Religious boundaries for a cosmopolitan world

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Introduction

I TRAVELLED RECENTLY WITH SOME FRIENDS from Frankfurt to Strasbourg. On approaching the border between France and Germany we were confronted by a sign telling us, '1000 m to France'. Bracing ourselves for something to happen, we were rather disappointed as we simply drove through without even a passport control. Boundaries in Europe are changing, and not only in Europe but in the whole world the process of globalization is making us ask the question, what is a boundary? In this article I would like to suggest a way to understand the boundaries of the Christian tradition in the context of an ever more cosmopolitan world. In such a cosmopolitan era, identities are typically multiple and loyalties legion. Furthermore, the revolution in transport and communications technologies has changed our conceptions of space and time. The transformation of these basic co-ordinates has important implications for our understanding of religious boundaries. The world religions are no longer, if they ever were, operating in separate spaces from one another. They now share in a common public sphere in which their ideas and doctrines are subject to public criticism and analysis. It is thus increasingly important that each religious tradition reflects on how its own borders[1] function to preserve the specificity of its own identity. The legitimate differentiation of one religious tradition from another, and indeed of a religious tradition from a purely secular vision, needs to be sensitive to the way in which its own borders exclude the other traditions from its own particular self-identity. We need to find new ways of preserving our religious identities from both liberal secularism which erodes the legitimate integrity of religious tradition and also from a form of religious 'tribalism' which seeks to crystallize the religious out of a cosmopolitan society.

This is the context in which I shall consider the making of a retreat with members of another religious tradition. I begin by considering the meaning of a border for the Christian religious tradition and then go on to see how this relates to spending a time of retreat with members of

another religious tradition. I shall also draw specifically on my own experience of retreats with Theravadan Buddhism in order to situate this analysis within the limits of my own religious experience.

Religious boundaries

The specificity of the religious boundary, of what defines the characteristic beliefs and practices of a religious tradition, is a charged question today. On the one hand, there are what we might call the 'secularists' who consider the religious to be reducible to purely cultural and personal categories. In this type of analysis the religious is purely a human product.[2] The religious is seen as functioning to give meaning to life, to create social solidarity or quite simply as a way of burying one's head in the sand. In any case, the question of the transcendental origin of religion is either not considered or considered to be beyond the human capacity to know. On the other hand, there are what we might call the 'traditionalists' who consider religion to be so transcendental that the cultural and personal influences which shape a religion often seem to be neglected.[3] Much of the difficulty in talking about the religious as a separate boundary arises from the polarization of the contemporary debate into these two opposing camps. Either you are a secularist, in which case you end up reducing religion to politics or social action, or you are a traditionalist, in which case you yearn to put the clock back to Christendom.

Both these alternatives seem insufficient in our contemporary cosmopolitan context.[4] They are both limited to what we might call a 'colonizing reason': each seeks to dominate by eliminating the other and reducing it to itself. A way through this impasse is to consider the notion of incarnation in the Christian tradition. In the Gospel of St John we read, 'The Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14). In entering into the human reality God in Christ expresses God's way of being. The history of the early Councils, and particularly the Council of Chalcedon, is one of trying to come to terms with this christological mystery in the face of heretical tendencies to reduce this mystery to one or the other of its two dimensions: human or divine. The Councils continually attempted to hold both of these dimensions together in proclaiming the doctrine of true God and true man in the one person of Christ. Analogously, we can adopt a similar manner of defining the religious boundary as neither secularist nor traditionalist but 'incarnational' in style.[5]

The religious boundary as an 'incarnational' style

The definition of the christological mystery of the incarnation by the early Councils provides a normative criterion for interpreting the notion of a religious boundary from a Christian viewpoint. This criterion is what we might call the 'both/and' principle. Neither dimension, neither the human nor the divine, colonizes the other: difference and identity are held together in 'incarnational reason'.[6] It is thus not surprising that the reflection on the nature of the Church should take this type of 'incarnational reasoning', both human and divine. A religious boundary understood by way of this 'incarnational reason' would thus be constituted through both its identification with the immanent cultural, social, personal and political dimensions of human life, and through its transcending of each of these historical categories. The question is, how is this possible? The conditions of possibility can be derived from both the secularist and the traditionalist conceptions of religion already mentioned. The truth of the secularist position is that the incarnation reveals to us that God fully respects the autonomy of the human order. Christ was a real human person and not some sort of 'Superman'. Yet, at the same time, we believe that God became human in a unique way in Christ. His unique mission is given in naming him the Christ, the Saviour. The traditionalist position wants to preserve this theological moment in defending the transcendental origin of religion as not reducible to the finite order of space and time.

This same constitutive tension of the Christian understanding of religion is manifested in the eschatological conception of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is both already among us, or between us, and yet to come in the future fulfilment of time, the *eschaton*. Thus using this style of reasoning we could define the religious boundary as both immanent in the autonomous workings of the political, cultural, social and personal dimensions of human life and at the same time transcendent of these limits, as of divine initiative. The specificity of the Christian religious boundary is its 'incarnational style': it delimits the immanent and transcendent presence of God to human experience. Political, cultural, social and personal boundaries quite rightly confine themselves to their respective areas of finite reality. The Christian religious boundary rightly confines itself to the dialectical relation between God and humanity both within and beyond the finite. 'Incarnational reasoning' thus allows us to avoid reducing the religious boundary to either historical or transcendental categories, and reveals a Christian eschatology which orchestrates the dialectic of time and eternity.

'Incarnational reasoning' and other religious traditions

Before we consider the question of crossing the religious boundaries in a retreat, one more prolegomenon lies before us, namely, that of the relationship between Christianity and the other world religions. Here, I would like simply to draw out some of the logical consequences for the Christian understanding of the world religions from what I have already outlined above as 'incarnational reasoning': how does the specificity of the incarnation structure the Christian reflection on other religions?

The question is one of the most pressing and difficult for contemporary theology.[7] Using the notion of 'incarnational reasoning' we see that two extreme positions can be avoided. First, the tendency to minimize the singularity of the christological mystery for the Christian faith, and second the tendency to reduce the real otherness of other religions to the Christian revelation. Both positions fail to follow the logic of the incarnation. 'Incarnational reason' both preserves the singularity of the christological claim and at the same time preserves a real difference and otherness, indeed autonomy, for the other religions. This gives us a way to understand the meaning of inter-religious dialogue. We dialogue both to share our christological truth and also to receive the truth of other religions. Only with such an attitude can we avoid on the one hand being untrue to our faith and on the other hand being arrogant and self-sufficient. This position is importantly an ethical position. It embodies the principle of the 'Golden Rule' that we find in Matthew's Gospel, 'So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the law and the prophets' (Mt 7:12).

Retreats with another religious tradition

Now I would like to turn to the more experiential level of making a time of retreat with another religious tradition. What is the experience of crossing one's own religious boundary?

The process of crossing a religious boundary for a Christian means making an encounter with another religious tradition for which the trinitarian mysteries of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are not constitutive for the self-identity of that tradition. My first serious encounter with such a tradition was with Theravada Buddhism. At the age of nineteen I spent some time at a Theravadan monastery in Hampshire, England. I had studied Buddhism at school and so had some theoretical knowledge of what to expect, but I had never entered into the lived experiential reality of Buddhism. This experience was for me one of existential disorientation. My symbolic world of existential

meanings was challenged by the experience that the 'spiritual story' can be told through another narrative. In this other narrative Christ, the Gospel and the Church were replaced by the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*. The resulting experience was what one might call a sense of 'spiritual agoraphobia', a loosening of formerly held securities and an expanding of one's spiritual geography. My crisis at this time was essentially a christological one. I could not give a definite answer to the question posed by Jesus to Peter, 'Who do you say I am?' (Mt 16:15).

Little by little this spiritual crisis was resolved through both the gift of faith in Christ and the discovery of the richness of the Christian spiritual tradition. The writings of Gregory of Nyssa, the Spanish and Rheinland mystics, the work of the anonymous English author, *The cloud of unknowing*, all helped to reconfigure my spiritual geography around the Christian narrative. This experience would lead me to suggest that one should first be well rooted in one's own religious tradition before taking the initiative to encounter another religious tradition seriously in a retreat context. Being rooted in one's own tradition has, perhaps paradoxically, the tendency to make one more open to the *alterity* of another tradition. This is also the case at the personal level. The more that one is at home with oneself the freer one is to accept the alterity of another. When one is insecure, the tendency is to either colonize or allow oneself to be colonized. In both cases, the result is the same: a colonization through the elimination of difference.

An incarnational approach works through holding both difference and identity together. In the case of my encounter with Theravada Buddhism I have slowly grown into an incarnational attitude with Theravada Buddhism. What does that mean in practice? Essentially, I have found that over the years I have grown in respect and friendship for Theravadan Buddhism and its practitioners. This friendship has encouraged me to spend regular times of retreat in Theravadan monasteries, participating in the daily meditations, the manual work and times of discussion. The importance in Buddhist meditation of body posture, breathing and mental attitude has helped me to be more attentive to these aspects in my own Christian contemplation. For example, the simple fact of sitting in the lotus, or as near to it as possible, as a way to still the mind and to bring oneself into physical and spiritual harmony has been invaluable in my own deepening in prayer and contemplation.

One Theravadan monk has particularly given me great support to follow my own spiritual path and challenged me to be more honest

about what I know and what I do not know in the faith of my own tradition. He meditates for me and I pray for him. That is for me a concrete form of spiritual solidarity for which I feel most grateful and blessed.

Furthermore, I am less afraid to acknowledge differences that exist between our traditions. In fact, part of the problem can be to try and pretend that we all really believe the same thing. This does not respect religious alterity, nor does it allow one to learn properly from another tradition. But why are we afraid of religious alterity?

Fear of the other

When a Christian seriously encounters another religious tradition in a retreat context, then sooner or later the christological question of the identity of Jesus poses itself. How can one hold to the christological claim that Jesus is the Son of God, the Saviour of all humankind, and at the same time recognize and respect the alterity of the other religious traditions? This question of religious truth comes to the heart of our fear about religious alterity. Truth here is seen as a colonial force: either you reject it and preserve your own truth or you accept it and abandon your own truth. However, we need not look at religious truth in this either/or way; 'incarnational reason' gives us a different way to understand religious truth. In this model, truth is not colonizing; it seeks not to eliminate the difference of the other tradition, but to learn from it and indeed to preserve its autonomy. Reducing everything to the same is also not the way to understand religious truth. But how is this 'both/ and' position of 'incarnational reason' possible without falling into a hopeless relativism? St Paul's christological hymn in the letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:6–11) gives us the key to understanding the dialectical nature of 'incarnational reason'. The Christian truth expressed in this hymn is that the logic of the incarnation is *kenotic*. The universality of this truth is not a universality of force in which the other is reduced to the same in some form of colonizing reason, but rather one of self-emptying in which the other is identified within an ontological solidarity: the incarnation. This *kenotic* attitude shapes the Christian understanding of the truth. Difference is now understood less as a threat to the truth than as a cause for charity. The real cause of fear for a Christian should be that one has lacked charity to the other, not that one is faced by the other. That is the normative consequence of the *kenotic* truth of the incarnation for the Christian understanding of other religious traditions.

However, what about the duty of the Christian to proclaim the gospel to the world (Mk 16:16)? Is this *kenotic* attitude of 'incarnational reasoning' sufficient to meet this Christian duty?

Christian apologetics and respect of the other

The defence of the Christian faith has been traditionally understood as Christian apologetics. The first letter of Peter tells us, 'always have your defence ready for people asking you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with gentleness and respect' (1 Pet 3: 15–16). This attitude of 'defending the faith' with gentleness and respect is a practical consequence of the *kenotic* truth of the incarnation. Indeed, it would be a performative contradiction to proclaim the gospel with any other attitude. This apologetic attitude is thus in no way in contradiction with real respect for the alterity of the other tradition. In fact, without this apologetic dimension in an inter-religious encounter the alterity between the religious traditions is effectively mute. When I speak with my Buddhist friends about the gospel, I share with them that which animates my whole life. They do the same when they speak to me about the *Dhamma*. This has been my experience of spending time with the Theravadan tradition. I remember vividly one discussion with the *Ajahn* (abbot) of a monastery in England. He wanted to know what I thought, and not simply to pretend that we think the same thing. It was an interesting experience for me to share my experience of the gospel with the *Ajahn* as it made me aware of my lack of faith in it. It is not good enough simply to repeat undigested formulas: that is fundamentally to disrespect the other. This form of dialogue with another religious tradition demands honesty with oneself about one's own faith. It is perhaps the way in which inter-religious dialogue works to deepen the conversion of each partner into the truth of their respective traditions. The honesty required to enter into such dialogues makes one humble before the mystery of both our own religious tradition and also that of the other. Paradoxically, the tendency to want to colonize the other seems to originate in the lack of conversion to one's own faith. It is a way of hiding from the insecure grounding in our faith that we tend to project on to others our *non-kenotic* attitudes of 'colonizing reason'.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show, by way of considering the Christian religious tradition through the notion of 'incarnational reason', that an encounter with another religious tradition can both deepen one's understanding of one's own faith and lead one to discover

the riches of another. I have specifically spoken from the point of view of the Christian tradition since the respect for another tradition requires that each tradition be allowed to speak for itself. It is also of great importance that each tradition, from within its own self-understanding, should foster an attitude of mutual recognition and solidarity towards the other religious traditions. The peaceful coexistence of the world religions requires that we find ways to encounter one another which foster such attitudes. A time of retreat with another tradition seems to me to offer one such possibility of fruitful encounter. It reproduces the internal logic of the meeting of God and humankind in the incarnation: the meeting of difference and identity in the unity of a person.

I have also suggested that the normative grounding of inter-religious encounters in the theology of the incarnation provides a basis upon which the Christian can understand such meetings without either compromising his or her own position or failing to respect the real alterity of the other tradition. The fact of religious pluralism today requires that the appropriate boundaries which distinguish religions from one another be thought of, not as 'no go areas', but rather as regions of alterity which invite ever greater mutual recognition and conversion. A time of retreat with another religious tradition is a good opportunity to live this religious pluralism at the level of a spiritual encounter. It is a form of spiritual solidarity in which each partner encourages the other to be both faithful to their own tradition and open to learn from the richness of the other.

Furthermore, this form of retreat serves not only the individual participants but also our contemporary societies which are searching for ways to hold regional differences together within new forms of cosmopolitan solidarity. Such a retreat is a sign of hope to the world that religions can be sources of solidarity and not merely rigid boundaries which separate and divide people from each other.

Finally, I have situated this reflection within the context of my own experience of making a time of retreat with another religious tradition. A purely speculative investigation of the inter-religious encounter can remain at a level of general principles without considering how these principles actually work in practice. Without wanting to reduce theory to practice it seems to me that one of the present challenges to our theological thought is to catch up with the lived experience of people. This 'theory lag' may well be due to an insufficient overlapping of theory and practice in our theological reflection. The overlapping of religions in the contemporary world demands that our practice be informed by inter-religious experience. In such a way we can hope to

enter more deeply into the living mystery of the incarnation, and also to think through the practical consequences of our religious boundaries for a cosmopolitan world.

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NOTES

1 For the purposes of this article I use the concepts of religious border and that of religious boundary interchangeably. By these concepts I understand the limits of the characteristic practices and beliefs which define the self-identity of a religious tradition.

2 Much of the tradition of the sociology of religion, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, was of this type of analysis. Even today one finds this 'functionalist' reduction of religion in the work of Habermas, Gauchet and Luhmann. See J. Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, trans Thomas McCarthy, vol 2 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp 77–111; M. Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); N. Luhman, *Funktion der religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

3 The most interesting contemporary example of this type of 'post-secular' thinking is the 'radical orthodoxy' of John Milbank. See J. Milbank, *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

4 For a very interesting survey of the cosmopolitan world context see D. Held, *Democracy and the global order: from the modern state to cosmopolitan governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

5 By the notion 'incarnational style' I mean the general principles and features used by the early Councils in understanding the mystery of the incarnation. I suggest that these principles and features can be analogously applied to defining the notion of a religious boundary.

6 'Incarnational reason' is thus the type of thinking associated with the Christian understanding of the incarnation. This reasoning has its origin in the initiative of the creator and saviour God made manifest in Jesus.

7 For a good survey of the various attitudes toward the inter-religious question see P. Knitter, *No other name: a critical survey of Christian attitudes toward the world religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985).