ON NOT INCLUDING EVERYTHING
Christ, the Spirit and the Other

By MICHAEL BARNES

THE COMMONEST OF EXPERIENCES in interfaith is that of not being heard – or, at any rate, of being half heard and then neatly slotted away in some carefully prepared pigeon-hole. I once had the task of explaining Christian ethics to a gathering of Hindus. Knowing the capacity of the average Hindu for enveloping everything in one genial all-embracing mass, I tried to be as explicit as possible. I took the line that, despite the many moral values which religions hold in common, motivations for action differ. As I spoke about the teaching of Jesus and his motivation in the love of the Father, I could sense the interest on the faces of my audience. Perhaps, I felt, I was succeeding in my plan to be as clear and precise as possible. At the end I was somewhat deflated when the chairman thanked me by saying with great enthusiasm, 'That was very beautiful; that is exactly what Gandhiji was teaching'.

I could not complain, of course. When not being blatantly exclusivist Christians have been reducing the other to some sort of sub-Christian form for centuries. Gandhi was a great man whose vision of a world ruled by principles of *satyagraha*, 'holding fast to truth', and *ahimsa*, non-violence, emerged from his own personal synthesis – a vision with its roots in the Sermon on the Mount as much as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yet he was not a Christian, however much he may continue to remind Christians of the very best of their tradition. Gandhi was a typical Indian *sannyasi*, a holy man, thoroughly rooted in his own culture, fully comprehensible only in Indian terms. Despite his eclectic religious background, his Hinduism is not the same as Christianity, any more than it is the same as a hundred examples of spiritual practice which are somehow held together under that all-embracing title of Hinduism.

Similar, yet different; comparable yet very particular. The more one learns about the ancient roots of religious cultures, not to mention their endless contemporary proliferations, the more particular religions appear. It may be natural to seek to explain the unknown through analogy with the known, the unfamiliar with the familiar, but the

elements of commonality are often provisional. At best they provide a perspective within which what is other becomes acceptable; at worst they may actually distort our vision of the very complexity of truth. There comes a point when the identification of what feels familiar has to give way to an acceptance that religions may not be congruent and may even be using very different languages to speak about very different experiences.

Taking differences seriously

At the heart of this article is the conviction that *differences matter* and, moreover, may be theologically significant. Finding my faith reduced to a cut-down version of Gandhi's Hinduism was certainly a salutary experience. To emphasize 'difference' is not to deny that there are links, parallels, connections, analogies and comparisons between faiths which point to a great deal of common ground. Anyone who has entered into another place of worship, let alone into the religious practice which goes on there, knows how much people of faith share. But the familiarity experienced on the other side of the threshold is mixed with much that is strange. Familiarity is only to be discerned in the midst of otherness. And vice versa. Dialogue seeks the connections, but it also underscores the particularities.

Despite the painstaking and necessary effort to find 'family resemblances' between religions, the individual elements remain distinct and unique and may not be separated out from the whole and linked together without risking distortion. It is the very uniqueness of an ancient tradition which must be treated with immense respect. And at a practical level the maintenance of difference in an atmosphere of trust and respect is the key to successful interfaith work. Even when I profoundly disagree with what has been said I may not ignore the other's right to say it, to be different. But what of the theory which informs our practice? How does one account *theologically* for difference? Is there a properly Christian way to avoid the worst extremes of an arrogant exclusivism which assumes that we know everything about God and the pluralism which assumes – paradoxically – that we have privileged knowledge of what is different?

The instinct to include

In surveys of the theology of religions the 'middle way' is often called 'inclusivism' – a term unhelpfully bandied about as if it refers to a single monolithic position.[1] I prefer to think of it less as a theological strategy than as an 'instinct' – a way of exploring boundaries and being prepared

to share space with the other. In which case we need to ask: what precisely is the force of that word 'include'? How does one allow the other a space which is neither separate nor a projection of the same?

The 'inclusivist instinct' is to be found, in some shape or form, in most faiths. To that extent it illustrates the universalist perspective which the great world religions – Buddhism and Islam as much as Christianity and Hinduism – seek to maintain alongside their claims to particular insights and unique revelations.[2] For Catholic Christians the instinct is particularly strong, being rooted in a sense of the sacramental, or – to put it another way – in a conviction of the unity of God's creative and salvific action. One must at least allow for the *possibility* of God's action outside the known boundaries. There are always going to be difficulties in discerning the nature and extent of God's revelation, not just through the word of scripture but in and through the created order. Nevertheless, the principle is clear: in any theological reflection on the nature of 'the other' care must be taken not to appear to limit the scope of God's action.

The inclusivist takes the risk of a certain universalism, conscious that such a stance, *on its own*, can be as vapid and patronizing as fundamentalism can be blindly self-regarding and narrow-minded. While it is necessary always to seek the signs of the Spirit at work in the world, not everything can count as the work of the Spirit. Universalism can tend towards an intellectual laziness when confronted with the complexities of religious pluralism.

But the critic will also ask: does a theology which seeks to 'include' the other within a predetermined Christianity-centred scheme do justice to the experience of the interfaith encounter? Does not the 'inclusivist instinct', let alone any particular theological version of it, simply patronize the other by giving 'them' a secondary place within 'our' world? The exclusivist strategy is based on confrontation; the inclusivist is less confrontational but is nonetheless based on a relationship of power. The tendency is to tell people who they are rather than accept the identity which they give themselves – rather as my Hindu chairman told me how Gandhilike Christ was. The other is included in the single system which, by definition, holds the key to all truth.

Is it necessary, that is to say essential to the maintenance of Christian identity, to think in this way? Any account of Christian origins would find it difficult to defend the sort of ontological inclusivism which, typically, is based on metaphysical or symbolic versions of the 'cosmic Christ'.[3] The Church did not emerge on that first Pentecost day as the bearer of the totality of truth revealed by God's Spirit, but as a

community gathered to praise God's wonderful deeds – what God has done, and *can* do, in Christ. Christian identity consists in bearing this message of hope for all people. It means being faithful to what Christians know in Christ to be true; it does not mean predetermining the way in which God may and may not act. The contemporary experience of interfaith – not to mention feminist and other critiques of various forms of post-Enlightenment metaphysical universalism[4] – has reminded Christians of the days of the early Church when there was a genuine pluralism of religious opinion and when identity was something to be explored and developed, not used to subdue other identities under the all-encompassing system.

A moral challenge

Once one learns to eschew the power relationship and actually *listen*, one can see how unsatisfactory is the very concept of the universal scheme in which what is 'other', the stranger, is situated within a more or less clearly defined world. Not only does systemic inclusivism tend to reduce religions to systems or ways of thought when they are more properly communities of people, it assumes that what is *unknown*, strange or 'other' can be encompassed by what is known.

This is not to be negative about the prospects for mutual understand-ing or sceptical about the viability of interfaith dialogue. On the contrary, it is to be realistic about what happens in the dialogue when people learn how to cross over the threshold into the world of the other and to deal with that experience imaginatively and without fear. All theology seeks to be both open and faithful – but also critical of its own presuppositions and prejudices. Once the power-relationship has been substituted by a relationship which seeks – in the words of Vatican II – to 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods'[5] found amongst people of other faiths, we enter into a different way of dealing with the 'inclusivist instinct'. Might it not be that for people to be true to themselves they actually need each other – need, that is to say, the sense of *difference*?

The distinction I want to make is between that grudging acceptance which patronizes the other, giving him or her a place in an ego-centred power game, and that which conceives of identities as being developed and maintained *in relationship*. Both can be said to 'include' the other; but, in practice, the former dominates, the latter defers. To develop the analogy in theological terms: there is a distinction between that type of uncritical universalism – what I like to call 'naïve inclusivism' – which presumes to include everything and everybody under the one all-

embracing system, and that which sees that persons are not identified by their capacity to erect self-defining barriers but by a willingness to have their preconceived ideas about identity tested by entering into and living in dialogue with each other. In short, a theory of interfaith relations begins not with some vague sense that tolerance is a 'good thing' but from a reflection on the moral challenge put to us by the stranger in our midst. I may not responsibly develop a system or way of thinking which simply 'places' the other outside or on the borders of a predetermined space. For the other makes demands on me which I may not ignore.

Once one accepts that differences matter, that there is an imperative to affirm the other in his or her uniqueness, a new perspective on familiar truths begins to make itself felt. The familiar is what is known of the love of God, the claim that God is *incarnate*, revealed in the particularity of human existence, in all the messiness and earthiness of human existence. The new perspective is what is not known, what remains mysterious but still life-giving, the equally messy, unpredictable and surprising way in which the God who is other can erupt into people's lives. In fact, a religion which is based on the shocking revelation of a God who allows his Son to be crucified must not just allow for the unpredictable, it must positively expect it.

Known and unknown

How do we reconcile *what we know* and *what we do not know*? All religions, whether based on the authoritative teaching of a founder-figure or on some form of cosmic mysticism, claim to 'know' an ultimate reality which remains always 'other'. Even as rigidly self-critical a religion as Buddhism has its vision of truth; for all that the individual meditator must make that truth his or her own, it begins with the act of faith, taking on trust the word of an enlightened teacher. To that extent our question is one that all religions have to grapple with. It is not limited to, though it may be felt more keenly by, the so-called religions of revelation.

To ask how Christians know what is 'given' in faith is to beg the question: how does anyone learn the language of faith? Clearly there must be in any language a certain intellectual coherence; it must obey the rules of its own grammar or risk being reduced to nonsense. Language has to be capable of articulating an experience within a community if not of communicating it to those outside. And yet, the language of faith must know its own limitations. If the intention behind all religious language is to enable people to speak of what they know to be true, the danger is that an uncritical use of such language leads to

over-determination. This is more true of consciously prophetic religions like Christianity than it is of a religion like Buddhism which is naturally more suspicious of the tendency to ignore the creative role of dominating personalities. Christianity places great weight upon the value of the spoken word and therefore upon the position of the prophet, the central mediator figure. It is, however, all too easy to forget that the determining word, which gives form to experience, is not the word of the prophet but belongs *to the Other* – *to God*. God initiates the dialogue; human existence is in these terms a response to the action and call of God, made both in creation and in the communication which God utters in Christ and which presents new possibilities for living and restoring broken relations.

This is what Christians know: the revelation which they interpret through the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, through prayer and the praise of God. Once, however, that revelation becomes the initiative of the Church, rather than the initiative of God to which the Church responds, it can be turned into a system and become all-dominating. One does not have to be a fundamentalist or a member of one of the more outrageously authoritarian modern cults to appreciate the attraction of a 'message' enforced on the personal authority of a charismatic prophet alone. But a faith which would live in, and indeed presume to speak with, a pluralist world cannot base its self-understanding on the idea of the perfect system ruling the perfect society. Such a system, almost by definition, has no place for difference, let alone deviance, and is a far cry from the community of outcasts and sinners gathered by Jesus as a foretaste of that reversal of human values which is the Kingdom of God.

Initiative and response

This is not to say that there is no place for the self-confidence of the prophet, only that it has to be matched by the reticence of the mystic, who – as David Tracy reminds us – knows the *source* of the language which the prophet speaks.[6] The word is and must always remain other – *God's* word. The prophet, seeking the clarity of God's self-revelation, risks replacing God's authority with his or her own; the mystic knows from personal experience that God's authority, God's radical otherness, can only be truly confronted, and obeyed, in silence. The prophet teaches people to speak with integrity; the mystic makes them realize the limits of language. The humblest statement of the greatest of the prophets is a warning to be watchful of that self-centredness which would substitute another word for that which is of God. 'I must decrease and he must increase', says John the Baptist at the beginning of John's

Gospel. Yet later Jesus himself expresses a similar reticence. He speaks not his own words, but those the Father has given him. And though he styles himself 'the way, the truth and the life', it will be the Paraclete Spirit who will guide the disciples into 'all the truth' and remind them of all that Jesus has said. What is stressed is the continuity of relationship. It is almost as if both are necessary to account for the fullness of God's self-revelation. As John Ashton put it,

> In the Hebrew Bible what is clear, fixed and determined about God is his word: the spirit, though the presence is clearly felt, is never seen and never grasped; like the sun she is a source of light but not to be looked at; like the wind, which in Hebrew is the same word as spirit, she is elusive and impalpable (cf John 3:8). There could never be any question of her taking flesh.[7]

The distinction between prophet and mystic is not that great. The prophet speaks of what he or she knows. Using the language of God which is Christ, the prophetic Word which challenges all words, the prophet sets God's demands over those of the religious system. The mystic witnesses to what is beyond language, to difference and otherness. The mystic 'knows' that God's life cannot be pinned down to any 'unifying structure' and marks out those areas of silence which must surround any effort to articulate, and therefore limit, people's experience of God. These are not two ideal types but the dual task undertaken by anyone who would seek to live on the boundaries of the Church, on the threshold of the world of the other.

A theology of difference must account for that intelligibility which is given in the Christian mystery and is reflected in the Christian story without letting it become hardened into a closed system. Christ is revealed as the *Logos*, God's revelation which gives an intelligible form or rational ordering to human experience, enabling humans to grasp God's presence. Christ is God's *meaning*. But one can never say that the *Logos* exhausts that meaning. Intelligible form is never adequate to encompass the whole of reality; to say so would be to limit God or to say that God is 'graspable' through form. However much Christians may claim to know of the *form* which God takes in human lives, that form can no more be fully known than the mystery of one human being can be exhausted, and therefore controlled, by the mystery of another. Only God communicates God, only the infinite communicates the infinite; therefore the meaning-giving activity of God's self-revelation must be open-ended.

Christian faith is, of course, based on Christ the *Logos* who represents the authoritative form of human potential – not just the example or

norm of Christian living but the first-born of all creation. Christ is the
life-giving image, the 'pattern' of God's grace, the one in whom all
human aspirations for unity and intelligibility are brought together.
Nevertheless, this potential is never complete in time; it can only be
worked for in hope. In the Gospels Jesus proclaims the kingdom and
points the way to the Father. To that extent he is the initiator. As Alister
McFadyen puts it, 'Christ himself is God's call to proper forms of
personal identity and of relation with God and others, to proper forms of
responsibility'. At the same time, Jesus strives to make that kingdom
present and even struggles to discern the will of his Father. Thus, as
McFadyen goes on, he is also 'the paradigm of the intended form of
response. Christ is in himself a call to responsibility before God and
others whose presence patterns and structures identities and relations in
dialogical form.'[8] Thus the gospel story, and so many incidents in the
Acts of the Apostles, are a reminder that God is *already* at work. Jesus
himself responds to the call of the Father by being led by the Spirit into
the future, over the threshold of the known, into the unknowable
mystery that is God. Christian identity is certainly bound up with the
mission to make Christ known, but this means not just a fullness to be
completed by making the unknown known, the implicit explicit, but a
fullness which is *still to be discovered*, precisely because it can never be fully
constituted in the conceptual pattern. Beside the confident assertion of
God-in-Christ there must be a willingness to discern that unpredictable
and surprising imitation of Jesus in the lives of human beings *before* ever
Christian witness makes it explicit.

Spirit of Christ

Is a properly Christian theology of difference, then, a matter of
developing pneumatology alongside Christology? Both are clearly
necessary to any theology of God if the 'inclusivist instinct' is to be more
than vaguely and unsatisfactorily universalist. Christology alone and the
result is an *ontological inclusivism*, making Christ the cosmic symbol which
gathers up and subsumes all other symbols, or a fulfilment theology
which subsumes everything under the great Christian system, reducing
other religions to subsidiary units in an already determined process.
Pneumatology alone and the result is a relativist pluralism or what I
have called a *naïve inclusivism*. This places every phenomenon within a
tolerant framework which, because it knows no boundaries, knows no
limits. In denying nothing it asserts nothing either.

For the Christian a vision of dialogue between *Logos* and Spirit is
necessary. Accounting theologically for difference does not, therefore,

take us away from an orthodox Christian account of God but more deeply into the Trinitarian mystery itself. This, however, will not focus on the co-existence of roles within the Godhead, nor even on the prophetic and mystic *personae* represented by Jesus and the Spirit, which supposedly reveal and conceal the silence of the Father. It will begin with that experience of identity-in-difference which is at the heart of all interfaith encounter and look at the process of self and other identification, of learning the language of faith, which it represents. Not that we need confine ourselves to the experience of engaging with people of other faiths. *Any* experience of mutuality – in which, for instance, male and female discover in each other two complementary sides of one God-given vocation – recognizes that persons are not static essences but constituted by their relations with each other.

A Trinitarian theology of religions begins by taking the experience of difference seriously. It reflects on the implications of otherness for Christian faith by establishing a genuinely interactive pluralism based on a Christian vision of a God who has revealed himself *and seeks to go on revealing himself.* It establishes a Christian identity discovered and maintained through that narrative of hope rooted in Jesus Christ the fullness of which is present yet still to be revealed. This is the paradox of the known which is yet unknown, the form which may not be determined.

Can the inclusivist instinct remain a guiding principle and not become a system? Only if the dialogue of faiths is understood as mirroring that conversation which *is* the very nature of God. Christian talk about the Incarnation emerges from the fundamental attitude of Christians, the heart of Christian spirituality: to praise God for what God has revealed of God in Christ. The God who is Love is made present through the miraculous revelation which is human *form.* The 'inclusivist instinct' rejoices to find signs of this form in a world which has been sanctified by God's action but it will take care not to harden those signs into something which it is not. As the Spirit makes the will of the Father known to Jesus himself, so in the process of dialogue and encounter the Spirit goes before all people of faith. The Spirit points the way for them all to recognize God's work. To emphasize the role of the Spirit in this way is not to downplay the centrality of the *Logos*; it is to accept that the Spirit is responsible for the struggles of all people, Christians and others, to maintain their own integrity in seeking out and manifesting the mystery of the infinite love of God.

NOTES

[1] The survey literature on the theology of religions is considerable. Among those books which discuss the theological strategies, usually summarized as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, with varying degrees of nuance are: Alan Race, *Christians and religious pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and religious pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Paul Knitter, *No other name?* (London: SCM, 1985); Michael Barnes, *Religions in conversation* (London: SPCK, 1989).

[2] The attitudes to Christianity of people of other faiths vary enormously. A fascinating selection of essays and articles by Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu authors, including both critical and more eirenic stances, is to be found in *Christianity through non-Christian eyes*, edited by Paul J. Griffiths (New York: Orbis, 1990).

[3] For a brief but incisive critique of this aspect of the inclusivist stance cf Rowan Williams, 'The finality of Christ' in *Christology and religious pluralism*, ed Mary Kelly (papers of a conference in memory of Charlotte Klein, July 1988; published by Sisters of Sion, 17 Chepstow Villas, London, W11 3DZ), pp 21–38.

[4] To what extent the inclusivist theory within Christian theology has been influenced by the complex philosophical matrix of post-Enlightenment universalism is not a topic which can be pursued here. But there are interesting suggestions in Seyla Benhabib's provocative study of political theory and ethics, *Situating the self*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). In face of various aspects of post-modern culture Benhabib's project is to develop 'a post metaphysical universalist position' for which the first step is 'to shift from a substantialistic to a *discursive, communicative concept of rationality*' (my italics), p 5.

[5] *Nostra aetate*, Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, para 3.

[6] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the other* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990; cf my review article 'Tracy in dialogue: mystical retrieval and prophetic suspicion', *Heythrop Journal* Vol 34, (January 1993), pp 60–5.

[7] John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p 421.

[8] Alister McFadyen, *The call to personhood; a Christian theory of the individual in social relationships* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp 46–7.