
In this age of ecumenism we hear of countless "dialogues" among the members of various religious traditions: Protestant with Catholic; Christian with Jew; Judaeo-Christian with Muslim; Western with Oriental. In the spirit of Vatican II, these conversations aim at a deeper sharing of values, a better understanding of diverse perspectives — and collaboration in promoting the fundamental human and religious values of justice and peace. But is it possible to carry ecumenism further? That is, can we find a common theological ground upon which all these diverse religious traditions could agree? Leonard Swidler, editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies and professor (of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue) at Temple University, attempted precisely this in convoking a conference, jointly sponsored by the Journal and the University, on October 17-19, 1984.

The conference proceedings, published in edited form in the book under review, consisted of: a "Preconference Paper" by Swidler, distributed to all the participants prior to the meeting; four major lectures (two by Protestants: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Presbyterian, and John J. Cobb, Jr., a Methodist; and two by Catholics; Raimundo Panikkar — identified as "Catholic/Hindu/Buddhist" in the biographical section on p. 255! — and Hans Küng); and twelve "responses" to various lectures, by respondents from virtually all of the world’s major religions. For reasons unexplained, the only response missing in this printed version is that of the Shiite Muslim participant, Hossein Nasr.
The aim of the conference is breathtaking in its ambition. As expressed by Swidler in his pre-conference paper ("Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for all Systematic Reflection Today"), it was to work toward the formulation of an "ecumenical esperanto" (p. 20), a common language in which the diverse traditions could communicate meaningfully at the "cognitive" (pp. 16, 18) level. This seems a daunting challenge. And the conference papers which it elicited make even clearer how daunting it was — and is. Before considering them, however, we might note that Swidler set for the conference an even more ambitious goal: the word "interideological" in his title indicates that he hoped to encompass not only the world's great religions but also ideologies such as Marxism, Feminism, Black Power and Liberationism. This latter goal, however, is barely adverted to in the conference papers. The participants, it seems, had difficulty enough finding a common ground, an ecumenical esperanto, for the Religious traditions!

THE MAJOR PAPERS

Much of the conference, in fact, focussed on whether Swidler's goal is even attainable. Wilfred Cantwell Smith ("Theology and the World's Religious History," pp. 51-72), the first speaker, turns out to be the most optimistic. While he sees the task as more difficult than does Swidler, he feels it can be done by proposing "a new basis for theological thinking" (p. 51). Though, as he notes, his proposal is actually more traditional than "more recent and now accepted" modes of doing theology. What is it? He claims "the history of religion is the one true basis for theology" (p. 55; cf. p. 57). In the spirit of recent thinkers like Thomas Kuhn and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom he cites, Smith believes that an historical approach to religion and theology can contextualize the various religious traditions and thereby lead (with much hard work, yet to be done) to a "universal theology of religion."

While Smith's paper is programmatic, it is at least optimistic about the theme of the conference. By contrast, in "Toward a Christocentric Catholic Theology" (pp. 86-100), John J. Cobb, Jr., objects even to the title ("ways" rather than "religion," p. 87; and "universal theology" unclear and too pretentious, p. 88). He says that "the pretense to stand beyond all traditions and build
neutrally out of them is a delusion’’ (p. 88). But he does believe that a genuinely Christocentric theology can be truly ‘‘catholic,’’ in the sense of universal, and as such will accomplish much of what is sought by those who propose a ‘‘universal theology of religion.’’ Cobb states that he is not claiming that Christocentrism is the only way to catholicity. But, as might be expected, his proposal leads his commentators to suggest that (Zalman Schachter, Jewish) Jesus was really a Nazarene ‘‘rebbé,’’ and that (Kenneth Inada, Buddhist) Buddhacentrism would do quite as well, perhaps better.

Just as the reader begins to wonder whether the discussion will ever come into focus, Raimundo Panikkar (‘‘A Tale of Two Theologies,’’ pp. 118-53) argues that the whole thrust towards universalization is characteristically Western, reflecting a ‘‘will to power’’ — in this case intellectual power (pp. 120-22; cf. pp. 124, 132, 135). He proposes three points as ‘‘The Alternative’’ to the conference theme (p. 137): we must first put our own house in order, bringing not only intellectual but personal experiential knowledge to the quest; secondly, we must open ourselves in dialogue to the other — not comparing, which presupposes we already have a common ground, but rather learning from each other; and finally, we must rely on the overall thrust of human experience, must have ‘‘a basic ‘belief’ in the human project, or rather in the worthwhile collaboration of all humans in the overall adventure of being’’ (p. 143). Ironically, two of his commentators, Charles Wei-Hsun Fu (Taoist/Buddhist) and Bibhuti S. Yadav (Hindu/Buddhist) see Panikkar’s own paper as itself too Western! The latter says that P. submits non-Western religions to the very ‘‘anthropomorphic conformity’’ he criticizes, though having shifted over ‘‘from rational to spiritual anthropomorphism’’ (p. 183).

Hans Küng’s paper seems to ignore the whole debate about the possibility of an ecumenical esperanto. It is entitled ‘‘Christianity and World Religions! Dialogue with Islam’’ (pp. 192-204). But, despite the title, it deals entirely with the encounter between Christianity and Islam, posing and answering 8 questions about Christ and Muhammad, the Bible and the Qur’ān, Christians and Muslims today. Küng’s paper is also the most explicitly Christian of the four (even more so than Cobb’s) — and one of the commentators, the Sunni Muslim Khalid Duran, turns the tables by arguing
that Islam’s “original sin,” from which Muslims must get free today, is the Qur’ān’s entrapment in the legalism which Muhammad derived from the Bible. He also argues that Küng is a neophyte to dialogue with Islam, and that his “new findings” are not really new. Paul Knitter, listed as a Catholic participant, critiques Küng as still being too Christian (a charge that Rome might be surprised to hear). That is, he says that Küng’s problem is the unique status that he still assigns to Jesus (p. 227). And he asks Küng (and Cobb) “to step across the Rubicon” to a more pluralistic, Theocentric rather than Christocentric model.

THE OVERALL PICTURE THAT EMERGED

The book concludes (pp. 231-50) with an additional lecture of Küng, delivered in Tübingen in the summer of 1985: “What is True Religion? Toward an Ecumenical Criteriology.” While Swidler says that it presents Küng’s later reflections on the conference discussions, it does not refer to the other speakers nor (at least explicitly) to the criticisms raised against his earlier presentation. It seems unfair to include it here, when the other participants had no chance to respond to it — and it does to some degree destroy the dialogical unity of the book. We might note, however, that Küng restates more explicitly, and defends, his adoption of a specifically Christian criterion, the spirit of Jesus Christ — for the Christian dialoguist (pp. 245-46). Pace Knitter, it is difficult to see how any committed Christian could disagree with Küng here. Or how any committed Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, etc., could dispense with a comparable criterion.

But where does this leave the quest for an ecumenical esperanto, a universal theology of religion? Two women participants made especially helpful, though brief, comments here. Ellen Zabrack Charrny (Jewish), in “A Step Toward Ecumenical Esperanto” (pp. 218-23), generalized Küng’s specific Muslim-Christian question as follows: “How can non-Christians take seriously claims made by Christians about themselves?” She says this is a theological question “from below”; and the way to proceed is “by identifying threads of a common theological anthropology” in eight major traditions, from Hinduism to Marxism and feminism (she being one of the few speakers to advert to the word “interideo-
logical’’ in Swidler’s title). These threads are two: that all people “assess the human condition as problematic, and everyone in pain seeks relief’’; and “that relief from pain defined in multiple ways is available’’ (pp. 222-23).

This may seem a very modest conclusion to 225 pages of learned discussion. But it is down-to-earth, and might have been the ideal starting point (rather than a “universal theology of religion’’) for the conference. Moreover, it squares well with the “Afterword’’ (pp. 251-53) to the whole book by Kana Mitra, a Hindu participant who contributed an earlier critique of Smith’s paper. There she argued that historical evidence alone is not decisive in proving a universal belief in transcendence, since there do seem to be historical counter-instances (pp. 79-84). In the “Afterword’’ she summarizes what she learned from the whole conference as follows: “‘Toward a Universal Theology of Religion’ is an enterprise whose ultimate goal of universality can never be achieved, but nevertheless needs to be attempted, in seriousness and friendliness, for the sake of individual discipline as well as social cooperation and harmony.’’ She then points out how each of the papers reveals the impossibility of the enterprise (especially Cobb and Smith) but also the necessity of making the attempt (especially Küng), for reasons that are not only theoretical and scholarly but of “extreme practical importance’’ — as revealed by Panikkar’s Buddhist stress on “the relationality of everything.’’ She found the conference a challenging, frustrating but growing experience. And that well summarizes the experience of this reviewer too.