

Post-Pluralism Through the Lens of Post-Modernity

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Abstract

This article briefly describes the state of Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, arguing that Jacques Dupuis's and S. Mark Heim's Trinitarian approaches would benefit greatly from inhabiting the self-consciousness generated by post-modernity. In particular, understanding absolute claims as constructed within discourse gives rise to humility—surely the best attitude for dialogue with the religious other. In the wake of pluralism's incoherence, what we need to do is not merely give our inclusivisms a new twist, but re-frame them within post-modernity's refusal to think in dual categories. When we overcome what seems to be our natural tendency to think in terms of either/or, presence/absence, and value/devalued, we become open to the experience of the religious other on her own terms. She then becomes not other, but neighbor.

While there is work being done by theologians in the space of post-modernity – the era in which we operate with suspicion and skepticism about the objective or absolute nature of our truth claims – such theologians frequently fail to acknowledge that we live in another “post-” era: post-pluralism. The post-pluralist world is that created by the demise of the pluralist hypothesis and the problems facing authors who follow in its wake. Pluralism claimed to represent all the religions by suggesting the existence of a religious object behind “God,” “Yahweh,” “Allah,” “Brahman” and so forth, but pluralism is now seen to *misrepresent* the religions by positing a religious object which is other than what Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists take themselves to be worshipping or in relationship with. Worse, pluralism claimed to affirm the truth of multiple religions, but instead affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview—the one beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Invariably, authors following in pluralism's wake have retreated into forms of inclusivism, the position which maintains the truth and superiority of one's own beliefs but which holds that others are in relationship with one's own religious object and will attain the specified religious end. These authors always give inclusivism a creative twist in an attempt to go beyond inclusivism's limitations of taking the non-Christian to be doing other than what she takes herself to be doing, and claiming superiority both in terms of Christian revelation and, sometimes, the salvation status of Christians over members of other traditions. Each of these new inclusivist positions has proven highly unsatisfactory. Yet, just as post-modern theologians have failed to take account of the post-pluralist conversation, post-pluralist theologians have failed to make use of post-modernity. This is exactly what authors like Jacques Dupuis¹ and S. Mark Heim² need in order to unproblematically put forth some form of the inclusivist position. This article will briefly describe the problems which these post-pluralist theologies face, and argue that any attempt at a new inclusivism in the post-pluralist world needs to make use of the category of post-modernity—applying the attitude of suspicion to our supposedly

universal, absolute and exclusionary truth claims. Inter-religious dialogue as engaged in by Christians ought to exploit the new, non-binary ways of thinking created by this rupture in our categories of thought – ways of thinking which seek to overcome the world seen in dualities like presence/absence, same/different and value/devalued. In a non-dual world, that which is different may augment rather than threaten our unitary religious narrative.

Though at first Jacques Dupuis's *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* and S. Mark Heim's *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* look like very different projects, they are methodologically very similar. Both retreat—or are on their way to retreating—into a Christian inclusivism. Both use a person of the Trinity to make their escape from charges of self-superiority, including non-Christians in God's saving plan through some aspect of God's nature. Dupuis uses the Holy Spirit yet prioritizes the pre-incarnation Trinity by ultimately separating the logos³ from the person of Jesus. Heim uses the Holy Spirit as well, to put forth the novel thesis that non-Christians get the ends that they desire because of the relational nature of the Trinity. Yet Heim is then faced with normativizing⁴ the Christian end instead of the Christian religion.

Such is the state of Christian theology of religions today. Riding the tension between the desire and necessity of affirming the value of the religious other and her teachings and the need to affirm what we believe to the exclusion of what seems incommensurate, we search for features in our own tradition which seem to open the possibility of the real contribution of non-Christian religions.

The search is futile as long as we inhabit the modernist, dichotomous discourse in which what is known is known “binarily” in terms of presence and absence. Just as we think of an object as either existing fully or not existing at all, we think that if God is present in one tradition, God cannot be present in other traditions. To give an example, an object either exists in full or doesn't. As open as Christianity's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is to its presence in multiple religious traditions, Dupuis is faced with either dispensing with the necessity of Christ or claiming the rightness of his own metaphysics. Similarly, Heim cannot help but rank the fullness of multiple religious ends allowed for by the Trinity, because union with God as conceived of by Christians is still the best reflection of that for which we were created. In a binary, dichotomous metaphysic, what is other must always be identified as a lack.

The limitations of inclusivism are real, but due not to inclusivism itself but the dualistic conversation it inhabits in which God is either fully present or fully absent. Inclusivism does make possible the positive valuation of the religious other and her tradition, but always through recourse to the truth of our own beliefs to avoid the logical incoherence of pluralism. The Jew or Hindu, for instance, attains salvation because her beliefs are monotheistic like ours, or she follows the ethical mandate not to kill, which is part of our ten commandments.⁵ The person who belongs to a religion other than our own, and that religion itself, may have value, but only insofar as she and it mirror our own beliefs and/or ways of life. What inclusivisms in a post-pluralist world need is not a doctrine-infused twist within the dualist nature of modernist “knowing.” This move will always result in recreating the limitations of inclusivism that we are frustrated with. Instead, putting forth the inclusivist position requires the new, self-critical attitude towards speech and knowledge, which we get from postmodernity.

By adopting a post-modern, deconstructionist hermeneutic in which we are self-critical and suspicious of claims to universality and objectivity, we consciously reject our intellectual dualist heritage. We understand our Western and especially Christian narrative for what it is: a worldview created in what *appears* to be the only way of thinking – thinking in categories of either/or, presence/absence and value/devalued. This way of thinking appeared so natural, so necessary, that we took it to be the way things really are. Yet when we admit even the possibility of a non-binary universe, where shades of existence can take form, we immediately see that this dual way of approaching the world is just that: a way of approaching the world. If we dispense with this constructed understanding of our thought, we are then free to enter into non-binary discourse. The “problem” of the religious other may then be seen for what it is, namely, the result of our dichotomous structures of thought, not the way the world necessarily is.

Instead of tackling the project of overcoming difference, in post-modernity we are now free to start with our experience of our religious neighbor as an absolute demand for ethical treatment. Given her witness of an ethically engaged life, participation in ritual and witness to spiritual experience, we may now come to abide by the subject’s claim on us as “person” rather than enslave ourselves to binary oppositions in which the other must, always and everywhere, serve in the role of absence to our presence. The rightness of our metaphysics and ways of life no longer has to signify the wrongness of what is different and the consequent devaluation of persons who believe differently than we do.

In the face of a subjective point of view, which gives rise to claims which appear different than our own, however, we must still speak. Our differences continue to appear real, but this no longer necessitates the positing of absolute or semi-absolute judgments. Instead, we may, and must, engage in the disruption that the demand of our neighbor as person poses to our unitary narrative. As soon as we understand her as a human being whose value is absolute, the value of any worldview that claims universal authority but excludes the other comes into question. Far from prioritizing our philosophical structures, we may admit their destabilization by the presence of she who was thought to embody absence.

For those of us who are Christians—or indeed persons committed to any religious system—we still need to speak. Our vision of the world claims us and demands a claim on others. Yet, in asserting our beliefs, we must now be self-scrutinizing and tentative, and hold them alongside and in tension with the critiques of post-structuralism and post-modernity. We may continue to espouse inclusivism, but only with the consciousness that our binary systems are a product of the logocentric Western mind, a mind that is searching for meaning in a transcendent word, put in opposition to the world. We then re-inscribe the logic of opposition in our knowledge of difference. Inclusivism then becomes our most consistent option, but only as a temporary measure in our struggle to identify the fissures in our homogeneous thought.

In the end, post-modernism functions much as the eschaton⁶ does in our Christian thought. It is a hoped for, yet much feared, development in history, which seeks to overcome our particularity and unjust, exclusionary power structures. It seeks to render visible fissures and gaps and entire segments of the world made invisible by exclusion. In the face of these visions, anything we say must be acknowledged as partial, and as serving a

finite, fallen agenda. If we function in the space of post-modernity, putting forth inclusivism as only a momentary measure, we may in reality better serve the coming of God's kingdom, which we take, in a cautious way, as our absolute goal.

Notes

¹ Jacques Dupuis is a Belgian Jesuit priest who worked for years in India, and for whom the question of whether salvation is necessarily mediated by Jesus Christ and possibly the Church necessarily arose from his experience of religious multiplicity. See his *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

² See S. Mark Heim's *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* which is an ingenious use of the relational nature of the Christian Trinity as the very basis for persons obtaining multiple religious ends—Nirvana, Moksha, union with Allah etc.

³ The *logos* in Christian theology simply means the person of the Trinity who becomes incarnate. Yet it is important to ensure the self-identity of the *logos* and Jesus, otherwise there would be four persons of the Trinity! The point is that the way God exists before God incarnates God's self is one with the way God exists during and after the incarnation. The *logos* is the way to speak of the person of Jesus before the incarnation. For those readers who are unfamiliar with Christian teachings on the Trinity and for whom the concept seems absurd, it may be especially helpful to start with recent scholarship which points out that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about number, but about God's relationality. To be God is to be-in-relation. Teachings about the Trinity are attempts to articulate this relational understanding of the very being of God. This is the overarching point made throughout Catherine Mowry Lacugna's groundbreaking book *God For Us*. Many Christians would do well to study the significance of Trinitarian theology as well, for the Trinity has—for some—come to signify three persons in the sense of three identities. This was never what was intended by the Greek Fathers.

⁴ To clarify, when we "normativize" something, we make it absolute. We give it priority, special status or unique relevance. We make it the standard for judging things similar in category.

⁵ I am using the language "our ten commandments" writing as a Christian, but of course the ten commandments were given to the Israelites long before one might have suggested they were Christian. Even the understanding of Christianity as a descendent of Judaism could not have arisen without the beginning of the sensibility that "we versus them" thinking is problematic. The point is simply that inclusivism holds that members of traditions which differ from one's own are in relation to one's own religious object (in this case God) and may attain the religious end specified by one's own tradition, and that this occurs because of overlap between the systems—either in terms of beliefs or ethics.

⁶ In Christianity, *eschaton* means the second coming of Jesus and “the end of the world as we know it” — a phrase which R.E.M. made a part of our cultural landscape whether one knew it to be of Christian significance or not.

Bibliography

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