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## Coming Home after Dialogue

### Religious Pluralism and Identity

A Review of Arvind Sharma and Kathleen Dugan, eds., *A Dome of Many Colors: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity, and Unity*. Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999. Pp. 201. \$17.00 (Paper).

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[1] When the Parliament of World's Religions met in Chicago in 1993, a tandem conference on religious pluralism was convened. This book is a collection of essays drawn from that conference. Before reviewing some of those essays, a preliminary matter should be made abundantly clear: some prior engagement in inter-religious dialogue is probably a prerequisite to the reading of this book. Many of the chapters, as the subtitle indicates, are reflections on religious identity in light of inter-religious dialogue. The purpose of this book is not to justify dialogue, nor even, in any substantial measure, to engage in dialogue on specific points. Rather, the essays are an attempt to share some perspectives on what happens (or should happen) to religious identity in and after dialogue - though it must be said that the perspectives offered are thoroughly informed by the religious commitments of the various authors (e.g. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim), and so result in the possibility of a lively inter-religious exchange.

[2] The title of the book, while certainly catchy, raises two important issues for studies in pluralism. The first of these is whether the visual metaphor for knowledge does not prejudice our approach to the whole issue of pluralism and identity. The visual metaphor for knowledge is pervasive and, perhaps, inevitable in our discourse. But does it embody a certain position on the nature of knowledge which, in subtle but important ways, biases our

very consideration of the relations between religions? It may be time to devote some attention, and exercise some caution, concerning the possible effects of this kind of language on our discourse. How does epistemology, even when implicit, affect our approach to pluralism?

[3] The second issue calling for comment concerns the explanation of the title given in the editors' introduction. After considering a variety of models for understanding pluralism and identity - the melting-pot, the salad bowl, the stir-fry, the mosaic - the editors propose their own model, saying: "If it is an inescapable fact of life, illustrated by religious pluralism, that life is enriched by the various hues it offers, is it also not due to an inescapable human condition that 'Life, like a dome of many-colored glass / Stains the white radiance of eternity?'" (5). To my mind there is a logical problem here that is commonplace in essays dealing with pluralism and identity. If, in fact, the human condition is inescapable, then how is it possible to know that there is a white radiance of eternity? Must one not escape the allegedly inescapable human condition to *know* that the human condition stains the purity of eternity? "Transcendence" is often invoked to qualify or eliminate absolute claims in religions (at least, the strategy is often employed by Christian theologians). But the question must be answered: how does one come to know and speak of that which so transcends human thought and language? The transcendent must be known, somehow, to be transcendent, in order to justify the qualification of religious claims. But theologians who cite transcendence to qualify religious claims rarely, if ever, qualify their claim to know that the transcendent is transcendent. The logic of transcendence, especially how the warrant for speaking of it interacts with the limits it places on our religious discourse, must be worked out more clearly in studies of pluralism.

[4] Raimon Panikkar's contribution to the volume asks whether or not we *can* adopt a "pluralistic attitude" and maintain our religious identity, and whether or not we *must* adopt such an attitude in order to deal with the religiously plural situation of our day. The pluralistic attitude originates when a subject is faced with an objective plurality that cannot be reduced to unity. "Instead of getting stuck in the objective impasse, we examine whether the cause may not lie on our side, on the side of the knowing subject, ultimately in the very act of knowing and the nature of knowledge itself" (31). Panikkar maintains that, in the face of religious plurality, we ought to stop postulating the total intelligibility of the real, and instead grant that reality may not have a unified intelligibility. Such a move would, he thinks, have two effects. In the first place, he contends that this pluralistic attitude provides *the* intellectual basis for good relations between religions. Where religions are really incompatible, we need not think that one or the other must be wrong. Consequently, we can live in peace with one another. In the second place, he also contends that the pluralistic attitude does not abandon commitments, and therefore religious identity; it simply does not absolutize those commitments and that identity. As we must not postulate the total intelligibility of the real, so we must realize that the "*ab-solutus* would literally be invisible, inaudible, unspeakable, *solutus* from everything" (34). This position, he says, takes away the sting of absolutism on both sides (the exclusive and the relativistic), since we can both respect others and maintain our own truth claims.

[5] Is the total intelligibility of the real, however, a naive postulate that must be replaced with Panikkar's pluralistic attitude in order to have peaceful relations among religions? Syed

Hossein Nasr implicitly contends, from a Muslim perspective, that the total intelligibility of the real is a corollary of monotheism. If that were to prove true then, contrary to Panikkar, one could not adopt the pluralistic attitude without abandoning one's monotheistic identity. Instead of abandoning the total intelligibility of the real, Nasr cites the Quran (V;51) to the effect that God created the religions in their diversity, and will ultimately explain the differences on judgment day. He allies F. Schuon's notion of \*religio perennis\* with this verse, and contends that the resulting notion of pluralism - in which religious differences must be respected because they are divinely willed, yet religions also have an ultimate unity - "is the only perspective which holds the key for accepting the validity of other religions without denigrating our own or violating its integrity, without belittling or reducing the teaching of other religions but respecting them on the highest level, at the level of their truth claims" (161). The approach is thoroughly informed by Muslim commitments, and yet not for that reason unintelligible or unpersuasive to the non-Muslim reader (at least, one who is sympathetic to monotheistic commitments).

[6] With respect to these two positions (Panikkar and Nasr) then, we might ask: is it possible to move from a naive postulating of the total intelligibility of the real to a critical adoption of that position, rather than an abandoning of it? Humility does not, Nasr notes, only involve *limiting* our religious claims. It also involves "see[ing] things from the authentic point of view of our own religion and not hold[ing] a position for the sake of expediency that would be so far-fetched as to distort the truths of our religion" (65). Once again, this seems to square solidly with Nasr's Muslim commitments, this time with respect to revelation. If God has revealed something then it is pride, rather than humility, which claims to sit in judgment of the revelation, and to qualify or revise it (160).

[7] Nasr, and, not incidentally, John Paul II, both strike this reader as examples of how one may be tolerant, even supportive, of religious diversity without abandoning the human access to the absolute. In fact, they may be examples of how our attitude toward diversity may be *enhanced* rather than undermined by our very commitment to the absolute, as long as we maintain that the absolute has a hand in the religions (Allah for Nasr, the Holy Spirit for John Paul II). Speaking of such an alliance, a specifically Christian note concerning pluralism, identity and the absolute should be joined to Nasr's objections to the pluralistic attitude: has Panikkar not, under the guise of epistemological and metaphysical modesty, asked Christians to abandon the conviction, which I take to be central to Christianity, that the absolute *has* become visible, audible, spoken, in the Incarnation of the Word? If so, then the alleged humility of not claiming the Absolute for ourselves actually becomes the pride of refusing to recognize that the Absolute has claimed us. From a Christian standpoint, one might not be able to adopt the pluralistic attitude without abandoning one's religious identity.

[8] Paul Knitter's contribution to the book contains an interesting proposal, and one that is not without merit. But it is a proposal whose significance is undermined in two important ways by the delayed publication of the book. Knitter proposes a topic for furthering inter-religious dialogue. His claim, in a nutshell, is that suffering, victimization, and the struggle for justice "constitute a universally available locus, an arena open to all, where persons of different religious backgrounds can feel the presence and empowerment of that for which religious language seems appropriate" (114). These experiences and activities, which he summarizes in the slogan *extra mundum nulla salus*, become or can become a *communicatio in*

*sacris* between religions (115). Knitter claims, further, that this locus of dialogue is well suited (more so than the mystical or rational claims of religions) to breaking through the postmodern claim of incommensurability, since the supposedly incommensurable religions will find in it a common language (129).

[9] The principal difficulty with Knitter's essay is not the proposal itself. It is, rather, two things that have happened in the time that has lapsed since he originally made the proposal. One regards the evolution of Knitter's own thought. Another regards the course taken by inter-religious dialogue in the ensuing years, and its relation to postmodern claims.

[10] Regarding the evolution of Knitter's own thought, those who have read *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (Swidler and Mojzes, eds.; 1997), will be startled to see Knitter's proposal in the present volume. In 1993, Knitter may have been proposing *extra mundum nulla salus* as a locus for dialogue. In 1997, however, his essay in *Uniqueness* was claiming that *extra mundum nulla salus* was the unique ingredient in Jesus' saving message, and that the idea bore a centrality in Christianity that was unique among world religions. It is crucial to grasp the movement of Knitter's own thought, for it appears to me that Knitter made his proposal in 1993 and found that it was not well received. In fact, the concluding essay in *Dome* mentions some criticism that Knitter received from a Buddhist, saying that the proposal did not really resonate with his Buddhist sensibilities (192). One suspects, if one knows anything at all about Knitter, that further dialogue with various people convinced him that he was, in fact, mistaken about the broad appeal of *extra mundum nulla salus*. Despite the publication dates, then, Knitter's thesis in *Uniqueness* appears to be the narrowing of his earlier claim in *Dome*, rather than the claim in *Dome* representing the expansion of the claim from *Uniqueness*. The shift is dramatic and must be noted regardless of what one thinks of either thesis.

[11] A second point with respect to Knitter's proposal concerns the evolution of inter-religious dialogue, and the relationship between that dialogue and postmodern claims. A great deal has happened in inter-religious dialogue since 1993. As I read that evolution, it appears as though Knitter's proposal of a common locus of dialogue for all religions has lost out to the particular: interest in particular traditions and their teachings, and an engagement in particular points of dialogue between particular religious traditions. Frank Clooney's *Theology After Vedanta* came out in 1993; the Dalai Lama's *The Good Heart* came out in 1996, followed by *The Gethsemani Encounter* in 1998; *Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Promise and Problems* was published in 1998. Jacques Dupuis' magisterial study of the Catholic tradition on the question of religious pluralism and salvation, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, was published in 1997, not only developing his own position but also helping to situate the current pope's thinking in the developing tradition. Finally, the Bill Moyers video series *The Wisdom of Faith*, with Huston Smith serving as a guide into seven different faiths of the world, was released in 1996. People have grown interested in learning the specific doctrines of different religions. The Moyers series shows, especially, that there is a market for an investigation into the particular. Dialogue has grown up out of the return to the particular, as the Dalai Lama's book shows in a special way. Moreover, that dialogue has been focused on doctrinal points and spiritual practices (the rational and mystical claims) more than on the ethical concerns that Knitter thought would be more effective in combatting claims of incommensurability. (The issue of pluralism has even entered as a topic into the science and

theology dialogue, with contributions being made by John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 1993: chap. 10; Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel? Theology and Science in a Post-Modern World*, 1998; Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 1997.)

[12] This turn to the particular is especially important in considering the prudence of Knitter's strategy for contesting the postmodern suspicion of universality. Knitter's strategy of proposing a universal locus for dialogue plays right into the hands of that suspicion. And we can gather, from the evolution of Knitter's own thought, that the postmodern suspicion was warranted in this case. The actual course of inter-religious dialogue in the ensuing years, as far as I am acquainted with it, has turned to the particular. It has waited to see whether or not points of agreement, or at least of understanding in disagreement, emerge out of that return. To take the most shining example, the Dalai Lama took up the task of reading the Christian Scriptures and commenting upon them. Points of difference were not whitewashed in this encounter, to be sure. But some points of commonality emerged. Even where there was disagreement, it was not due to sheer mutual incomprehension.

[13] My conclusion, partly from my reading of what has been happening in inter-religious dialogue, is that we do not need to fight the postmodern trend toward the particular. Rather, we can embrace it. But when we do embrace it, and return to our particular traditions, what we find, as a matter of fact, is that incommensurability simply is not true. There are things to talk about between traditions. And we can understand each other, even on those points where we do not agree. The caustic postmodern suspicion of anything but the particular leads to the demise of the claim of incommensurability when dialogue emerges out of that very return. Postmodernism dialectically undercuts itself. Is the postmodern age really only a transition on the way from modernity to a new stage in the history of thought - the age of dialogue?

[14] Masao Abe's contributions to the volume articulate a powerful program for inter-religious dialogue. He does so through the use of specific points of dialogue, and in such a way as to draw the reader into the dynamic process about which he is speaking. In these regards, both his use of specific points and his drawing the reader into the book, his contributions are quite unique. Abe contends that dialogue is for the purposes both of understanding and transformation. He gives specific examples of how his own understanding and presentation of Buddhist concepts - especially emptiness, and its relation to social justice - has been transformed by dialogue with Christians. In turn, he challenges Christians concerning the implications of monotheism (as opposed to non-dualism) for the relations between religions, contending that a non-dualistic notion of unity provides a better basis for approaching the pluralistic situation of the world than monotheism does. Also, having noted previously how the Buddhist emphasis on wisdom (and emptiness) needs to be balanced with the monotheistic concern for justice, he turns around and challenges Christians, saying "in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole, the wisdom aspect of God has been neglected in favor of the justice aspect of God. Is it not important and terribly necessary now to emphasize the wisdom aspect of God rather than the justice aspect of God in order to solve the conflict within religions as well as among religions?" (147). Abe's contributions to this volume are powerful because he speaks of transformation in dialogue, shows how he has been transformed in dialogue, and challenges the reader to be transformed in dialogue.

[15] In a brief response to Abe's contention that non-dualism offers a better basis for approaching the pluralistic situation of religions than monotheism does, Donald Mitchell hits upon a point which deserves to be mentioned, since it is conspicuous by its absence in so many Christian discussions concerning pluralism. Mitchell concurs with Abe that, as a matter of historical fact, a "particular Western picture of God" as set apart "can color one's living out of a monotheistic unity in a way that stresses keeping apart from and judging persons of other faiths" (148). The question arises, then: How can we "understand God from a monotheistic point of view in a way that fosters a more universal unity of humankind" (149)? Where Abe had suggested a non-dualistic understanding of God in terms of "*Nichts*," Mitchell expresses the concern that "it is hard to see how the transcendent personhood of God can be preserved" in such an interpretation. In other words, Abe's proposal may work in terms of pluralism, but not in terms of identity. Instead, Mitchell turns to the logic of *trinitarian* monotheism, in order to preserve both distinction and unity, on a divine and a human level. "Since God's nature is reflected in his action," Mitchell states, "the diversity in unity of God's trinitarian nature is also a principle of God's creative action. All humankind is therefore created in a communal image of the diversity in unity of the Trinity" (150). Thus, a trinitarian monotheism can provide a legitimate basis for a pluralistic situation. Monotheism need not lead to separation between religions. If we are created in the image of a trinitarian God, then some diversity within unity ought to be expected.

[16] This is crucial because much of the discussion of pluralism, at least from a Christian perspective, focuses on the role of Jesus, especially the uniqueness or non-uniqueness of Jesus, to the exclusion of the role of the Spirit. In other words, much of the discussion of pluralism among Christians has not, up to this point, been fully informed by *trinitarian* monotheism. This seems a systematic oversight of immense proportions by Christian theologians. One can only hope that the recovery of the Spirit by the likes of Jacques Dupuis, Harvey Cox, and especially John Paul II, and the articulation of an approach to pluralism thoroughly informed by the trinitarian identity of Christians, will be a seed that takes firm root in future discussions of pluralism by Christian theologians. Without it, the specifically Christian notion of identity in a pluralistic world must be inadequate.