

# A historical overview of the study of the theology of religions

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is commonplace that our world has become plural in more than one way (Kärkkäinen 2003:18). Isolation is something of the past. A growing number of communities are linked to a widening network and exposed to influences far outside their traditional range. Homogeneous communities are becoming the exception and plural communities the rule. Our world is changing into one huge plural society. This plurality applies to all levels of existence, such as religious affiliation, race and culture, social and economic status and even world view.

Plurality also implies connectedness. Globalisation has made the inhabitants of this planet aware of their differences. Open access to society and world communities at large

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1.This section does not have the intention of presenting a complete historical description of the development of the thoughts leading to a theology of religions; it merely presents a broad overview in order to reach an understanding of the complexity of the matter.

not only brought people into contact, but multiplied divergences. Any claim or statement purporting to have fundamental and/or universal implications must be prepared to be tested in this worldwide forum. The world has become a global village, and modern communication technology links the most outlying communities to the worldwide network. A global citizenry is developing.

The position and status that religions enjoy in society are also changing. Kärkkäinen (2003:19) indicates how those that do not believe and those that believe differently, engage in society. Values and religious viewpoints previously accepted without question, must be prepared to be questioned. They may even be subjected to attack or ridicule. In many instances religious communities need to go the way of confrontation in order to retain formerly unquestioned positions or rights. Religious leaders who had the ear of the authorities a couple of decades ago have since found that their influence has been reduced to the size of the community they represent.

Christians increasingly experience challenges from people of other faiths. In such situations it is imperative that they are aware of their own position as well as that of the other parties. Christians, members of churches, congregations and churches are frequently invited to cooperate with other faiths in projects of common interest, but in many cases it is unclear whether such cooperation would be in order in terms of the Christian perspective.

The church and its members are moving into unknown territory. Theology is called upon to provide answers to previously unheard questions. These and many other points end up on the agenda of our subject of the theology of religions. We are functioning at the cutting edge of theology.

## ■ Theology of religion (*Theologia religionis*)

This subject covers theological reflection on and technical debate about the phenomenon of religion with a view to a theological theory of religion. Dupuis (1997:7) indicates that the theology of religion asks from a Christian perspective what religion is, and seeks to interpret the universal religious experience of humankind. It further investigates the relationship between revelation and faith, faith and religion and faith and salvation. The understanding of the nature of the own religion evidently leads to an understanding of the relation with other religions.

The question about the origin, nature and essence of religion remains one of the fundamental theological issues, especially in the context of our time. In fact, many modern theologians would claim that religion as phenomenon provides theology with a most important theoretical challenge. A theological theory of religion is essential for the church's understanding of itself. It is also of fundamental importance to the theology of religions, as well to the rest of theology.

## ■ Theology of religions (*Theologia religionum*)

Theology of religions is concerned with theological reflection on the meaning and value of other religions (Kärkkäinen 2003:20). This is where theology focuses on religions that are neighbours or challenging the message and/or mission of the church – with a view to evaluating such religions and the challenges they pose from a Christian perspective, and also to reach a deeper level of understanding.

Theology of religions also aims to formulate principles and guidelines regarding the practical coexistence, witnessing toward and dialogue with members of other faiths.

Ever since Christianity had to consider its relationship with other religions, a debate started which has not ended. This apparently started as an intrareligious debate between Christians as how to understand the relationship between Christians differing on interpretations of matters of faith. The apparent statement made by Origen that no salvation is possible outside the ‘house’ of the church was directed against nonconformist and sectarian groups within Christianity. In his commentary in a sermon from Joshua 2:19, Origen states that salvation belongs only to those residing inside the house, which is the family represented as the church (Dupuis 1997:87). The Church Father, Cyprian, had the same intention when he formulated the famous principle ‘*extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*’ [‘outside the church there is no salvation’] (Dupuis 1997:88). This was done within the context of the struggle between the church and sectarian groups (Berkouwer 1965:231). Later on<sup>2</sup> this principle became the official church position and was applied far beyond its original scope in terms of intent and time (Berkouwer 1965:230); it was now applied to all who found themselves outside of the church, Gentiles included. Even the most spiritual and pious Gentile should convert to the Christian faith and church in order to be saved. Piety as such offered no hope of salvation (Kärkkäinen 2003:64).

During this early period, Christianity had to consider its relationship with mainly two religions: Judaism and that of the Gentiles. The relationship with Judaism has a complex history.

## ■ Judaism

Scholars seem to agree on the fact that Judaism and Christianity had an apparent close connection. Compare in this regard discussions by Jung (2008), Rendtorff (1998), Kessler (2010:4) and Frankemölle (2006). Amongst the first Christians were people who belonged to Judaism. Crossan (1999:x) stresses this point by indicating that in its time of origin,

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2. Dupuis (1997:89) indicates the commencement of this notion when Christianity became the state religion.

Christianity cannot be separated from Judaism. When Crossan (1999:xi) uses the word Christianity, he declares that he means 'Christian Judaism'.

The original relation between Judaism and Christianity is, however, unclear. This is due to the fact that Judaism at this stage was already a heterogeneous community, consisting of identifiable groups such as the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and Pharisees. To this list Frankemölle (2006:27) adds the Galilean and Alexandrian versions of Judaism as well as the messianic renewal movement represented by Jesus and his followers. One such faction within Judaism was Christianity (Kessler 2010:4). This is confirmed by Neusner (1984:22) when he indicates that for a long time, Christianity was a form of Judaism.

Giffen (2013:80) indicates how a Talmudic reference (Tractate *Sanhedrin* 29c of the Order *Nezikin*) mentions that at the time of the Temple destruction (70 CE), 24 varieties existed within Judaism. Frankemölle (2006:25) refers to the period between the Temple destruction in 70 CE and the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135 CE as the 'Jabne period' due to the synod of Jabne held in 95 CE. Reed and Becker (2003:4) indicate how the 'Council of Yavneh' made an end to sectarian disputes within Judaism, set the rabbis into power as leaders of the nation and dispelled Christ believers from amongst the Jews. From this time onward Jews preferred to live isolated from the Greco-Roman world, set apart from Christians and Gentiles alike (Reed & Becker 2003:5).

Kessler (2010:5) indicates how, during this time, which he refers to as the Second Temple period, a gradual separation occurred between the Jewish descendants of the Pharisees and Christianity. Reed and Becker (2003:4) indicate from a Christian vantage point how the gradual separation between Christianity and Judaism occurred when Christians no longer focused on their relationship to Judaism but rather to Greco-Roman culture. The separation between the two religions arose despite the common origins they shared during the Second Temple period (Reed & Becker 2003:5).

## Gentiles

As regards the relationship with Gentiles, the statement ascribed to Cyprian mentioned earlier applies: Outside of the Christian church there is no salvation.<sup>3</sup> Even the most spiritual and pious Gentile should convert to the Christian faith and church in order to be saved. Piety as such offered no hope of salvation. At least Gentiles were not considered to exist outside of the scope of conversion and salvation. Upon conversion Gentiles were welcomed into the Christian community or the kingdom of God (Dupuis 2001:23).

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<sup>3</sup>Compare in this regard the extensive discussion by Dupuis (1997:88) of the development and application of this notion throughout early history.

The positions which early church fathers held on the Gentiles vary on a continuum. Some church leaders considered gentile philosophy to be of some value in understanding Christian doctrine. Origen enjoyed the esteem of contemporary philosophers, and was a friend of the new-Platonic philosopher Plotinus. Origen's theology displayed distinct new-Platonic features. He had no qualms in making use of Greek philosophy to 'enrich' Christian theology. He defended this by a peculiar exegesis of Exodus 3:21, 11:2 and 12:35: The Egyptians were forced to hand over to the Israelites sacred golden and silver objects from their temples. These were melted down by the Israelites and refashioned into sacred objects for the Tabernacle. In the same way, the church was allowed to adopt concepts and ideas from gentile philosophy and learning on the condition that they were Christianised.

As opposed to this, some leaders indicated with indignation the falsity and evil of gentile philosophy. Tertullian was one of the earliest theologians not only to reject non-Christian religions and rituals, but also non-Christian learning, scholarship and philosophy. He famously asked: '*Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?*' ['What has Jerusalem in common with Athens?']. He was trained in classical scholarship, law and philosophy, but after his conversion regarded this as nothing. He opposed the apologetic tradition of his time, that is, offering philosophical and learned arguments for the Christian faith. Faith does not follow clever arguments and logic – it is the fruit of conversion and rebirth.

Dupuis (1997:102–109) discusses several theologians who exhibited a positive attitude towards other religions. A letter of friendship from Pope Gregory VII (1076) to the Muslim King Anzir of Mauritania emphasises a possible good relationship with Gentiles. Peter Abelard's treatise *A Dialogue of a philosopher with a Jew and a Christian* indicates a sentiment different to the official position that outside of the church there is no salvation. Francis of Assisi's peaceful approach to Muslims also illustrates a positive attitude towards non-Christians. Nicolas of Cusa's treatise *The Peace of Faith* emphasises the notion that all religions are worshipping one God with varying rites.

## Islam

When Islam appeared on the scene from the 8th century onward, Christians had to express their position in relation to this monotheistic religion. Islam exploded from Arabia at roughly 600 CE. Muslim armies conquered large parts of the Byzantine Empire (including northern Africa). Byzantium suffered huge losses but continued to play an important role as a local power for a number of centuries to come. By the time of 700 CE Muslims ruled over Spain and Portugal. In 732 CE they were stopped in southern France by the armies of Charles Martel, when they withdrew to the Iberian Peninsula.

During the next phase the Muslims began to absorb the cultures and learning of the peoples they conquered. Whilst Western Europe stagnated, the Muslim world moved

towards learning and sophistication. The works of Greek scholars and philosophers were translated into Arabic and eagerly studied. The metaphysical views of Plato and Aristotle found their way into Muslim theology. In the meantime the literature of Aristotle was lost in the West and rediscovered only centuries later. A Latin translation was made from the Arabic translation of his works only in the 12th century, long after Arab philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes developed extensive philosophical systems based on Aristotelian ideas. The famous Jewish philosopher-theologian Maimonides preferred Muslim countries (and peers) and never entered Western Europe. Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides exerted influence on European scholastic theology and philosophy.

Seven crusades were organised from Western Europe during 1096–1270. The intention was to drive the Muslims from the Holy Land and seize pilgrim centres from Muslim control. A few of these crusades were well organised. For some time Muslims were driven from certain Mediterranean regions. Germanic kingdoms were established in Palestine and Syria. In the long run, however, the effect was dubious. The irony of it all is that the crusaders also acted against Byzantine interests, as result of the Eastern church being excommunicated by the Pope. During one of the crusades the crusader fleet and armies turned against Constantinople and looted it for weeks, which weakened the city and hastened its eventual demise. The crusades nonetheless brought a great number of people from Western Europe into contact with foreign cultures, and they were stimulated by new ideas and customs.

## Christianity

The theology of Thomas Aquinas (12th century) contributed hugely to the Christian expression of relationship with other religions. His theology became the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Counter-Reformation.

Aquinas produced a library of books, of which the *Summa* series stands out. One such treatise, *Summa contra gentiles*, deals with the relationship between the Church and the Gentiles. Aquinas rehabilitated Pelagianist thought and made it a mainstay of his theology. His theology can be described as a double-tiered structure. The bottom level is nature (including human nature, or the natural state of man) injured by the Fall of Adam and Eve, but not completely ruined. The top level is the kingdom of God and the dispensation of grace. The kingdom continues nature, which is restored by grace (*gratia infusa*). Within human nature there remains something capable of recognising God and his grace; all humans have this innate ability to know God. Whilst Augustine taught a radical break between nature and grace and therefore the necessity of rebirth or a new creation, Thomas taught continuity between nature and grace, and instead of rebirth proposed fulfilment.

For Aquinas the image of God in man was reflected by human intellect. He related salvation to knowledge: Proper knowledge, according to his optimistic view of man, should result in a proper attitude, will and acts. He also accepted the possibility of revelation in Creation. Since the Creation was God's work, it follows that Creation is essentially God-centred. The same principle would apply to man; since man was created by God, all humans should be God-centred. This is exemplified by a universal *desiderium naturale*, that is, a natural desire for wholeness and divine perfection.

All of these factors lead to religion: All human beings and communities are, according to him, religious in one way or another. Non-Christian religions are not worthless or without any merit – they must be seen as taskmasters and training grounds with a view to true religion. When a gentile pious person becomes a Christian, his or her existing religiosity and experience of transcendence is merely continued, fulfilled and absorbed by the true religion of the Church.

The Catholic theologian of the 16th century, Bellarmine, formulated the following principles on the Church's relationship with non-Christian religions, based on Thomas Aquinas' propositions (Berkouwer 1968:18–19):

- Any human being may sense God spontaneously, that is through their innate senses and intellect, by observing and reflecting on God's creation. The Fall injured this ability, but not completely nor without hope of healing.
- It is God's will that all human beings be saved. Therefore, it can be accepted that he would provide ways and means to make this possible. It should be accepted that he would have provided ways and means of membership to those who, through no fault of their own, never heard of Jesus or his Church.
- Non-Christian religions have a preliminary legitimacy.

During the Reformation period Reformers such as Luther and Calvin uniquely formulated how they perceived the Protestant position on other religions.<sup>4</sup>

## Vatican I and afterwards

During Vatican I (1869–1870) it seems that some Council fathers were quite willing to revisit the rigid interpretation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Many of them pleaded for a more accommodating interpretation. In 1943 Pope Pius XII stated in his encyclical letter that the Church accepts the existence of piety outside the Church, and that such pious individuals should be regarded as votum members of the Church. This was an example of how the ideas of Bellarmine percolated through.

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4. See later chapter dealing exclusively with the theology of religions of Luther.

## Towards Vaticanum II

During Vatican II a more inclusive theology of religion and religions was proposed. The name of Rahner was most prominent, as he more than anyone else influenced modern Roman Catholic theological thought. His contribution in preparation for the debates of Vatican II cannot be underestimated, the following being main points of his thought:

- Christianity is the absolute religion, since it stemmed from the unique self-revelation of Jesus Christ. Christianity cannot recognise any other religion as equal or similar.
- The non-Christian religions display elements of a natural and innate notion and knowledge of God. This knowledge became warped through sin, but can nevertheless be rescued by God's grace. The various non-Christian religions have their place in God's salvation plan, that is as steps in God's staircase towards full knowledge and salvation. They should be regarded as preliminary ways and structures toward salvation.
- The non-Christian pious are encountered by Christians not as pagans but as persons with whom God already involved himself – in Rahner's terms as 'anonymous Christians'. Paul's words to the Athenians may be relevant, '[w]hom therefore ye worship in ignorance, Him I declare unto you' (Ac 17:23b).
- Eventually, explicit witnessing of the gospel will still have its place, especially in the light of the 'incarnate nature and social structure of God's grace', and because explicit Christian faith offers a better chance of salvation.
- Due to the religiously plural world of our time, the style of confrontational evangelical crusades became impractical and even undesirable. In any case, we should not think of those belonging to other religions as hopelessly lost. The Church should realise its new role in the world: that of vanguard or sacrament of God's salvation amongst the nations.

## Vatican II and afterwards

During the Council (1962–1965) the outside world saw how the old-style Catholic theology represented by Cardinal Ottaviani was swept away by the New Theology. The Council expressed its views on non-Christian religions in two documents: *Lumen gentium*, on the nature of the Church, and *Nostra aetate*, specifically on the attitude of the Church regarding non-Christian religions. The kind of theology of religion and religions reflected in these documents may be described as inclusivistic, fulfilment theology or sacramental theology. The moment these documents became public, Rahner's influence was evident.

Towards the end of the Council meetings some Council fathers expressed uneasiness, as they realised the far-reaching implications of their decisions, especially for the missions



of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformed Dutch theologian Berkouwer (1968:23) aptly commented that *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* removed the urgency of mission. Today we know that the missions of the Roman Catholic Church were negatively affected for decades to come.

Within and without the Roman Catholic Church a chorus of voices resounded against an optimistic appreciation of non-Christian religions and religiosity as such. Whilst the World Council of Churches (WCC) moved away from a theology of fulfilment in favour of theocentrism, the Roman Catholic Church continues on this road.

It is clear that Christians had been thinking about the intra- and interrelationship between Christianity and other religions right from the onset, although the formalisation of interreligious models only came later. Kärkkäinen (2003:23) indicates how the theology of religions is only a recent development. The study of interreligious relations can be divided into three distinct periods, which are not merely chronologically historical periods succeeding each other but have been constructed according to developmental issues and changes in approaches. The period designated as the Golden Age describes where models became formalised and fixed as traditional. The second period reflects a time when the interreligious debate ended in an impasse due to the fact that the traditional models no longer stimulated debate. As a solution the acceptance of pluralism is suggested, almost relativising religious uniqueness. The current era is characterised by new endeavours opening up new avenues for describing interreligious relations.

## □ The Golden Age

D'Costa (1986:2) is of the opinion that the large-scale exposure of the West to other religions came through the advance of scholarly sciences such as Anthropology, Sociology and Oriental Studies. Widespread travels and journeys of discovery since the Renaissance and Enlightenment contributed to the knowledge of other religions.

One of the first attempts at identifying the different Christian positions on the relationship between Christianity and other religions was presented by Ernst Troeltsch (1912). Troeltsch's approach is defined by Knitter (1974:7–9) as a cultural-historical, individualistic and evolutionistic theory to explain the development of religions. Consecutive engagements with the transcendental in specific historical contexts can lead to a deeper and more spiritual expression in religion. Some religions can therefore exhibit a deeper and more spiritual pattern. Religion and culture become intertwined over time. Based on this interpretation, Troeltsch's theory would suggest that all religions are relative and therefore all are of equal value (all religion is good). Religions feed and nourish one another over time; this contributes to the character of religions and enrichment of personal experiences of the absolute (Troeltsch 1912:104–105).

## A historical overview of the study of the theology of religions

From a Christian-biased understanding Hendrik Kraemer (1958) divided religions into two main groups: revelation and natural religions. Revelation becomes the key to theological understanding of the relationship between religions (Kraemer 1958:157). For Kraemer the only true religion is worshipping God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. All other religions are false (Kraemer 1958:28) and idolatrous (Kraemer 1958:286) when they try and know God from outside of the revelation in Christ.

However, Kraemer does not have a completely negative view of non-Christian religions. Religion is the human response to the general revelation of God (Kraemer 1958:287); God also works in other religions (Kraemer 1958:292). As to where and how God is busy with other religions, Kraemer remains vague. He does however suggest openness towards other religions.

During the Vatican II period (1965–1967) the need for a clear delineation of models of interreligious relations became apparent. Owen Thomas (1969) presented the different positions that theologians could take regarding the relationship of Christianity to other religions. Thomas identifies such positions as rationalism, romanticism, relativism, exclusivism, dialectic, reconception, tolerance, dialogue, catholicism and presence. Paul Knitter (1974, 1985) identified the three dominant positions<sup>5</sup> as, (1) the conservative evangelical position, claiming Christianity to be the only true religion, (2) the Protestant position, indicating that salvation is in Christ but not exclusively, (3) a Catholic understanding of multiple ways to salvation, with Jesus as the preferred way and (4) the theocentric position, positing God at the centre of attention and search for salvation. The three traditional paradigms that transpired from this search for understanding were identified as pluralist, exclusivist and inclusivist (compare D’Costa 1986).

Hans Küng (1987) contributed to the debate by simplifying the four categories of understanding as (1) no religion is true, (2) one religion is true, (3) all religion is true, and (4) one religion is true and all religions share in this truth. Küng is of the opinion that we may learn about God in all religions. Even idolatry may be regarded as invisible worship of God, witnessing Christ without realising it. He termed the non-Christian religions ‘normal’ ways to find salvation and wholeness, whilst the church was the ‘extraordinary’ way. On the other hand, he would concede that these religions harboured much of what is unholy, sinful and degenerate, therefore he was not prepared to refer to such religions as instances of ‘anonymous Christianity’. Küng favoured dialogue.

Different models for understanding the relationship between religions were developed. Compare Jacquis Dupuis’ (1997, 2001) alternative to the three traditional paradigms. Dupuis suggests models of ecclesiocentrism (1997:185, 2001:76) (alternative description of the exclusivist position), Christocentrism (alternative description of the

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5. Knitter considers position [1] as a variant of [2] and considers them as one position.

inclusivist position) (1997:185, 2001:77), and theocentrism (pluralist position) (1997:188). Dupuis refers to Hick's Realitycentrism (1997:193, 2001:79) as a variant of theocentrism where the centre of all religions is not God but an ultimate reality.

Knitter (2005) eventually updated the traditional models (exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism) by adding a fourth possibility called the acceptance model. This is an effort at addressing the theology of religions taking the postmodern context into consideration. According to the acceptance model Christians can only accept that there are differences between religions and that there is nothing in common (Knitter 2005:181).

## □ The impasse

Kenneth Rose (2013) predicts that pluralism will be the only coherent explanation of and solution to religious diversity. With pluralism, Rose (2013:9) refers to the theory of John Hick as the theological foundation of the relationship between religions. Pluralism serves as a theory suggesting a solution to exclusivism and inclusivism. Those asking about the relationship that Christianity ought to have with other religions will eventually have to agree to the pluralistic view, according to Rose (2013:2), who acknowledges pluralism as inevitable. The current context and paradigm of our time mean that one religion can no longer be the only measure of all other religions.

Pluralism recognises the validity and equality of all religions: No religion can be considered inferior to the other, all religions must be viewed as having knowledge of that which is considered transcendental, and every religion presents a valid mode of existence. No longer can one religion deny or exclude the position and status of the other. It is clear that pluralism can lead to relativism. If all religions are considered equal, religious affiliation does not matter. This brings about the danger of syncretism (Hedges 2010:237) – allowing religions to exchange elements to such an extent that the unique identity of a religion disappears (Rose 2013:73). Pieris, quoted by Hedges (2010:238), defines syncretism as the 'haphazard mixing', synthesis and creation of a third religion which leads to destruction of the identities of both religions which are in contact.

In an attempt to identify the essential differences between religions, Paul Hedges (2010) identifies the problem of how religions address plurality and the claim to particularity by each. The polarity between plurality and particularity drives the debate on interreligious relations. Religions seem to have reached a deadlock: How can religions coexist whilst acknowledging the reality of the plurality of religions, yet simultaneously each religion lays claim to the uniqueness and particularity of its expression (Hedges 2010:9, 228)?

It is clear from the discussion presented by Hedges that all traditional models lead only to an impasse, as no solution is presented where the particularity and plurality of religions

receive equal attention. Hedges (2010:2) suggests that the most appropriate model is pluralism, which suggests radical openness to the religious other (Hedges 2010:111, 230) and is necessitated by Christian tradition (Hedges 2010:2).

Hedges (2010:3) acknowledges that the context within which he posits is a postliberal theology of religions. From this position the plurality of religions needs to be acknowledged and accounted for. Hedges' attempt at arguing a theology of religions tries to create a balance between plurality and particularity. Over time Christianity evolved into a position of 'radical openness' towards other religions (Hedges 2010:2). However, this does not imply subscription to the classical position of pluralism as presented by John Hick (Hedges 2010:113–115); Hedges (2010:229) suggests a need for respect of the plurality as well as the particularity of religions.

Pluralism as presented by Hick and Knitter (1987) focuses on that which religions have in common, ignoring the differences. God is set at the centre, as all religions seem to describe the same reality. Christ as the stumbling block in relations between Christianity and other religions is removed from the equation, focusing now only on God (theocentrism). Hedges suggests that a radical openness towards other religions should acknowledge the existence of differences and not just ignore them. Hedges suggests that such radical openness is an effort to avoid the impasse of the pluralist-particularist deadlock.

Christianity which is depicted as being 'closed', as opposed to a radical, open Christianity, focuses on set doctrines, beliefs and creeds, excluding all that differ, and enforces dominance by claiming the sole right to truth (Hedges 2010:230). Hedges (2010:230) suggests that this 'closed' position grew not from a search and application of the truths found in the gospel, but rather from socio-political concerns which formed the Christian identity as the dominant power in society.

Radical openness for Hedges (2010:247) entails the possibility of mutual fulfilment of all religions. As to what exactly he suggests by 'mutual fulfilment', Hedges (2010:249) only mentions that he does not want to present 'easy answers' nor suggest a 'simple recipe', indicating that mutual fulfilment should imply the 'need for religions to overcome the building of barriers and embrace a radical openness to one another.' The way in which this is expressed is contextually determined; in every context 'the voices that come to us from the margins' ought to be accepted (Hedges 2010:251). Acceptance of the 'Other' implies critically questioning the Own. Hedges (2010:252) suggests that Christianity seriously needs to question whether the traditions, denominations and doctrines have not become the idols that Christians worship. Openness toward other expressions of religiosity cannot deny, ignore or oppress other religions.

With radical openness Hedges suggests a way forward and stimulus for debate, creating a way out of the impasse created by plurality and particularity.

## □ New ventures

Part of escaping the impasse of polarity and particularity requires new and creative thinking, and in this regard Hedges presented a possible solution. Further suggestions are presented by David Cheetham and Jenny Dagers.

David Cheetham (2013:1) tries to 'devise(s) creative ways of meeting others and dealing with new circumstances' and to set the scene for interreligious encounters. In his own words (Cheetham 2013:2) he is creating appropriate 'spaces' or rooms where religions will feel comfortable to meet. The 'spaces' Cheetham (2013:5) identifies are deep levels, referring to non-theological spaces, spaces not obviously religious, liminal spaces. Another possible space for meeting is interspirituality (Cheetham 2013:6); with this concept Cheetham refers to the sharing of spirituality, including activities such as prayer, meditation, worship and spiritual experiences.

Cheetham's (2013:7) most prominent contribution lies in his suggestion of changing the nature of interreligious encounter from the religious into the aesthetic, and the possibility of ethical spaces or moral ways of meeting. Cheetham (2013:123) suggests a new and different meeting space based on an 'aesthetic attitude', meaning to view other religions as one would view a work of art, emphasising ways of seeing (Cheetham 2013:127). The goal is to experience empathy between religious traditions on an aesthetic level. This can be reached by being an 'imaginatively participating perceiver' (Cheetham 2013:147) and not necessarily a participant. Viewing the Other becomes a subjective activity. Seeing the other for what it is and appreciating the uniqueness and beauty within the other leads to mutual appreciation.

Ethical spaces become a further suggestion for ways of seeing the other (Cheetham 2013:149). An attempt at interreligious ethics was suggested by Hans Küng at the World Parliament of Faiths in 1993. Cheetham (2013:157) is sceptical of this space, as any neutral global ethics will not necessarily be sensitive towards the particularities within different cultures and traditions.

As a last possible space of meeting, Cheetham (2013:177) suggests the attitude exhibited by the Scriptural Reasoning movement, which sees meeting not as a discussion forum of differences or similarities, but emphasising 'understanding above agreement; collegiality above consensus' (Cheetham 2013:179). This particular space of meeting is not defined along theological lines and therefore opens up the possibility of meeting in spaces in-between.

Cheetham's contribution is an honest attempt at creatively seeking for new ways of meeting. His approach focuses on ways of seeing and meeting the other and the spaces where meeting might be possible, and not necessarily on the content of the meetings. He is trying to set the scene for the encounter, preparing conditions conducive to meaningful

encounters between religions. In this sense he presents a novel way of perceiving the theology of religions.

Jenny Dagers (2013) attempts to establish a theology of religions which takes the current context (i.e. postcolonial) into consideration as the acting paradigm for thinking about other religions.<sup>6</sup> Traditional models of theology of religions consisted of 'Eurocentric imperialist attitudes' (Dagers 2013:1); she suggests postcolonial theologies of religious difference to indicate the transition from a monologue by Eurocentric Christians to acknowledging religious plurality. Dagers (2013:2) suggests that within a postcolonial context a revised particularist theology of religions is necessary, in order to acknowledge the particularity of religious traditions and simultaneously respect the integrity of Christianity and other religions. She suggests a Christian particularity grounded in Trinitarian theology, which would encourage Christianity to act with hospitality towards postcolonial theologies, recognising interreligious concerns. Compare Hedges' (2010:231) suggestion of biblical hospitality as a guide for interreligious encounter that takes radical openness seriously.

Dagers (2013:2) does not intend a pluralist theology of religions – she proposes a continuation of the pluralist theology of John Hick. Hick's theory would view other religious traditions as complementary. She sees the task of the revised pluralist model as to turn 'theology of religions towards the dynamic process of constructing lived religion within each received tradition' (Dagers 2013:2). This new way of thinking is necessitated by the religious diversity characterising the postcolonial environment. The context within which other religions are viewed is no longer a Eurocentric, Christian-pivotal perspective, but a disentanglement from this position in order to recognise and acknowledge diversity. Over centuries the understanding of other religions through the lens and in terms of Christian doctrine caused an entanglement, which is why Dagers (2013:18) suggests a process of disentanglement. By disentanglement Dagers refers to the process of acknowledging the value of local religious expressions, as seen from their own point of view. This inclusivity of other's points of view is what Sugirtharajah (2006) proposes should happen in a postcolonial approach necessitated by the current world context.

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6. Compare Sugirtharajah's (2006:8) distinction between postcolonial and post-colonial. The hyphenated form refers to a historical period succeeding the period of colonialism. The unhyphenated form refers to a theory and approach by the colonised to the ruling knowledge systems introduced by the colonisers, and an attempt at restoring the past while questioning neo-colonising tendencies. It is clear that postcolonial refers to a certain methodology of inquiring and responding. This approach is to investigate and critically analyse all structures of power, dominant systems of thought and ideologies. The goal of postcolonialism is to give recognition to perspectives of marginalised people, cultures and religious entities which were once regarded as inferior.

## ■ Conclusion

Any theology of religions is constructed by taking note of communalities and/or differences. The differences can divide and lead to a situation where the exclusivity of a religion is emphasised; the similarities approach endeavours to seek communalities and emphasise what religions consider as mutual. Knitter (2005:112) identifies three bridges to be crossed by Christians in order to comply with the requirements of the mutuality model: a philosophical-historical bridge, religious-mystical bridge, and ethical-practical bridge.

The philosophical-historical bridge is represented by the position of John Hick, who suggests that there might exist only one Divine Reality with many cultural expressions. Religions over time have tried to grasp the Real, and no religion can therefore claim to know the complete truth about the Real, as human efforts are contextual and socially constructed and therefore limited. Once Christians accept this stance, they have crossed this bridge, exchanging a Christocentric position for a theocentric position.

The religious-mystical bridge emphasises the fastness and infiniteness of the Divine Reality (Knitter 2005:125); in spite of the different ways in which the Divine Reality is perceived by different cultures, one mystical core experience remains at the centre of all. Raimon Panikkar represents this path. For Panikkar the Divine lies in a mystic cosmic power, which according to him, is constituted by the cosmos, the Divine and the human (Knitter 2005:127). By crossing this bridge, Christians acknowledge the existence of one cosmic Divine Reality, although perceived not only as one but as many. The Divine Reality exists in the diversity of humanity, and can therefore never be reduced to only one. The diversity of the Divine shines through the different religions (Knitter 2005:130).

The third possible route is supported by pillars of ethical responsibility (Knitter 2005:134), which enables an interfaith exchange. The essence of this position entails religions seeking communal concerns (i.e. global responsibility, social justice, etc.) and acting upon them. The emphasis is not on communalities in terms of similar content, but rather points of contact: A common concern attracting the attention of different religions. As such points of contact, Knitter (2005:137) suggests the following elements: poverty, victimisation, violence and patriarchy. Crossing this bridge would imply that Christians engage on a practical and ethical level with comprehensive ethics in relieving global suffering.

Both Dagers and Cheetham suggest novel approaches to creating a theology of religions. Any theology of religions requires setting out from one's own comfort zone and engaging the other in some kind of no man's land. This will require a deduction as well as a multiplication. One will need to tone down one's own requirements and preconditions for engagement, which implies a loss (deduction). However, once engaging the other one will gain in insight – not only understanding another religion, but also seeing reality through the eyes of the other, therefore multiplying one's own knowledge.

A historical overview of the study of the theology of religions

A theology of religions requires not only seeking similarities but also identifying differences, and then seeking points of contact. The purpose of this analysis is to suggest a comprehensive approach to understanding religions.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 1

A brief overview is given by the editor of the development of the discipline of theology of religions to indicate how in a postmodern era an almost non-foundational approach has become evident. For a Christian understanding of interreligious relations an understanding of the origin of religion (theology of religion) is just as important as a theological evaluation of the relationship between religions (theology of religions). In this first chapter, a historical overview of the way in which Christianity thought about its relationship with other religions (especially with Judaism and Islam) is presented. Over history, three distinct phases can be identified, namely, (1) a Golden Era during which the main theories of interreligious relations were formulated (namely exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism), (2) an impasse during which the traditional theories no longer proved to provide a sufficient framework for understanding the relations (pluralism and particularism are important polarities to be kept in balance, although the balancing act can end in a deadlock) and (3) a third phase which introduces a discussion of New Ventures on interreligious relations. The theories of scholars such as Paul Hedges, Jenny Dagers and David Cheetham are discussed as new ways forward out of the impasse. An overview of past theories is presented, as well as the most recent theories on interreligious relations.



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