
**A BOOK
REVIEW:
SAMARTHA'S
ONE CHRIST –
MANY
RELIGIONS:
TOWARDS A
REVISED
CHRISTOLOGY**

*by
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The cry for inter-religious faiths and the call for a 'global community' have echoed throughout the annals of time. The initial sounds were made in the 18th century, by the classical theologians. Subsequent to this, the pitch has heightened and a number of present day theologians are setting the tone for renewed discussions on religious pluralism. One such theologian is S. J. Samartha, who, in his book, One Christ - many Religions, proposes the following thesis, "in a religiously plural world, a christology that is biblically sound, spiritually satisfying, theologically credible, and pastorally helpful is both necessary and possible—without making exclusive claims for Christianity, or passing negative judgments on the faiths of our neighbours."

This review presents a brief and critical evaluation of the particular work. I will seek to accomplish this by summarizing Samartha's main lines of argument and, secondly, by analyzing the propositions proffered.

The main purpose of the book One Christ - many Religions is to examine the new perceptions of religious pluralism in the contemporary global community and, at the same time, direct the reader's attention to a revised Christology. Naturally, as the title suggests, this revised Christology seeks to include all religions alongside Christianity while, at the same time, preserving the elements of each. The author believes that our present day scenario is appropriate for such an attempt, because culturally, historically, politically, spiritually and conceptually, trends are developing which pave the way for change. History is not the story of the Western world, but is becoming the reflection of the various peoples; the secular nature of the world demands that all religions pool together to spread news of the 'Transcendent'; exclusive claims by religions are becoming more

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inclusive; and perceptions concerning religious plurality are shifting from a missiological outlook to a theological one. The author uses several main arguments to illustrate these viewpoints, and the underlying biblical principles that undergird them are: love thy neighbour as thyself, judge not, and pursue justice and peace. The frame of reference is the Asian context and the audience is the Christian community.

In the opening phase of the book, the author gives a vivid description of an oppressed people kept in bondage by the colonial powers—a people whose desire is for a life of freedom, self-respect and human dignity. A people who were forced to accept other values as superior to their own. The author then introduces Christianity which is, in his estimation, closely aligned with colonialism. He states that Christianity is also oppressive because it refuses to recognize that people of other faiths live by their own cherished beliefs. This rejection he deems as a serious form of injustice. However, the author is happy to note that in recent times a fresh wind has been blowing. With the dismantling of colonialism and the meeting of Vatican II, new lines of communication concerning religious pluralism have opened up. The inclusion of world religions in theology and the launching of a study by the World Council of Churches, 'My Neighbour's Faith and Mine—Theological Discoveries through Inter-Faith Dialogue', are great indicators of the new trends in the perceptions of Religious Pluralism.

This leads into the second argument, the fact that we live in a global and plural community. 'Religious Pluralism is part of the larger plurality of races, peoples and cultures of social structures, economic systems and political patterns of languages and symbols, all of which are part of the total human heritage'. The Buddhists, Jews, Hindus and Muslims, all have contributions to make concerning who God is. The author calls for a sensitive understanding of all these faiths, which extends also to an acceptance of their beliefs. He states that for too long, Christians have been teachers rather than learners. As he considers Jews as victims of Christian missions, as Abraham Heschel observes :

... the mission of the Jews is a call to individual Jews to betray the fellowship, the dignity, the sacred history of their people.... we are Jews as we are men. The alternative to our existence as Jews is spiritual suicide, extinction. It is not a change into something else. Judaism has allies, no substitutes.

The other proposition, in light of the above, is the concept of religion as the identify of a community. The writer indicates that 'religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion. If religions are responses to the Mystery of Life, cultures are expressions of these

responses.' He states that culture encompasses the spiritual, material intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society. In this sense, religious pluralism becomes credible, for it is the inevitable response by a cosmopolitan community. For a religious community gives the people a sense of identity and belonging through shared faith, common tradition and continuing history. Therefore, the notion that one faith holds exclusive rights to religion for all peoples and cultures is doubtful and insincere.

Another attempt to buttress his case is the recognition that in this secular society, religions need to come together for the cause of bringing people to God. The task of a religious people is to draw attention to the mystery of transcendence, a centre of values beyond the individual religion. The 'Beyond in the midst', should not be confined to one particular expression of faith, 'For an exclusive claim weakens God's outreach to all humanity.'

Accordingly, the value of religious pluralism in the modern age cannot be overlooked, because it provides spiritual and cultural resources for the survival of different peoples; it is a guarantee against fascism and colonialism; the mystery of God is too profound to be exhausted by any one religion; and it provides a multiplicity of spiritual resources to tackle the problems faced globally.

An acceptance of religious pluralism will have several implications. One of the most obvious, as the writer points out, is the plurality of Scriptures and a hermeneutical revolution, for knowledge of God can be found in a multiscriptural context. Hence, the methods adapted to tap into this knowledge, whether through writings or individuals, should be culture oriented. For each culture and religion has a particular way of expressing and thinking about Truth, and these individual expressions should be regarded as valid and authoritative, like the Christian scriptures.

Another consequence is the stress of a theo-centric and revised Christology. This makes it possible to recognize the theological significance of other revelations and experiences of salvation. It allows for a quest in the meaning of Jesus Christ in which all religions can participate. The author guards us against thinking that such a mindset would lead to watered down theologies. On the contrary, it allows us to critically reflect on the immanence of God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, who works in the hearts and minds of individuals, leading them to new avenues of truth. Jesus Christ should be mixed with all other revelations of 'Christ', for a 'masala' (a mixture of spices) of theologies. Hence one no longer speaks of 'either /or' but 'both/and.'

This type of christological shift moves away from the 'helicopter

christology', and ushers in a 'bullock-cart christology'. In other words, there is a culture-centred christology which does not make a great deal of missiological noise (that people cannot hear) or even understand the Divine, but it echoes the sounds of the people—sounds they can interpret and relate to. It is a christology harboured in the heart of the peoples, because it touches them at their point of need and through this they are able to meet the Divine. A christology that is helicopter, mission oriented or foreign, cannot minister to neighbours of other faiths. It only proves to be a stumbling block. In other words, 'to believe that God is best defined by Christ, is not to believe that God is confined to Christ.'

To reject religious pluralism, on the other hand, can lead to four negative consequences: (1) the dichotomy and division of peoples into 'we' and 'they'; (2) makes cooperation among different religious communities difficult; (3) can lead to tensions and conflicts in society; and finally (4) it can raise serious theological questions. The author's concluding remarks can be summarized in the following statement: 'Plurality is the inescapable fact of history. To ignore it and behave as if it does not exist may amount to self-deception'. As long as they do not contradict the distinctively Christian concern for love and justice, manifest in the life and work of Jesus Christ, there is no reason to ignore the call to cooperate with neighbours of other faiths, in their efforts to procure a better and enhanced life.

The arguments advanced by the author mirror both strengths and weaknesses. I was impressed with the wide cross-section of material and references he employed to buttress his arguments. This breadth of scholarship aids in presenting a very interesting piece of work on religious pluralism. The references to the historical and colonial experience, cultural norms, socioeconomic and political considerations, as they relate to spiritual expressions, and the thwarted missiology of Christianity, convinced me to reconsider some of my own views formerly held concerning religious pluralism.

The use of analogies like the 'helicopter' versus 'bullock-cart christology', gives the exposition colour and life, instead of a dry-crust presentation. The style of writing was clear, though it tended to be repetitious. This clarity made reading and proper systematization of the points manageable. The Preface of the book contains a good summary of the contents of the presentation, by the author.

The inclusion of the biblical themes of 'love thy neighbour as thyself,' 'pursue peace and justice', and 'do not judge,' I deem as quite creative. It almost implies that if in the event one does not quite support the claims of the author, one should not neglect the principles of the Bible. The author seems to have prudently included these cherished Christian

values, so that in case the arguments lose face, the latent themes would still stand out in the minds of the Christians, as they pertain to religious pluralism.

Despite these strengths, there are some drawbacks with the author's propositions. I will discuss only the major weaknesses as I see them.

The first weakness I would like to mention is that of the frame of reference used by the author. The frame of reference as it regards religious pluralism is inadequate. The author seems to focus on the East/West relations, excluding other countries that make up this global community. Africa, the Caribbean, Australia and South America, are not even mentioned. How can one speak of Religious Pluralism and not even include these? One may say, well the book can only cover a certain amount of material. Yes, while this may be true, the author needs to acknowledge other continents, territories/latitudes.

Another weakness lies in the use of philosophical ideas to determine religious definitions. The author's use of Kantian concepts is seen in his definition of religion as being 'the substance of culture and culture the form of religion.' This has serious implications for the meaning of the Transcendence and Immanence of God. In addition, even though logically it seems much more sensible to define God culturally, this is not biblical. God has certain attributes for himself, and it is not the right of human kind to turn Him from a theistic being to a panentheistic entity. Although logically, in a pluralistic society, there should be plurality of religions, yet it does not follow that all should blindly accept the others as truth. One should account for falsity, and the book does not seem to account for this consideration. Truth becomes extremely relative and confusing.

The main weakness with this author's work is the use of the Procrustean bed. Like Tillich, he uses culture as the final lever and judge. Religion must fit into culture. Faith is a question seeking an answer, rather than an answer looking for a question. Faith then is not based on knowledge, but rather on experience. Also, the revision of Christology and its imposition on other religions are inadequate. Some religions do not have a concrete concept of Christ or even God. To use Christian concepts and align them with other religions do not do justice to the Christian claims, or that of the other faiths. The mixing of all religions into a 'masala', does not procure unity in diversity, but some other substance altogether; distasteful to both Christians and non-Christians.

Even though the author asked for objectivity in light of Religious Pluralism, he was somewhat subjective, because emotional citations were scattered in his exposition, especially as it related to his home-land,

India. The impression is left that the author was apologizing and rationalizing the inherent problems of India, and Hinduism. I believe that he should have been more honest in his rendering of the explanations of the confusion and conflict existent in Hinduism and Islam, and their encounters. On paper, religious pluralism seems possible. However, in real life situations, it is difficult to sustain. The book therefore seemed to be more idealistic than realistic.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can see that the author has indeed made a valuable case for religious pluralism. Some of his arguments are valid. But one must ask the question, Are they realistic and even possible? Nevertheless, as Christians, we should not throw out the baby with the bath water, but should engage our minds in critical dialogue, with other religions. Other religions may have worthwhile contributions to make to our understanding of reality and it would be folly to turn a deaf ear to their cries. Despite the fact that the truth has been revealed to us, we should not carry ourselves with arrogance and pride, but should try to meet other religions where they are at, beginning on some common ground. Since as a Christian community, our knowledge is still to some degree darkened, we should commit ourselves to sincere humility. That is, being open to change some of the traditional beliefs and practices we have held on to for so long, and reach to higher levels of understanding. We are to act as decibels that measure the worth of various sounds around us. In all of this though, the message of the Gospel should in no way be compromised, for it is the power of salvation to all who believe.

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