Christianity. But if it seems quite impossible for the Christian

teacher not to propagate the faith on the psychological plane then it is more impossible still on the spiritual plane. To be Christian is to subject the whole of our life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ—which p.182 means loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. If a teacher is a Christian in any real sense, therefore, it is as impossible for that teacher not to propagate the faith as it is for a fish to live out of water. How can a Christian bracket faith in Jesus on entering a classroom to discuss matters which have to do with the ultimate questions of human existence? To do so would be to deny the Saviour and to be unconcerned about the eternal destiny of pupils.

I have argued that the fact that we live in a pluralist society should mean that a teacher should have the right to be a Christian teacher. There is now, however, a very strong lobby particularly in the area of Religious Education or Religious Studies that would deny Christian teachers this right. This lobby emphasizes the ideal of objectivity and the injustice of using the state educational system to indoctrinate pupils. But these emphases are not fundamental to their position. Fundamentally they represent one particular theological standpoint which is very much a minority standpoint in the spectrum of Christian theology but which seems to have been able to corner the market in the area of Religious Education. The gurus of this school are Ninian Smart, John Hick, Cantwell Smith, Mircea Eliade and the like. Theologically the first three are liberal Protestants and Eliade was a very liberal Catholic. To consider their view of revelation will help us to see the crucial importance of the traditional Evangelical view of the Scriptures if we are to develop an Evangelical theology of pluralism.

Whatever else may be said about the contemporary exponents of Religious Studies they put a very heavy emphasis on the vital importance of religion for the wellbeing of mankind. They have no doubt that there is Something there over and above man and that it is very important for man to be in contact with that Something. They also believe that that Something reveals Itself to man, (e.g. Eliade's 'theophanies'). But they are united also in denying that that Something reveals Itself in *words*. Revelation to them is essentially a non-verbal experience of some kind. The archetype of this genre is 'the feeling of absolute dependence' of Schleiermacher and Otto's consciousness of an ineffable mystery that is both awesome and attractive is another example. The 'divine' is There continually as Something which stands over and above man, as something beyond man's control and as Something on which man depends. Occasionally certain individuals or groups experience this overriding reality in a new way. Having experienced It they then try to explain their experience by putting it into words which can never adequately express the experience. In fact the verbal expression in some ways kills the experience—fossilizes it p. 183 by making it into something historical rather than existential. A somewhat extreme though, I believe valid, illustration of the status of words in this view of revelation is the Hindu *mantra*. Very often the mantra is a meaningless 'word' which when repeated over and over again is believed to evoke an experience of the 'divine'. The meaning of the word in the mantra is not important; what is important is that its use evokes an experience. When applied to the question of revelation and the Bible in the context of Christianity this approach yields the view that the Bible is not God's revelation but an attempt to express an experience of God's revelation. The revelation itself cannot, by definition, be embodied in a verbal expression. God cannot speak, it is man only who has that privilege. We do not read the Bible, therefore, to discover certain statements which can be said to be true but we read it in the hope that it will evoke in us the same experience as its authors had.

The adoption of this subjectivist view of revelation brought with it a tremendous revolution in theological thinking. With the rejection of the objective standards of the Bible and dogma the emphasis moved to religious experience and religious experience is not something found only in the Christian tradition. Everywhere men have had religious

experiences and then tried to express those experiences in a bewildering variety of ways. But given their commitment to a 'god' who cannot speak there is no question of being able to make any sense of the variety of man's religious experience by appeal to some objective standard. The only alternative is to argue that one expression of religious experience is superior to another in terms of fulfilment or moral superiority. Quite a lot of theologians are still trying their best with this approach to proving the superiority of the Christian verbalization of the primal revelation. Others, such as Smart and Hick, are now abandoning the attempt and saying that every religious tradition is an equally valid response to revelation.

As Evangelicals, however, we do not believe that it is unreasonable to hold that God has spoken with man. But even though we can marshal various arguments to justify this belief we gladly admit that in the last analysis it is a matter of faith—just as a rejection of such belief is also a matter of faith. But an Evangelical theology of pluralism must begin here, with the conviction that the Bible is God's word to man. This emphasis has been central to evangelicalism in its British sense from the beginning and continues to be so. Members of the Evangelical Alliance, e.g., still have to declare their belief in 'the divine inspiration of the Holy Scripture and its consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and [p. 184](#) conduct.' This might seem a very obvious point to make but I think that we do need to remind ourselves as evangelicals today that this is where we begin. This is not to say that we worship the Bible as some would have it. It is God whom we worship—but the God who has revealed Himself to us in the Bible. We don't begin with some experience of a Reality greater than us which we try to describe with our inadequate language but we begin with He who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth and who *said* ' "Let there be light," and there was light.' We know that we are caught in a round argument when we say this. All we can say is that we cannot make God subject to human reason or experience and being that He is God our creator we believe that He is able to communicate with us in words. Precisely how He speaks, of course, is a big question.

We begin, then, with the Scriptures. We read or hear of the God who is described in them. We trust Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin and eternal life. We know in our own experience the power of the Holy Spirit in the struggle with our own corruption and the corruption in the world around us. We go to the same Scriptures to make sense of the religiously pluralist situation in which we find ourselves. To say this does not preclude discussion about precisely how the Bible is the word of God but it does preclude the belief that the Bible is simply a weak and inadequate human attempt to express ineffable spiritual experiences. We refuse to open up this unbridgeable gap between an experience of God and its verbal expression which has been opened up by liberal Protestant theology. In this context I would think that a Biblical view of religious experience and particularly of the experience of divine inspiration developed in the context of the view which dominates Religious Studies at the moment would be a valuable contribution to an evangelical theology of pluralism. I am in no position to even outline the Biblical view of religious experience but I can offer a critique of the gap theory which might help in clearing the ground.

I would like to look in particular at Cantwell Smith's distinction between 'faith' and 'belief' as an excellent example of the matter in question. For Smith 'faith' is intensely personal. 'Men's faith,' he states, 'lies beyond the sector of their religious life that can be imparted to an outsider for his inspection.' In *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) he discusses the various ways in which 'faith' has been expressed, such as through art, community, ideas, words or beliefs. Here 'faith' and 'belief' are very different. Belief belongs to the world of the relative and the mundane—the world of history. Faith on the

other hand is man in the presence of the transcendent. This experience [p. 185](#) of faith can never be captured in words or beliefs; as the Tao Te Ching puts it, 'The truth that can be told is not the eternal truth.' And unbridgeable gulf is opened up between faith and belief and Smith's attempts to describe faith must be seen in the context of this gulf.

In *Faith and Belief* he describes faith as a 'quality of human living' which 'at its best has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what will happen to oneself at the level of the immediate event.' (Princeton 1979 p.12) In *Towards a World Theology* he describes faith as 'an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing the world, and of handling it; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension. The early Christians proclaimed that in Christ faith had become available to man, so that a new life thereby became possible.' (pp. 113–4) Consistent with his basic view of faith these attempts to describe it are really attempts to describe its effects without any reference to belief.

Smith's distinction between faith and belief has been subjected to critical analysis by William J. Wainwright in an article entitled 'Wilfred Cantwell Smith on faith and belief' (*Religious Studies*, vol. 20, 1984, pp. 353–366). Wainwright rightly contends that the heart of Smith's position is his conviction that assurance of the truth of certain propositions is not essential to faith. He then examines the various arguments Smith offers to justify this point of view. One argument Smith uses is that since belief (doctrine) is important in some religious traditions and not in others then it cannot be essential to faith. Wainwright, however, is very doubtful whether there are any religious traditions where belief is entirely unimportant and charges Smith with failure to distinguish between a formal system of doctrine and being convinced of the truth of certain propositions. It is true that a formal system of doctrine is unimportant in some religious traditions but it does not follow that the adherents of those traditions have no convictions that certain propositions are true. To the contrary it is very unlikely that one could find a religious believer who does not believe in the truth of some proposition or other.

A second argument of Smith's is that faith remains constant while belief varies from age to age. Beliefs change in response to various historical pressures but authentic faith can be found in every age. Beliefs, therefore, are not essential to faith. What Smith is doing here according to Wainwright is assuming the correctness of his idea of [p. 186](#) faith as the foundation for his argument. He builds his case on the unproven conviction that there is something essential and of vital importance for mankind at the root of the diversity of the religious traditions. This essence he assumes cannot be subject to change and must differ from everything that does not change. Doctrines or beliefs change and so they cannot belong to this essence—which brings us back to the beginning of the circular argument.

Another assumption underlying Smith's argument is that the objects of faith as expressed in belief are unimportant, i.e. what faith is and does can be divorced from its object as expressed in doctrines so that it does not really matter whether one believes in Christ, Buddha, Allah or any other object of faith. These names are in the last analysis attempts to express in words the essential reality (at the core of religion—they are merely shadows of the ultimate reality) that lies beyond them. As Wainwright correctly comments, 'this argument's premise will only be granted by those who are antecedently convinced that the nature of one's doctrinal convictions is only peripherally related to the authenticity of one's faith.' A rare creature among religious believers I suspect!

Another assumption underlying Smith's thesis is that faith is primary and belief secondary or derivative. Wainwright questions the possibility of having any religious

experience, or experience of faith as understood by Smith, that is 'logically prior to any sort of conceptual articulation'. His analysis of the illustrations that Smith uses to support his point proves the justice of Wainwright's criticism in my opinion. What Smith claims to be contrasting here is what he calls 'insight' (i.e. knowing the truth of something, recognising it) and 'propositional knowledge', (knowing that something is true). Faith, he claims has the quality of 'insight'. He illustrates the point by comparing 'insight' to seeing what is funny in a joke, a 'seeing' which, according to Smith, is quite separate from the telling of the joke. But Wainwright points out quite rightly that there would have been no 'seeing' without the 'telling'. 'Propositional knowledge' must be at least part of the process of 'seeing'. This does not mean that 'propositional knowledge' and 'faith' are identical but it does mean that the relationship between them is much closer than Smith is prepared to admit. Smith fails to see that to say that A cannot be identified with B is not the same as saying that A is unlike B. While not exhausting the being of God it is conceivable that certain propositions could correctly describe God—though only partially. If this is so where two beliefs contradict each other both cannot be true—it is this conclusion that Smith seeks to avoid at all costs. [p. 187](#)

It is very interesting how very suspicious Smith is of propositions, propositional truth or propositional knowledge. He possesses almost the same fervour as an 18th century revivalist in his insistence that religious head knowledge is not enough and that there is no authentic 'faith' without a commitment of the heart. The great difference between Smith and the 18th century revivalists is that for Smith head knowledge is profoundly unimportant. In this he is typical of many modern Western thinkers who are searching for some final experience beyond the understanding, some solid ground underneath and out of the reach of the tumult of the conflicting voices of our pluralist society. He offers us some island of hope beyond the horizon towards which we can sail without a compass and without any certainty that the island is there at all. One way in which he expresses his suspicion of propositions is that 'the object of faith's cognitive attitudes is the transcendent, not propositions or statements'. Here again he seems to misunderstand the basic mechanism of faith. No one who claims to believe in the Apostle's Creed is saying that the propositions of the creed are the objects of their faith. God is the object of the believer's faith, the God who is described in the creed. A similar mistake is made by those who charge 'fundamentalists' with bibliolatry. To believe that the Bible is the word/s of God is not the same as worshipping the Bible and to suggest that it is is illogical.

Another problem with the gulf which Smith opens between 'faith' and 'belief' is that, according to Smith's own assumptions, this idea itself belongs to the realm of beliefs. After all what he says about 'faith' is a series of propositions. One is reminded here of Dilthey's statement, 'the relativity of all human concepts is the last word of the historical vision of the world'. According to Smith all beliefs belong to the flux of history and this must include Smith's own beliefs which are not difficult to extract from his works. Smith believes, (i) in 'God' the transcendent reference point of man's experience. (*Meaning and End of Religion* p. 184); (ii) that this 'God' is worshipped in all the religious traditions of the world (*Towards a World Theology* pp. 103, 164–5); (iii) that where authentic existence is found this transcendent reference must be at work (*Faith and Belief* p. 12); (iv) that the universe bears witness to the fact that this transcendent reference is love (*Towards a World Theology* p. 151). For anyone familiar with the history of theology since the 19th century this creed has a strangely familiar ring. What he sings is the old and familiar tune of liberal Protestantism.

It might be felt, maybe, that I have laboured the point somewhat with Cantwell Smith but in fact the argument is very relevant to the type of thinking that has come to dominate multi-faith RE. As I am [p. 188](#) made to understand Cantwell Smith seems particularly

relevant since his position could be described as 'subjectivity' rather than 'objectivity'. But whether the emphasis is on objective or subjective understanding underlying both approaches is a very definite religious conviction that is as much a matter of belief as the explicit credal system of an evangelical. If I as an evangelical—or even if I was a Muslim—decided to embrace the views of Cantwell Smith or Ninian Smart then I would have to turn my back on my evangelicalism—or my Islamic convictions. I would go as far as saying that the dominant view of RE at the moment is a challenge to all who adhere to a specific historical religious tradition to abandon their faith and embrace the liberal Protestant creed. Another major objection to this point of view, in my opinion, is that it does not take seriously enough the doctrinal schemes of the religious traditions. Their conflicting doctrinal schemes are essential to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam etc. and if we fail to be serious about these doctrinal schemes then we fail in our respect to the adherents of the various religions. And if doctrines are much closer to religious experience than the liberal Protestant is prepared to admit then doctrines have more to do with truth also—to suggest that true religious experience flows from contradictory doctrines is nonsense.

I am not at all sure whether what I have included in this paper can be described as a 'sketch of some of the issues that need to be considered in formulating' an evangelical theology of pluralism, or that it is 'an outline of some of the basic principles that should condition such a theology'. I might have cleared some of the ground to begin a task that needs to be completed and hopefully given some encouragement to those who are in the thick of it to stand firm as evangelical Christians.

Dr. Dewi Hughes is Tear Fund Co-ordinator for Wales (formerly Senior Lecturer and Section Leader in Religious Studies, Polytechnic of Wales). p. 189

Book Reviews

THE CHURCH IN THE BIBLE AND THE WORLD

by Donald A. Carson (ed.)

(Paternoster: Exeter, 1987; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988)

xi + 359pp., price £12.50

Reviewed by Rev. Jacob M. B. Sudhakaran. Printed with permission.

This book is the product of a consultation by the 'Faith and Church Study Unit' of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, under whose sponsorship several prominent evangelical scholars met to discuss the theme, the nature and the mission of the Church.

Edmund P. Clowney affirms in his paper (on the biblical teaching on the Church) that the ministry of the Church is three-fold, like God's nature: the Church is a worshipping assembly, the body of Christ and a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The mission therefore involves the community, discipleship by following Christ as members of his body and witnessing in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit through the various gifts endowed to the Church by the Spirit. In the second paper, P. T. O'Brien's focus is on the eschatological dimensions of the Church; he discusses how the Church can be an eschatological reality