

Chapter 2

Method: Towards a Christian Global Systematic Theology

It may ring strange, particularly to Christian ears, to suggest that the same God revealed Godself through the various world religions, considering the gulf of theological differences. Be that as it may, the Judaeo-Christian message has undergone various transitions that would have been less than clearly recognisable to the people of God in former ages. As a case in point, when Jesus came on the scene, he brought teachings which effectively laid the foundations for an interpretation of God's law delivered through Moses which constituted a return to the original essence of that law and yet were perceived to be obscure by the people of Jesus' day.

It is necessary to observe that the instruction of Jesus directly to the disciples and indirectly through the Holy Spirit concerning elements of the Mosaic law, such as the food laws, is not diametrically opposed to the exhortations of God through the authority of Moses.¹ Jesus was not opposed to the food laws as such; he may have felt that these regulations were critical in providing a visual and metaphorical picture of the fact that certain actions render a person impure before God. These actions include wicked thoughts, the desire to kill another person, sexual relations with a married person, illegal dispossession, lying with the intent of harming the reputation of another person, and defamation.² What Jesus may have been really against was the perversion of these kosher

1. Mark 7:14-19.

2. Cf. Matthew 15:19-20.

rules to confer a sense of religious favour and aegis purely on the basis of an external observance of a ritual.

The same thing could be said of the Sabbatical law, which was not laid down to be so religiously observed as to be the indirect cause of harm to a person in dire need but only to enshrine remembrance of God as the origin of all existence.³ Also, the requirement for all Jewish male infants to undergo circumcision, the purport of which was solely to image the morality expected of the Jewish community, which proscribed certain behaviour, such as theft, sexual relations with a married person, embezzlement and the unfettered worship of wealth, and all other forms of moral lawbreaking.⁴ Consequently, far from encouraging the violation and jettisoning of God's law, Jesus attempted to redirect the attention of those he came into conflict with, back to the heart of that law.⁵

Likewise, in relation to the core belief of monotheism in the Judaeo-Christian faith, it should be noted that the form of the conviction pursuant to the oneness of God endorsed by the Bible has little to do with the exclusive and aggressive type usually promoted as biblical teaching, whether on the part of critics or theologians themselves. As we have already seen, if the Old Testament religion appeared to promote exclusion or the exercise of aggression towards other faiths, this was only on the grounds of gross moral violations and possible and potentially fatal incursions. Even during the formative years of Israel, monotheism was more a matter of loyalty and commitment than a universal broadside against and delegitimation of all other religions.⁶

In a world order in which the rights of the various religious groups are protected in international and national legal and ethical systems, it is no longer tenable to insist on an exclusive fealty to a particular religion. Jesus through direct and indirect guidance led the community of believers to see the true essence of vital Old Testament laws, by which it dawned on their leaders that they were not to exclude the Gentiles on the basis of their differing cultural backgrounds and practices.

3. Cf. Mark 3:4.

4. Cf. Romans 2:17-29.

5. Brownson cites the kosher food laws, circumcision and the law of the Sabbath as examples of regulations which were revisited. J.V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 65.

6. T.P. van Baaren, 'Monotheism in world religions', *Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 25 May 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monotheism/Monotheism-in-world-religions>.

This was no new insight. As a matter of fact, the Old Testament books of prophecy testify to a day in which the Gentiles would be included with the community of the people of God but without really specifying the nature of this inclusion. It was left to the apostles of Jesus to determine, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what embracing the Gentiles would entail concretely.

Jesus did not bring new teaching which served to overturn Old Testament law; and neither do I now presume to venture to overhaul the teachings of the New Testament in propounding my theory about an inclusive and irenic monotheism. However, in both cases, the intent, and, I hope, the effect as well, is simply to be faithful to the timeless truth of God in a radically changed context.⁷

Reflection on the purport of the Scriptures led Christians to throw their weight behind movements to abolish slavery and eradicate racial discrimination against black people because these were rightly seen to offend against the intrinsic equality in which all human beings originate from God. The next watershed and *status confessionis* will be the renunciation of religious exclusivism, which constitutes, in effect, if not in express intent, a marginalisation of religious others.⁸ Religious communities in modern societies have learned in a practical sense to live with one another; the next challenge is for them to reform their central theological principles in keeping with this practical need.

We do well to remember that God is capable of working dissimilarly among the various religious groups and emphasising certain attributes in a religion which may not be prioritised in another, and that it is easy for a human mind to exaggerate these specific attributes at the expense of others. God is even capable of dealing differently with people according to their religious profession if need be.

The only qualities we cannot ever ascribe to God in all settings are omnipotence and omniscience. To argue that God who is good is all-powerful and all-knowing at the same time, and yet to observe the prevalence of evil, injustice and needless suffering is to commit a logical error and subscribe to a travesty of God's incorruptible goodwill. To contend that God can intervene in these situations but chooses not to for whatever reason is to demolish the idea that God is truly good.

7. W.S.-C. Goh, 'Doctrines: An Interplay Between Experience and Scripture', *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.catholic.sg/19-may-2022-thursday-5th-week-of-easter>.

8. Hedgès, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 252.

It is not enough to suggest that God is merely non-omnipotent while possibly being simply omniscient, because of biblical testimony not only to God's non-omnipotence⁹ but God's non-omniscience¹⁰ as well. The conception of God in a Christian-based global systematic theology, as opposed to another which may be based on another religion as a primary premise, has to take account of this.

As far as a Christian-based global systematic theology is concerned, it is preferable to aver that religions which promote the ideas of divine omnipotence and omniscience may have gone too far in highlighting the power and awareness of God. Goodness, non-omnipotence and non-omniscience are essential attributes of God in any religious system from a Christian point of view. Whatever exalts the purposive goodness of God is essential to a theological conception which is inclined towards the message of Christianity.¹¹ Therefore, *inter alia*, the ultimate principle is a personal being rather than impersonal force, this God is Trinity rather than monad, and a single being rather than a pantheon of multiple deities.

Logically, however, it is conceivable that God is a being of irresistible power and only apparently incorruptible goodness, rather than incorruptible goodness and only apparently or purportedly irresistible power. Nonetheless, the decision has to be made as to which among these two attributes is primary, for they cannot coexist. In this system, oriented as it is towards the Christian faith, the latter is judged to be preferable because assessed to be more fitting and helpful, as an exemplum, to human conscience and moral aspiration. It is also possible to construct a global theology or philosophy on the basis of the central divine or ultimate attributes and their ordering of any other religious or atheistic system. There will be disagreement between theologians and

9. Mark 6:5.

10. Genesis 18:20-21.

11. That is to say, God is to be conceived as an independent moral agent whose personal vision is to bring about the highest wellbeing of all entities and whose moral and communal character undergirds these movements. It was Richard of Saint-Victor who asserted that the communal nature of God is rooted in God's divine fullness, requiring as it does perfect, reciprocal (so as to be 'orderly') and inclusive (so as to be unselfish) love which can only be consistently offered by and among perfect divine persons. Richard of Saint-Victor, *De Trin.*, III.2, 7, 11. R. Angelici, Introduction and Commentary to Richard of Saint-Victor, *On the Trinity: English Translation and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), pp. 44-45.

philosophers of such systems over various aspects, and there will be major areas of agreement, however, this in no way translates to a sense of superiority of one group to another.

A religion or philosophy may emphasise an aspect of divinity or ultimacy which is understated in another religion or do just the reverse. The idea is for members of different religious and philosophical groups to learn from each other in order to bolster their own picture of the divine or ultimate in a more holistic fashion, being willing to prune certain, less effective facets of their theology or include other specific, more profitable dimensions not as adequately found in their belief systems to achieve this.

The question arises whether it is even fruitful for an established world religion to enter into such a constructive dialogue of mutual theological formation with another. The assumption undergirding such pessimism could be the mere assumption that a world religion has little if anything to learn from another, especially if that other world religion is already and directly condemned in the sacred text of a world religion.

An example can be adduced from Islam and concerns the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which, as already noted, is misunderstood in the former religion as a community comprising the Father, Mary and Jesus.¹² Such an observation makes one wonder about the validity of Islamic condemnation of the Trinity and whether a Muslim theologian might have anything positive to learn about God from a proper and accurate understanding of the Christian Trinity. For that matter, it may be asked whether the God which the atheist denounces is the type of God worshipped by Christians.¹³ The very same thing could be said to a Christian theologian about the central beliefs of any other world religion.

Each religion will have many positive things to say about itself and perhaps some negative things to say about other religions.¹⁴ The key is to get beyond the self-enclosed space of a religious faith, to begin a productive conversation with other faith groups and to clarify one's opinions about

12. Hoover, 'Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity'.

13. G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 93.

14. As examples, consider the Islamic teaching that the Christian Scriptures have been corrupted (Hoover, 'Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity', corrected version, p. 2); the Jain and Buddhist shared idea that Hindu gods are stuck in *samsāra* and so are inferior to Mahāvīra and Buddha (Fohr, *Jainism*, p. 11); and the Zoroastrian belief that some of these earlier gods are in the party of a destructive, hostile and malicious spirit or inspiration, Angra Mainyu (Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 17, 22).

other religious faiths so as to change one's perspective from negative to positive, with a view, finally, to bolstering the constructive holism of one's own faith. Ideally, each religion should be able to arrive at an accurate conception of the faith of its counterparts and attempt as far as possible to integrate what has been learned into their own systems of belief.¹⁵ Be that as it may, each religion should be properly and duly understood on its own terms and not on those of the religion whose adherents seek to understand in order to appreciate and learn from the former.¹⁶

A unified system of religion that reconciles all religious traditions cannot be achieved, given that each faith or philosophy will espouse its own commitments to a specific ordering of particular principles of the divine, ultimate or meaningful.¹⁷ The open-minded theologian or philosopher of any religious or philosophical persuasion will attempt a systematic theology or philosophy which weans itself off unhelpful or anti-communal perspectives,¹⁸ upholds values, premises, categories, paradigms assessed to be quintessential to the system,¹⁹ redresses

15. The Archbishop of Canterbury, writing on the issue of fostering peace in an often violently torn world on the occasion of the publication of a book on reconciliation, recommends – as one of three ‘transformational habits’ to bring relational healing, form relationships with people who are different, and mitigate the impact of factors that keep people apart – the virtue of curiosity in people who may be different from us, in order to develop an accurate understanding of what these people stand for, and ways in which they may be able to contribute to other communities, and the value of humility in seeking to benefit from what other people may have to say. J. Welby, ‘The Big Idea: Is a World without Violent Conflict Really Possible?’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2022.

16. We note the Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer’s (1888-1965) concern about violating the ‘totalitarian’ integrity of a religion in attempting to assimilate or come to terms with it. D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, p. 55.

17. Such an understanding is necessary to avoid the type of criticism levelled against a thinker such as John Hick, who has attempted to construct a theology of world religions based on the idea of an Eternal One, Divine Reality or the Real at the centre of a universe of faiths which, in D’Costa’s estimation, ultimately impresses as being Christian in substance, concealed as pluralist. D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, pp. 43-45.

18. E.g. the idea that one religion is better than another’s or even the only true way to salvation.

19. E.g. the personal nature of God, the immanence of God, the transcendence of God, God’s struggle with evil, humanity’s resemblance to

imbalances²⁰ and charts a path of metaphorical compatibility of literally incompatible beliefs across religions.²¹

Can any one such religious or philosophy-based system be deemed to be superior to another? To the extent that a system does its level best to overcome anti-communal tendencies, promotes a broad suite of universally binding pro-social values, redresses imbalances and manoeuvres between the competing claims of the various religions and philosophies, it can be considered to be a fair, good and meritorious attempt which need not be pitted against another similarly fair attempt. Each religious or philosophy-based systematic theology is valid because it encapsulates and is premised upon some vital aspect or aspects of the divine being.

The Method of a Global Christian Systematic Theology

If the Bible already makes clear statements of truth, what might be the possible contribution of a culture and non-Christian religion? Augustine of Hippo availed of the classical philosophy of his day, accepting ideas which he felt agreed with and bolstered Scripture and rejecting those which he felt contradicted it.²²

Built into the biblical writings already are facets of a distinctive Hebrew and Graeco-Roman culture which make different assertions about reality.²³ This includes the absolute sovereignty of God in an ancient Near Eastern worldview.²⁴ Consider the statements regarding God's

God, God as the redeemer and hope of humanity, the goodness, love, justice, compassion, gentleness, patience, trust, empathy, purity, wisdom, power of God.

20. E.g. focussing more on God as personal than non-personal.
21. E.g. what a theistic system can learn from a non-theistic system and how the former may incorporate an interpretive and signficatory essence of the idea that God does not exist, a possibility being the following: a theistic religion can learn from a non-theistic system that God bears not just a personal dimension but an impersonal one, in which God is conceived in terms of being the origin of all things and a principle, or at least an ultimate source, of material evolution.
22. Augustine, *Conf.*, VII.ix.14-15; XIII.xi.12.
23. Newman, *DCD*, p. 352.
24. Rulers in the ancient Near East were regarded as taking responsibility for everything their subjects did, whether or not these went to plan, and the incorporation of this element into a monotheistic faith guaranteed

providential control over good fortune and disaster in Isaiah 45:7 and Ecclesiastes 7:14. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible owes much to a Persian religious influence, via Zoroastrianism, in terms of its development of a henotheistic idea of God as the only true God, head of a pantheon of other, subaltern gods (much like the Persian king was thought of as the only true king because he ruled over other kings and Ahura Mazda was believed to be the head of the Zoroastrian pantheon), of the notion of a powerful chief adversary in the person of Satan, inspired by the figure of Angra Mainyu, Ahriman,²⁵ and its ideas of angelology and demonology, in general. Furthermore, the biblical writings, especially the primeval history, were shaped by Mesopotamian texts such as the epic of Gilgamesh and accounts of creation and a flood.²⁶

Christian Scripture also includes thought-forms from Greek philosophy. John Henry Newman (1801-90) detects Gnostic and Platonic language in the Johannine writings, noting that unitarians have suggested that the doctrine of Christ's divine nature proceeds from Platonism, while Gibbon observes that the notion of an incarnation was pioneered by Gnostics. To Newman, regardless of their source, these ideas are successfully and efficaciously synthesised in a self-confident Christian theological tradition. We may add that the Ephesian reference to Satan as the 'prince of the power of the air'²⁷ and the general New Testament cosmological framework may have profited from a Platonist classification of the demons as inhabiting the air as their proper abode, human beings as inhabiting the earth, and the gods²⁸ as dwelling in heaven.²⁹

As a matter of fact, we cannot fail to discern traces of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy in the New Testament writings.

the attribution of responsibility for all events to the one God. G. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 90, 188.

25. On the characteristics of Angra Mainyu, similar as they are to Satan's, the reader is directed to the account of the substantial likeness between Judaeo-Christianity and Zoroastrianism on p. 40.

26. Römer, *The Invention of God*, pp. 227-30, 232; Jackson, 'Zoroastrianism and the Resemblances between It and Christianity'.

27. Ephesians 2:2.

28. The equivalent in Christianity of good angelic beings such as thrones, dominations, principalities, powers.

29. Augustine, *Civ.*, VIII.14, 24.