

**GOD**

Perry Schmidt-Leukel

**BEYOND  
BOUNDARIES**

A Christian and Pluralist Theology of Religions

WAXMANN



Perry Schmidt-Leukel

# God Beyond Boundaries

A Christian and Pluralist Theology of Religions



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*For John H. Hick*



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## Preface to the English Edition

I am glad, grateful and relieved that my study *God Beyond Boundaries* (“Gott ohne Grenzen”) is now available to an English speaking readership. Apart from offering my reflections and argumentations on Christianity’s self-understanding among and in relation to other religions, the book also provides an opportunity for getting some glimpses of the discourse in Germany, even if the bulk of the literature discussed in this work stems from the English speaking world.

My relief is due to the fact that the translation process has taken unusually long. Getting as close as possible to the German original involved far more difficulties than originally foreseen. Several drafts and three translators were involved, while I myself gave the manuscript a final check. My gratitude goes to Ulrike Guthrie, Dr. Carolina Weening and Dr. Charles Cahill for all the time and effort they invested in producing the English text of this book. I’m also grateful to Dr. Natalie Watson (formerly at SCM Press) who strongly supported the project during the first years of the translation process and to Dr. Ursula Heckel from Waxmann Publisher who supervised the final production of the book after the project had been transferred from SCM Press to Waxmann. The staff at Waxmann have been wonderfully supportive and highly professional in getting this book published. I feel sad that Carolina, a fine scholar in her own right, who in 2012 died from a rapidly growing cancer, has not been able to see the final result.

The translation of *God Beyond Boundaries* not only took much time and effort, it also required significant financial support. Grants have been given by *The Weisfeld Foundation*, the *Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”* at the University of Muenster and the *Stiftung Apfelbaum*. I am very grateful to all three funding institutions and their representatives who decided to support the project.

I have been asked whether my more recent book *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Orbis Books 2017) would make *God Beyond Boundaries* redundant. Anybody who takes a look at the present work will soon realize that this is not the case. *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* starts where *God Beyond Boundaries* ends, with the need for an interreligious theology. And while the more recent book only provides a summarized sketch of pluralist approaches in Christianity, *God Beyond Boundaries* deals in much detail with the various theological questions raised by these approaches. Moreover, *God Beyond Boundaries* shows with regard to both Christian doctrinal issues in general and Christian dialogue with Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in particular what the numerous and significant advantages of a pluralist approach over against its rival option of Christian exclusivism and Christian inclusivism are. The arguments presented here are still as topical

and pertinent as they were more than ten years ago. There is only one point where the theological discussion has moved forward considerably. While the last chapter of *God Beyond Boundaries* emphasizes the need for more theological reflection on the question of multi-religious identity (cf. chapter 16, note 51), this issue has now indeed caught more theological attention and found some excellent scholarly treatment, though here too still more work needs to be done.

Muenster, May 2017

Perry Schmidt-Leukel

# Preface

Even in the era of internet and computerized word processing, books continue to be “born.” While this obviously applies to the drafting of texts, on a deeper and more fundamental level it is even more true of the thoughts themselves that make up the books. Thoughts need time to develop, time to allow their implications to unfold and gradually take on the form in which they will then see the light of literary day. Certainly books too are “children of their times,” clearly marked by the atmosphere and circumstances in which they came into being; it follows that they may be outdated before long, and superseded by new ones. Yet until then they continue to work and, as it were, reproduce themselves: in the thoughts of others as well as sometimes in the creation of new books.

Usually the birth of a book is preceded by a longer pre-history. In the case of the volume at hand, its concept and structure derive from a particular course of lectures I held, first at the University of Salzburg in the summer semester of 1999 and not long thereafter at the University of Munich in the 1999-2000 winter semester. Although I had been officially banned from teaching by authorities of the Roman Catholic Church, colleagues and good friends of mine—for whom academic freedom is of great importance—actively lent their support to make these courses possible. In the turmoil of this situation, that both threatened my livelihood as well as jeopardized my family’s well-being, many of my ideas had to remain in embryonic form. Still, I never abandoned the hope that the driving ideas behind this lecture series would one day emerge as a book.

In spring 2000 I was appointed to the newly established Chair of World Religions for Peace at the University of Glasgow. Now in Scotland one rarely encounters that cynicism regarding the European Enlightenment and its values so widespread on the Continent. On the contrary: the Scots are thoroughly proud of the not insignificant contribution made by their country to the Enlightenment, and it comes then as no great surprise that they continue to foster the Enlightenment tradition of freedom of thought in speech and in writing. In contrast to the situation on the Continent, control and censorship at secular universities, whether by the churches or by other ideological entities, is quite unthinkable in Scotland and legally prevented. Indeed some churches have accommodated themselves to this very well. The teaching staff of Glasgow’s Department of Theology and Religious Studies, to which I belong, represents a number of different denominations and religions, and the current (2004) chairperson is a Muslim lady—a fact that by no means prevents the largest ecclesiastical denomination in Scotland, the Reformed Church of Scotland, from continuing to educate its ministerial candidates in this department. Even outside the Universi-

ty it is not uncommon to encounter signs of an exemplary social openness. The German and French prohibitions against the wearing of a *hijab*, or headscarf, by Muslim women in certain official positions, together with the often pseudo-intellectual discussion surrounding these measures, is in Scotland more likely to be greeted with a puzzled shake of the head. The traditional police uniform in Glasgow has been supplemented with a turban decorated with the police emblem and the famous check-board hatband so as to enable access to police service even to those who belong to the religious community of Sikhs and as such are duty-bound to wear a turban.

In this liberal (in the best sense of the word) climate of Scotland I was able not only to continue my academic work but also finally to realize my plans for this book. Some of what I have published in recent years is included here in revised format and now appears in what I hope is a unified and coherent form. I have made an effort to refer frequently to contemporary discussions on the theology of religions, though it has not been my intention to do so in a comprehensive way. My coverage has been largely selective, because my primary concern has been to present my own position on the theology of religions, relating this to other positions only when necessary. Anyone interested in a more comprehensive presentation of the state of the discussion will find this in some of my earlier publications (particularly in Schmidt-Leulke, 1997) as well as in the numerous references to the broader literature mentioned throughout this book.

The fundamental issues in the theology of religions are far too important to be left only to theological specialists. I have therefore tried to write this book in such a way that it can, on the one hand, be read with understanding by non-theologians, while still appealing to specialists on the other. Hence I must ask the latter to forgive what may appear to be unnecessary explanations, and the former for forbearance if there is presumably still too much theological shoptalk.

There remains the debt of thanks which I owe to many people who contributed to the coming-into-being of this book—a duty I am only too glad to fulfill. First are to those who made my German-Austrian farewell lecture possible: Heinrich Schmidinger from the University of Salzburg and Heinrich Döring from the University of Munich. The extent to which the ongoing discussions and thematically cutting-edge seminars at the Institute headed up by Heinrich Döring informed my thinking and broadened my horizon can hardly be assessed. Without this foundation, the present book would never have been written. Yet it also could not have been written without the granting of an entire sabbatical year for research. For this I am indebted to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Glasgow for relieving me of teaching duties during the 2003-2004 winter semester, and to the British Arts and Humanities Research Board for magnanimously supporting this project through a generous financial grant, thus making it possible for me to prolong my research-leave in the summer semester of 2004. In particular, I thank my former Glasgow colleague John Barclay, without whose energetic encouragement I probably would not have taken up this project so quickly. I owe special thanks as well to Shulamit Spain-Gayer and Philip Spain, who read the chapter

on Christianity and Judaism and gave me valuable suggestions from their Jewish-influenced perspective. (In the end, of course the final responsibility for the handling of this topic in the book lies with me.)

It was not only the university that had to release me for this work but my family as well. Too often, they had to endure the fact that my thoughts were not with them but with this book; too often their attempts to discover whether I might be approachable at a given moment were met on my part with annoyance. I particularly thank Doris for investing so many hours of her time, yet again, in proofreading. Thanks also to Diedrich Steen of the Gütersloher Publishing Company for the enthusiasm with which he accompanied the book and thus spurred on its author. One glance at the German-language publications on the theology of religions demonstrates the enormity of this publishing house's contribution to the ongoing vitality and topicality of this discussion over the years.

To mention here the names of all those who have informed my thinking would exceed the bounds of a foreword. Yet there is one author and fatherly friend whom I must name: John Hick. After my lengthy study of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue I began to extend the scope of my theological work by taking up the fundamental systematical questions of a comprehensively conceived theology of religions. In this process, no other theologian inspired me as much as did John Hick. And I am not the only one who has benefitted in this way. For almost four decades John Hick has pushed forward the international discussion on a Theology of Religions—far beyond the circles of Christian theology. It is to him therefore that this work is dedicated as a token of my particular gratitude.

Glasgow, September 2004

Perry Schmidt-Leukel



# 1. Introduction

## October 27, 1986 – September 11, 2001

The twentieth century will likely go down in history as the period in which the major world religions began to engage with one another on a large scale and in an unprecedented spirit of openness and dialogue. This spirit became symbolized and also concretized in the interreligious prayer meeting at Assisi on October 27, 1986, convened by Pope John Paul II and broadcast by many TV networks around the globe. Roughly 150 representatives of numerous religious communities had gathered in Assisi. Both individually and collectively, these representatives gave expression in their own particular ways to their desire for peace and to their conviction that an unshakeable commitment to peace was inherent in their understanding of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Since then however a second event of great symbolic power has overshadowed the event of Assisi. Similarly it generated images that were transmitted throughout the world and have left an indelible impression in the consciousness and sub-consciousness of countless people. While not a religious event, it nonetheless contained an undeniable religious dimension: the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, conceived and carried out in the name of God. The perpetrators put the ultimate seal upon their conviction that this mass murder would serve the cause of God by deliberately sacrificing their own lives, for which they are today honored as martyrs in the circles of those similarly minded. 9/11 drove home two resounding points: first, that religion is a most powerful factor, and not to be ignored in our future life together on the planet; and second, that this factor continues to have a dangerous, violent dimension.

The symbolic intensity of the events of September 11 and October 27 illustrates the ambiguous mix of expectations and potentialities inherent in global religious encounters.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, given the inevitably increasing interconnectedness of the world's countries and cultures in the wake of globalization processes, diverse religions contain the potential to exacerbate the conflicts and problems among com-

1 In light of the conflict that had flared up in theological circles before this event had even taken place, Rome went to considerable lengths to “clarify” the Church’s position: Participants would not be gathering in order to pray *together*, “but rather they were coming together in order to pray” (J. Mejia, cited in Waldenfels 1989, 26). Fortunately, such casuistry is too difficult to reach the public at large and thus the symbolic power of the event did not suffer any diminution. The Assisi texts can be found in Waldenfels 1987.

2 For that reason on January 24, 2002, an interreligious assembly met once again for prayer in Assisi. Rather than succumbing to the psychological atmosphere set off by the events of September 11, 2001, this gathering explicitly invoked the spirit of Assisi in 1986.

munities. On the other hand, however, the same religions could play a decisive role in the resolution of these problems as well, and offer active assistance in overcoming conflicts in ways that are both just and peaceful. They could move us to tackle the challenges of the contemporary world and of our common future with imagination, creativity, and above all with confidence. Since the early beginnings of the human race religions have been able to awaken, sustain and renew within their respective cultural realms an abiding awareness of the presence of a supreme transcendent reality. Religions have imparted meaning and purposefulness, and despite all their dark aspects have contributed to the best and highest achievements of human life. Might not the various religions prove able to make comparably beneficial contributions to our future life together within a worldwide community? – I am referring here to that cultural coexistence which will come to define not only globalized society in general but also, and increasingly, life *within* each individual society on the planet. This in turn will be wholly dependent upon the nature of religions' relationships to one another. In any event, what the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, wrote in his noteworthy and widely acknowledged response to the events of September 11 holds true: "If religion is not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem."<sup>3</sup>

## Interreligious Encounter and the Emergence of Pluralism

Just which of those two roles religions are to play in the future will be closely bound up with the way in which they apprehend and take stock of one another, the way in which they approach the teachings and practices of the others as well as how they deal with the fact that there *is* religious diversity at all: Is this diversity considered a regrettable evil ultimately to be overcome, or seen as an opportunity for reciprocal enrichment and common spiritual growth? Ultimately decisive however will be the question of how each religion will come to view its own place within the context of such diversity. And all this in turn will be shaped by how well and how deeply the religions (more precisely: their respective adherents) know and understand one another. It is here that we can recognize the significance of those interreligious encounters which became so widespread in the twentieth century.

An example of such recognition can already be seen at the first Parliament of the World's Religions, convened in Chicago in 1893, in conjunction with the World Exposition.<sup>4</sup> One of the most impressive speeches was given by the renowned Neo-Hindu Vivekananda. Friedrich Heiler, the German scholar of religions, reported the following reaction: "...as Vivekananda left the lecture hall a listener said

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Sacks 2003, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. Seager 1993.

spontaneously: "This man a heathen?! And we're sending missionaries to his people. It would be better if they were to send missionaries to us!"<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, for the first time in his life, this Christian had encountered an authentic Hindu and been confronted with Hindu spirituality. His spontaneous remark gives expression to the insight that Christians must change their ways of thinking and acting if there are people of the caliber of Vivekananda among the supposed "heathens" that are to be evangelized. Vivekananda himself perceived that an encounter among the world religions should elicit such reactions on *all* sides. When he once again took the podium at the final session of the World Parliament, he closed with the words:

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possession of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."<sup>6</sup>

Nowadays interreligious conferences of global scope are no longer a rarity. One hundred years later a second Parliament of the World's Religions met in Chicago and formulated the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic."<sup>7</sup> In this important document the signatory representatives of the various religions reconfirmed the conviction that there is significant agreement among the different religious traditions as to fundamental ethical values, norms, and attitudes. Not only did they commit themselves to working together to implement this global ethic, they also pledged to strive for "better mutual understanding." This procedure was further strengthened in the follow-up meetings held in Capetown in 1999 and Barcelona in 2004. There, all religious institutions and their representatives were called upon to promote an attitude of "respect and mutual welcome" with respect to each other and "to strengthen the search for those shared ethical and spiritual values and principles that can enable religious and spiritual communities to engage creatively with each other and with the world."<sup>8</sup>

Here one could list a goodly number of further international and interreligious organizations that have dedicated themselves to the peaceful coexistence of all peoples as well as to an improved understanding among the religions—for example, the World Conference of Religions for Peace, the World Congress of Faiths, the Temple of Understanding, Religions United, *et al.*<sup>9</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, com-

5 Heiler 1967, 36.

6 Vivekananda 1994, vol. I, 24.

7 For the text of this Declaration and for the story of its origins, see Küng, Kuschel 1996.

8 Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions 1999, 18.

9 For an overview of interreligious organizations, see Böhle 2001.

munal inter-faith councils have since sprung up in any number of cities and larger towns—and their numbers continue to rise.

The English industrial city of Birmingham presents a particularly evolved example of this within Europe, having been shaped by enormous cultural and religious diversity for many years. An “Inter-Faith Council for Birmingham” has been in operation since 1975.<sup>10</sup> John Hick, a British professor of the philosophy of religion and by then an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of England, was decisively involved in setting up the Council, and played a crucial role in a number of other interreligious activities as well.<sup>11</sup> In 1967, after holding teaching positions in England and the U.S. (Cambridge, Cornell and Princeton), Hick was appointed to the H.G. Wood Chair in the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham, a position he held until 1982 when he became Danforth Professor at the University of Claremont, California. Since his retirement in 1992, Hick once again lives in Birmingham. At the beginning of his career Hick’s views on theology and philosophy had been quite evangelical and conservative but his early encounter with the religious diversity of Birmingham led him to a radical rethinking, which he himself describes in the following words:

... I was drawn into the work which is variously called ‘race relations’ and ‘community relations’<sup>12</sup>, and soon had friends and colleagues in all these non-Christian religious communities as well as in the large black community from the Caribbean. And occasionally attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and *gurdwara*, it was evident that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church—namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man. I could see that the Sikh faith, for instance, is to the devout Sikh what the Christian faith is to the sincere Christian; but that each faith is, naturally enough, perceived by its adherents as being unique and absolute. Visits to India and Sri Lanka, amounting together to nearly a year, mainly to study Hinduism and Buddhism, further revealed something of the immense spiritual depth and power of these two oriental religions. Without ever being tempted to become either a Hindu or a Buddhist I could see that within these ancient traditions men and women are savingly related to the Eternal Reality from which we all live.<sup>13</sup>

10 On the interreligious situation in Birmingham, cp. Ustorf 2005 and Conway 1996.

11 In his autobiography, Hick reports more extensively on his involvement in Birmingham, particularly with AFFOR (“All Faiths for One Race”), Hick 2002, 159-192.

12 Here, Hick alludes particularly to his participation in multi-religious campaigns against racism and fascism. His political writings, which were an integral part of this participation, are unfortunately hardly known. Yet just how seriously his opponents took his involvement can be seen in the death threat he received (cp. Hick 2002, 190) as a result of his pamphlet against the racism of the British National Front (Hick 1977b), and his pamphlet against the racism of the then South African government (Hick 1980b) promptly led to his blacklisting (cp. Hick 2002, 246).

13 Hick 1982, 5.

Soon Hick began to reflect on the latent consequences of his new experiences for a theology of religions and to develop the results in a series of publications.<sup>14</sup> In so doing he also drew upon the experiences and reflections of others who had reached similar conclusions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a scholar of Middle Eastern and Oriental Studies and the History of Religions, and a Reformed theologian, had a particularly strong influence on Hick. Smith and Hick in turn attracted other theologians, for example the U.S. Catholic academics Paul Knitter and Leonard Swidler. 1986 marked a watershed: A group of theologians met together with a number of critics at a conference in Claremont in order to formulate and propagate a new *theology of religions*, which had been known for several years as “religious pluralism” or “pluralist theology of religions.”<sup>15</sup> In retrospect, proponents as well as critics of religious pluralism came to refer to this conference as the “Rubicon Conference,” for it was the “Rubicon” of *Christian absolutism* that was here being crossed. In its place, these scholars suggested a fundamental equality of the major religious traditions as spaces of uniquely distinct but no less genuine forms of *revelation/experience* of the divine reality and as equally valid paths of salvation.

One year later, Hick and Knitter published the pro-pluralism papers of the Rubicon Conference in a collection entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*.<sup>16</sup> At the same time (1986-87) John Hick received a special honor in the field of the philosophy of religion: the invitation to hold the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. Hick used this opportunity to set forth his approach to a pluralist theology of religions in a philosophically secured form. These lectures were later turned into the book, *An Interpretation of Religion*, honored in 1991 with the renowned Grawemeyer Award and since then translated into a number of languages.<sup>17</sup>

At this point the critics of Hick’s position became quite vocal. In 1990, a group which included several of the critics who participated in the Rubicon Conference published a response under the title: *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*,<sup>18</sup> edited by Hick’s former student, Gavin D’Costa. Since then, the dispute between the advocates and opponents of a pluralist theology of religions has by no means abated. In the German-speaking context, religious pluralism was the object of intense controversy at the 1994 annual conference of Roman-Catholic systematic theologians.<sup>19</sup> In a widely publicized speech in 1996, Josef

14 Particularly noteworthy among Hick’s publications on the Theology of Religions from the first Birmingham period are: Hick 1973, Hick 1980a, as well as two volumes he edited: Hick 1977a and Hick 1974. For a summary review of Hick’s works, see Schmidt-Leukel 2001b.

15 Cp. Race 1983, Hick 1983b.

16 Hick, Knitter 1987.

17 Cp. Hick 1989.

18 D’Costa 1990.

19 Published in Schwager 1996. Beyond this, in the German-speaking context it is principally the following monographs and discussion volumes that should be noted: Bernhardt 1990, Bernhardt 1991, von Brück, Werbick 1993, Peter 1996, Schmidt-Leukel 1997, Schwandt 1998, Breid 1999, *Die Theologie der Religionen in der Diskussion* 2000, Müller, Serretti 2001, Hüt-

Cardinal Ratzinger identified the pluralist theology of religions as one of the greatest theological challenges of the present day.<sup>20</sup> That same year the *International Theological Commission*—the advisory committee of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—published an extensive document on the theology of religions, a document consisting for the most part of a critical confrontation with the pluralist position.<sup>21</sup> The Roman Catholic Church’s most adamant rejection of religious pluralism (at least for the present) was set out in the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 2000.<sup>22</sup> “(T)o consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her” (No. 21)—clearly the pluralist position—is sharply denounced in this document.

Reactions to *Dominus Iesus* were extremely mixed. In the German-speaking context, the most vociferous protest to *Dominus Iesus* arose in response to a few anti-ecumenical remarks,<sup>23</sup> whereas its statements concerning theology of religions often met with agreement—among Protestants as well as Catholics.<sup>24</sup> At the global level, alongside some predictable agreement on the one hand and some radical dissension (Leonardo Boff, for example, and Aloysius Pieris) on the other, the responses were on the whole reserved or, at the most, cautiously critical.<sup>25</sup> The publication of *Dominus Iesus* was accompanied both before and after by a battery of sanctions and censorial measures directed against Roman-Catholic advocates of a pluralist approach.<sup>26</sup> Such measures significantly narrowed the possibilities for a free and unhindered discussion even within academic contexts—to the extent that university theological departments are subject to control by the Roman Catholic Church (as is the case primarily but by no means exclusively in the German-speaking countries). Thus it is difficult to gain a clear picture of the degree to which Roman Catholic theologians accept a pluralist theology of religions at the present time.

tenhoff 2001. Particularly noteworthy German works specifically on John Hick’s philosophy of religion and Theology of Religions include: Gerth 1997, Joswowitz-Schwellenbach 2000, Heller 2001, Koziel 2001. Gerhard Gäde’s work unfortunately suffers from numerous misunderstandings and erroneous renderings of Hick’s thoughts (see my extensive discussion of this book in Schmidt-Leukel 1998b). For further bibliographic references to a pluralist theology of religions see chapter 6.

20 Ratzinger 1996; on this, see also Hick’s response in Hick 1998.

21 International Theological Commission 1996.

22 The German and Latin texts of *Dominus Iesus*, along with some supportive statements as well as the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith’s statement as to the measures taken against the Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis can be found in Müller 2003.

23 Cp. Rainer 2001.

24 In some ways the document issued by the theological commission of the Protestant churches in Germany (“Kammer für Theologie der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland”) *Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen* (EKD Texte 77) presents a kind of German-Protestant counterpart to *Dominus Iesus*.

25 With regard to Asian responses see Chia 2003, 55-107.

26 Cp. the reports by John Allen in the *National Catholic Reporter* (“Doubts about Dialogue,” 27.8.1999, and “Perils of Pluralism,” 15.9.2000).

The reactions among other churches or ecclesial organizations to the idea of religious pluralism were generally milder but also considerably less specific. However, the closing declaration of the 1990 Baar consultation convened by the World Council of Churches (hereafter: WCC) constitutes something of an exception.<sup>27</sup> This document displays a cautious but unmistakable opening for a pluralist understanding of religions. So, for example, we read there:

We see the plurality of religious traditions as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, the document views the plurality of religions not as “an obstacle to be overcome, but rather as an opportunity for deepening our encounter with God and with our neighbours...”<sup>29</sup> Yet afterwards, even within the WCC, the Baar declaration did not yield any noteworthy consequences, and the WCC’s *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions* (2003) returns to the nebulous position which Hans Küng had characterized as “ambiguous” more than twenty years previously, rightly attributing such indecisiveness to the conflict of positions among the WCC’s member churches.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, advocates of a pluralist position took a significant step forwards in Birmingham, September 2003, as they gathered for an interreligious conference to discuss the possibility of arriving at a pluralist understanding of religions *from within* the various religious traditions themselves. For if the pluralist conviction is correct in its claim that humanity’s major religious traditions refer to an ultimate transcendent reality in ways which are indeed different and yet in principle equally valid, then it must be possible for each particular religious tradition to express this claim in its own specific way and on the basis of its own presuppositions. This then means that there should be a pluralist theology of religions expressible *as* a Jewish, or Christian, or Islamic, or Hindu, or Buddhist<sup>31</sup> theology.<sup>32</sup>

27 “Religious Plurality. Theological Perspectives and Affirmations,” in *Current Dialogue* 19 (1991) 47-51.

28 Ibid, 48.

29 Ibid. 49.

30 Küng, Ess, Stietenron, Bechert 1984, 53.

31 With regard to Buddhism the term “theology” is, of course, to be understood in a broader sense, much in the way the term is used by the Buddhist authors in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, (Jackson, Makransky 2000), that is in the sense of a critical and academic type of referring to one’s own religious tradition, in order to relate it freshly and authentically to today’s world, (cp. *ibid.*, p. IX).

32 A sampling of the contributions to this symposium appears in P. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, Maryknoll 2005.

## An Outline of the Argument

With this in mind, the present book aims at a delineation of the fundamental characteristics and advantages of a theology of religions which would be both pluralist and at the same time Christian. My argument unfolds in three major parts. In *Part One*, I explain why I believe a Christian and pluralist theology of religions is necessary—in other words, I set forth the problems a theology of religions needs to address, and lay out the approaches which are available for resolving these problems. All this will be examined in detail later, but for now let us simply sketch out these approaches. First to be considered is the *exclusivist* position, which insists that it is Christianity alone among all the religions that witnesses to and mediates a salvific knowledge of God; secondly, there is the *inclusivist* position, which maintains that although fragmentary and embryonic forms of salvation and revelation can indeed be discerned in other religions, alone in Christianity are salvation and revelation to be encountered in a form that is uniquely superior to all others; and lastly we come to the third approach: the *pluralist* position, according to which salvation and knowledge of the reality designated by Christianity with the word “God” is witnessed to and mediated by various religions in diverse but equally valid ways, such that no religion is uniquely superior to all the others.

Now there are to be sure a number of variations upon these three basic positions (as will be seen in later chapters) but there are no other *basic options* left from which to develop a Christian theology of religions. Thus a theology of religions must reflect upon, carefully evaluate and choose from among these three options, taking into consideration as well their respective theological consequences, so as to arrive at a choice grounded in sound and cogent argumentation.

During the course of *Part One* all three options will be considered, and I shall present arguments which, I believe, demonstrate that the exclusivist and inclusivist positions are both deficient—although the inclusivist option does indeed represent an advancement over the exclusivist option that should not be underestimated. It will be vital to realize that a pluralist theology of religions does not at all negate or abandon the progress represented by the inclusivist position; on the contrary, this progress is developed yet further. This is to say that inclusivism will be freed, as it were, from its exclusivist remnants—specifically: freed from Christianity’s claim of the exclusive or sole superiority of revelation in Jesus Christ.

Of course serious objections have also been advanced against the pluralist position. Is this position *philosophically* consistent, i.e., is it logically coherent or does it suffer from insurmountable inner contradictions? And we must ask too whether religious pluralism can honestly be considered as a *Christian* theological position, as the present book claims. We must take up the question as to whether such pluralism is not grounded in conditions that are ultimately incompatible with central Christian beliefs. In other words, is a pluralist theology of religions *theologically* consistent?

Now whether or not religious pluralism can be seriously considered as a possible theological option at all depends on how convincing the answers to these questions are found to be. These concerns are pursued in *Part Two*, where I demonstrate that a pluralist theology of religions can indeed hold up to scrutiny, albeit only under quite specific philosophical and theological presuppositions, which are developed in the course of *Part Two*. The first and most fundamental presupposition concerns the understanding of God as a transcendent reality necessarily exceeding all human comprehension and speech. What then follows takes up the problem of why and in what sense we both can and must speak of this transcendent reality, despite its inconceivability and ineffability. Key to the understanding of religious discourse as here expounded is the link between revelation and experience. At its core lies a conception of revelation understood not as a divine communication of propositional truths but rather as the self-disclosure of divine reality within the many and diverse forms of human experience. Such an understanding of revelation, coupled with an unequivocal acknowledgement of God's transcendence, clears the way for a theological hermeneutic open to a coherent and consistent pluralist reading of the incongruent and even seemingly contradictory varieties of religious speech. The next task will then be to clarify the connection between such an understanding of revelation and religious experience on the one hand, and the salvific function of the religions on the other. In what sense, and under what conditions can religions be considered as paths of salvation—indeed, as possibly equally valid paths of salvation? The answers to these questions lead directly into the field of Christology, which is to say, into the question of how Jesus Christ can be spoken of as revealer, as mediator of salvation, and as incarnation of the Divine. My proposal will, I believe, preserve a justifiable and sustainable understanding of these claims while being at the same time compatible with a pluralist theology of religions.

Those who find themselves in fundamental agreement with the presuppositions of a Christian and pluralist theology of religions as set out in *Part Two*, and also find themselves agreeing with the critique of the alternative options as presented in *Part One*, will come to consider a pluralist theology of religions as both possible and indeed advisable. Yet can such a theology of religions also find its confirmation in real-world encounters with other religions? What can we learn from both past and present relations between Christianity on the one hand, and Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism on the other? In *Part Three* I hope to show that here too—in the delicate area of interfaith relations—a pluralist approach seems to bear much promise. Now to be sure, the encounter and dialogue with these religions constitutes a vast and to date still largely unexplored terrain; thus my statements on these issues will necessarily remain provisional and fragmentary. Yet through select examples I will demonstrate that despite a history heavily burdened and stamped by exclusivism, inclusivist approaches have indeed managed to open up new perspectives and precisely these perspectives are now further developed via pluralist approaches.

By way of conclusion I will suggest a few possible steps into the future—suggestions which, however, are intended neither as a contribution to some sort of theo-

logical futurology nor as an exercise in prognostic speculation. Their aim instead will be to highlight those areas where a theology of religions which will be both Christian and pluralist can be recognized as unquestionably relevant for the future. In this regard we will above all need to inquire into the consequences of such a theology for Christianity's practical relations with non-Christian religious communities. And more: We will need to carefully consider the kind of contribution this theology might make to a gradually emerging "world theology" which draws upon several religious traditions and what significance it will have for the further development of an interreligious spirituality as it is increasingly taking shape among us.

**Part I:**  
**The Need for a Christian and  
Pluralist Theology of Religions**

