

# **Towards Christology in a Pluralist Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

An interfaith Christology, in the words of Peter Phan<sup>1</sup>, is a highly necessary desideratum which until today has barely been approached. However, the need for a construction of peace among believers of different faiths urges us to rethink theology from a pluralistic perspective. Quoting again Peter Phan: "Given the religiously pluralistic situation of our time and the urgent need for mutual understanding and collaboration among followers of different religions, such interfaith Christology arguably is a desideratum if not a pressing necessity for contemporary theology."

## **Christology - Hallmark or Obstacle for Dialogue?**

But is it possible, at all, to construct such a Christology? José María Vigil says: "I have to say from the outset that this topic is difficult, dangerous and in any case extremely sensitive."<sup>2</sup> Christology is at the very core of Christianity; it has been called its "hallmark". The understanding of the person and salvific work of Jesus Christ, to put it in traditional dogmatic terms, for 1.500 years has been the core of Christian theology. It shows the relationship between God and humankind as understood in Christian faith.

In interreligious dialogue, differences between the concepts of this relationship become visible. Let me quote an example experienced in a centre for Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nuernberg, Germany: A panel discussion was titled "Jesus Christ – Saviour or 'only' Prophet of Love?" Young Moshtagh from Iran, who regularly frequented the events of the centre, commented: "Although the 'only' is in quotation marks, I don't like the title at all. For Muslims being God's prophet is the maximum. We don't need a saviour: God forgave Abraham. Therefore, any human being is born without sin. In Islam, there is no such thing as original sin. My mother taught me that we as Muslims don't need a saviour. I begin to understand that although we have the same God Muslims have another image of Him."<sup>3</sup>

For a theology of religions, Christology as the core of Christian faith presents the severest problem: Claiming the unique and universal significance of Christ for humankind in a way seems to imply a devalorization of other religions. Let's see different approaches towards this problem.

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1 Peter Phan, An Interfaith Christology: A possibility and Desideratum? In: Toward a Planetary Theology. Along the Many Paths of God, José María Vigil (Ed), EATWOT, Canada 2010, 117 - 123

2 José María Vigil, Liberation Christology and Religious Pluralism, in: José M. Vigil, Luiza Tomita, Marcello Barros (Ed.), Along the Many Paths of God, Interreligious Studies Vol. 1, Berlin 2008, 173 – 180.

3 Christsein angesichts des Islam. Ein Glaubenskurs, EMW Hamburg, 2009, 50. Quoted from: Wir sind Brückenmenschen. Wie sich Christen und Muslime begegnen, Biografische Notizen. Hans-Martin Gloel (Hg), Neuendettelsau 2007.

## **From Exclusivism to Pluralism: Challenges for a Theology of Religion**

Theology of Religion has offered three models of coping with the differences: The exclusivist model describes the person and work of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation which is achieved through faith mediated by the church. This was the classical position of the Catholic Church, in dogmatic terms: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This position is also still predominant in evangelical and Pentecostal shapes of Christianity. The inclusivist model claims salvation for all humankind as achieved by Christ even beyond faith and church. Liberation theologies follow this type of Christology. In liberation perspective, however, Christology marked a shift from an ecclesiology centred exclusivism towards a Christologically centred inclusivism. José María Vigil states: "In this latter paradigm, salvation was believed to occur also outside the church but not outside Christ. Christ had achieved salvation, all salvation and even though it reaches human beings that are beyond the borders of the church, that salvation was nevertheless 'achieved by Christ'. (...) Classic Latin American liberation theology was built on the paradigm of Christ-centered inclusivity."<sup>4</sup>

In interfaith dialogue, however, the inclusivist perspective fails to pronounce the differences between religions properly. It includes a superiority of Christianity. Theology of Religion, therefore, suggests pluralistic models in order to enable the dialogue. They differ among themselves. Let's have a closer look.

### **Interfaith Christology in pluralist perspective**

The pluralistic model accepts the differences between religious systems. The challenge of a pluralistic theology, therefore, is to overcome inclusivism by opening Christology for an interfaith approach. There are, however, different models that have been suggested. José María Vigil criticises the Christological dogma as a "fundamentalist enclave" within Christianity<sup>5</sup> and suggests overcoming Christology in order to put God in the centre and have all religions equally circle around God as the only centre: "In this new paradigm, God occupies the centre while Christ, along with other religions, turns around God."<sup>6</sup> This approach, however, seems to eliminate the liberation theology at all by doing away with God's historical identification with the poor and marginalized. Moreover, it does not solve the question how Christians can maintain the uniqueness of Christ.

Peter Phan, on his terms, suggests a phenomenological approach to Christology. The term and concept of "Christology", according to him, are also found in other religions, especially in Judaism and Islam where the figure of Jesus is known but has a different function. According to Phan, in this method understanding the meaning of a statement must be differentiated from the act of affirming its truth. This opens the possibility to understand different meanings of certain statements religions make on the significance of the person of Christ: "The point of interfaith Christology is not to demonstrate that the Christ of Christians is unique, universal and superior to all other religious figures, or vice versa. In principal, a rational demonstration of such a claim is not possible since it is essentially an affirmation of faith. Rather it is to obtain a profound and diverse an understanding as possible of the Christ on the basis of the most varied and even contradictory affirmations of different religions on what makes a particular being (e.g., Siddharta Gautama, Jesus of Nazareth or Muhammad) the

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4 Vigil, 175.

5 *ibid.*

6 Vigil, 176.

‘Christ’.”<sup>7</sup> Peter Phan claims that, “Underlying these divergent Christologies, is the notion that somehow in Jesus, however his historical role is interpreted, humans are given the possibility of fulfilling their nature and reaching their ultimate goal, referred to in the theistic language as union with God and in non-theistic language as self-transcendence (e.g., liberation, enlightenment, salvation, redemption, transformation, etc.).”<sup>8</sup>

But, does this functional approach really do justice to the significance of the figures mentioned above in their respective religions? Would other faiths agree to the universal concept of a “Christ”? An even stronger criticism seems to me that the construction of a functional concept of Christ does away with the Christological pluralism within Christianity itself and, therefore, also with the historical significance of Jesus of Nazareth which is fundamental for all liberation theologies. Phan himself concedes the limitations of an interfaith Christology of this type: “Nor is it a ‘historical Christology’, a ‘Christology from below’, or an ascending Christology insofar as it is not based on the Gospel’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry and is not designed to show that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. In this respect it lacks the historical specificity characteristic of, for example, liberation Christology of various stripes (e.g., black, Latin American, Asian, feminist, ecological etc.).”<sup>9</sup>

The challenge, then, is to maintain the differences and construct a theology that responds to the need of a reflected dialogue between partners who do not agree easily upon abstract universal concepts. Finally, it means to take more serious the incompatibility of different systematic approaches.

### “Integral Christology”

German theologian Hans-Martin Barth in his *Dogmatik*<sup>10</sup> offers a slightly different approach. He approaches towards what he calls an “integral Christology”. He states that, from the perspective of religious science, the figure of a mediator between God and humankind is exceptional and marks the difference of the concept of salvation. Other faiths know figures like e.g. the founder, the teacher, the reformer or the example. A “saviour” in the Christian sense is widely unknown to other religions. Barth hints at “Christologies” within the other four world religions. I will restrain to Judaism and Islam here for the reason of the topic of this workshop.

In Judaism e.g. Christology is not compatible with monotheism, with the prohibition to venerate images, with continuity of history and the messianic hopes. Nevertheless, Jewish theologians can develop an appreciation for Jesus as the brother (like Martin Buber said) or identify the Jewish victims of Holocaust with the crucified Christ (Pinchas Lapide). While the Jewish tradition teaches us that Jesus unseparably belongs to the tradition of the First Testament and to the Jewish faith, Christians at the same time attribute another relevance to his person.

In Islam *Isa* (Jesus) is known in the Qu´ran. He is seen as a messenger (*rasul*) of God. Some contemporaneous interpretations see him as a spiritual leader, as an ascetic person or as the messenger of love and reconciliation. But without doubt Jesus remains strictly on human side. According to Barth, in dialogue with Muslims,

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<sup>7</sup> Phan, 118f.

<sup>8</sup> Phan, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Phan, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Martin Barth, *Dogmatik. Evangelischer Glaube im Kontext der Weltreligionen. Ein Lehrbuch*, Gütersloh 2. Aufl. 2002

Christians can learn to appreciate the history of God's self-revelation of which Jesus is a part. While during centuries, Christian theology focused on the salvific work of Christ and his divine nature, the significance of a prophet has been nearly absorbed by Islam. Christians in dialogue with Muslims may let themselves be challenged to re-discover this dimension within their own faith.

Barth's approach is interesting, because he does not start from a pluralist theology of religions. Instead of claiming an underlying common principle between different phenomena in the religions, he works out the differences, thus presenting an exterior perspective on Jesus Christ. He aims at enriching the Christian tradition by exterior perspectives and, therefore, looks for transversal aspects that can challenge Christian dogma. From Jewish and Muslim "Christologies", Barth derives the following challenges:

*Integration of Inclusive and exclusive representation of God:* While a mediation between God and the individual is not necessary, in the history of Jewish faith, some figures have represented God – e.g. his "knight" (abad) or the messiah. This idea vanished in the history of Judaism. Barth claims that Christian theology could learn from Jewish faith to appreciate the idea that Jesus represents God among mankind as well as mankind in front of God. Thus, Barth interprets the old dogma of the double nature of Christ – *vere homo vere Deus* – in a new way.

*Integration of the message and the messenger:* While Islam gives the highest appreciation to the message of the Qu'ran, in Christian faith the messenger has become more important than the message: He has become the only qualifying criterium for the authenticity of the message, thus the message is in a way absorbed by the messenger. Looking at it from the perspective of communication theory, the messenger and the message are interdependent. Christians can ask Muslims to which extent the Qu'ran can be understood without certain knowledge of the person of Muhammad. On the other hand, Christians can learn from Islam to rediscover the message of Jesus which under the priority of his person and salvific work has been neglected for centuries.

Barth's approach tries to take serious the differences between the religions and their perceptions of the relationship between humankind and its final destination. Still, it can be questioned for its perception of other religions from the Christian perspective. While concentrating on other religions' perspectives on the figure of Jesus Christ, the question is not discussed what they put in the place where Christology is for Christians. Stressing the integrative aspects, the incompatibilities are made invisible.

### **The Politics of Difference**

More recent approaches - e.g. by Timothy Fitzgerald or Jonathan Smith - criticize the concept of religion at all: "While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion – *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy."<sup>11</sup> Religious sciences with their universal concepts finally represent a Western attitude of dominance over other beliefs. As

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Smith, *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago u.a. 1982, S. XI; quoted in: Jochen Teuffel, *Mission als Namenszeugnis. Eine Ideologiekritik in Sachen Religion*, Tübingen 2009, 175.

Jonathan Smith states: "Difference is not something simply to be noted; it is, most often, something in which one has a stake. Above all it is a political matter."<sup>12</sup>

I would rather modify: Difference becomes a political matter, whenever it is used to construct hierarchy and injustice. The political challenge for a pluralist theology of religions, therefore, is to construct a sound theological base for different religions to live out their differences and incompatibilities without claiming superiority over one another.

### **Comparative Theology – A Radically Pluralist Approach**

Given the fact that religious pluralism recently leads to a new search for identity<sup>13</sup>, theology has to bridge the gap between the search for an own identity and the request for the truth. Claiming one truth for all behind the differences, the universalist approach fails to overcome the fear of a loss of identity which is based upon the concrete and contextual experience. While a radically pluralist perspective is necessary, theology at the same time must be enabled to reflect critically the respective faith's own tradition and to assume a perspective from outside. The fear of loss of identity, according to Klaus von Stosch, can only be overcome by switching between the inside and the outside perspective<sup>14</sup>.

To overcome the impasse of the theology of religions and the fruitless discussions between inclusivism and pluralism is the claim of *comparative theology*. Comparative theology starts with the observation of the practice. Instead of developing universal theories, it works by case studies. It departs from real questions of the people for meaning, truth and healing, including the criticism on religion. The own belief is the starting point while the perspective from outside is being assumed. A so called "third perspective" from a religiously and philosophically independent point of view is needed in order to prevent partners in dialogue from the danger to trivialize the problems on the basis of common shared convictions. This, on the one hand, enhances pluralism. On the other, it is a limitation because this philosophical perspective owes itself to a clearly defined rationality. According to Klaus von Stosch, it therefore should itself be a concrete third perspective, maybe an atheist or a person from a religion different from the partners in dialogue. Comparative theology always needs the reflection of religious practice, analyzing the relationship between the expressive and the encyclopaedic levels of faith. It is a theology out of dialogue rather than a theology for dialogue<sup>15</sup>. Finally, comparative theology is aware of its own vulnerability and fallibility which draws it close to Christology.

Comparative theology, therefore, aims at a better understanding of the own tradition in the light of the other, at achieving friendship in inter religious dialogue which is more than mere tolerance and at mediating between pluralism and inclusivism in the theology of religions.

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *What a Difference Difference Makes*, in: Ders., *Relating Religion, Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago/London 2004, 251 – 302, S. 252. zit bei Claudia Jahnel, *Vernakulare Ökumene in transkultureller Einheit. Ökumenische Theologie nach dem Cultural Turn*, in: *Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 1/2008, S. 10 – 33; S. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the German discussion on an „ecumenism of profiles“!

<sup>14</sup> The following considerations are based upon: Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Hauptaufgabe der Theologie der Zukunft*. In: Reinhold Bernhardt/ Klaus von Stosch (Ed.), *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, Zürich 2009 (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen; 7), 15-33. and: Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Herausforderung für die Theologie des 21. Jahrhunderts*. In: *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 130 (2008) 401-422. Main publications on the issue are: K. Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, Oxford 1994; K. Ward, *Truth and the diversity of religions*. In: *Religious studies* 26 (1990).

<sup>15</sup> Here, Stosch refers to M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*. In: *The Month* 28 (1994), 270 – 274; 325 – 330.

## Conclusions for Christology within the framework of Comparative Theology

How can the unique significance of Jesus Christ for Christian faith be spelled out under the presupposition of radical pluralism? Klaus von Stosch suggests a Trinitarian approach to God's revelation that gives way to other forms of revelation beyond the figure of Christ<sup>16</sup>. Still, he concedes that this argument is drawn from a dogmatic point of view that claims Trinity as the final being of God which can hardly be accepted by other religions. According to him, to spell out Christology in a radical pluralist manner needs the philosophical tools of comparative theology that allow for a perception of radical otherness.

This goes far beyond of what we can do here today. Let me only hint at some questions that I consider important taking into account especially Christology of liberation and feminist Christologies.

A comparative approach towards Christology should work out the contextual significance of different Christologies:

- Which kind of discipleship and spirituality do contextual Christologies inspire? (case studies)
- How do contextual Christologies inform the relationships among members of a religious community (ecclesiological aspect)?
- How do contextual Christologies motivate Christian commitment for society (missiological aspect)?
- How do contextual Christologies spell out the relationship between humankind and God in the person of Christ, in dogmatic terms the *vere homo*? Do they allow for a differentiation between the different human persons according to their social, economic, gender, racial and political identity?
- From which perspective do they show God in the respective contexts, in dogmatic terms the *vere Deus*? Does God appear more transcendent or more immanent?
- How do contextual Christologies relate the Christ to God (pneumatological aspect)?
- Which criteria do contextual Christologies provide for the relationship with people from other religious backgrounds (interreligious aspect)?

The challenge for comparative theology lies in the construction of analytical frameworks that fit for other religious systems in their respective contexts and in the choice of a "third perspective" on the compared contexts and religious systems. The vision is to reveal truth beyond dogmatics in the shape of discipleship which is committed to create peace in justice accepting radical otherness.

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<sup>16</sup> „Von daher scheint mir die eigentlich spannende Frage, die aus der Christologie im Blick auf die Theologie der Religionen folgt, nicht die zu sein, ob sich der Logos mehrfach in Menschen inkarniert hat, sondern ob es unterschiedliche Gegebenheitsweisen derselben Offenbarung des trinitarischen Gottes geben kann.“ Klaus von Stosch, Christologie im Kontext der Religionstheologie, in: MThZ 60 (2009), 42 – 50. 48