God’s diversity: A trinitarian view of religious pluralism

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Christians believe in a complex God, three coeternal persons living a single enduring communion. The divine life has varied dimensions and allows human interaction with the triune God to take different forms. God’s channels are open on many frequencies. Christian belief in the Trinity originates in the conviction that only such a complex view of God can account for the relation with God that takes place in Christ, the incarnate Word—a relation that does not replace that of creature to creator, for instance, but adds to it. Only a complex God could take up this radical form of relation with us (becoming one of the creatures within God’s own creation) and offer this peculiar form for our relation with God (communion with God and others through Christ).

In the triune God, the varied dimensions of God belong to all of the persons together, not to any one. Human interaction with the Trinity can “tune” itself to one or more of these dimensions.

There cannot, then, be only one simple way of relating to God. The Trinity is a map that finds room for, indeed requires, concrete truth in other religions, because it allows for a variety of ways of relating to God. It is impossible to believe in the Trinity instead of the distinctive religious claims of all other religions. If Trinity is real, then at least some of these specific religious claims and ends must be real also. If they were all false, then Christianity could not be true.

The simplest way to express this is to consider three dimensions of human relations and three trinitarian analogies. First, humans can have impersonal relations with each other. For instance, one person receives blood from another person she may never have met. The life processes of the two relate in a very fundamental and physiological way. This is not a “personal” relation in our normal terms, but it sustains or saves human life. Second, humans can have personal encounters with each other, exchanging intentions and feelings, speaking and acting in response to communication from another. These interactions may be face-to-face exchanges, or they may use a medium like writing or art so that it is possible to have a “personal”

relation with someone you have never met. Third, there is the human relation of communion. Here you not only encounter and relate to another as a person, but in some measure you share in that person's life. Empathy and familiarity with someone gives rise to a vicarious capacity to experience his responses, a kind of second nature. These arise in us not instead of our own reactions, but alongside them. Relations of deep love or intimate friendship often reflect this communion.

The polyphony of the three trinitarian persons is a single divine life that manifests three frequencies analogous to those we have just described. Any one of these dimensions can be the avenue for a genuine relation with God. The distinctive religious ends of various traditions correspond to relations with God in which one dimension conditions or limits the rest. This reality provides the basis for Christians both to affirm the reality of other religious ends and to distinguish them from salvation—the specific fulfillment Christians seek.

The impersonal dimension of the Trinity: The three divine persons have an impersonal dimension to their relations with each other. Below the level of active agency, life is shared and exchanged among the persons. The life within a single organism or community cannot be isolated in any one place: it exists in the process of the whole. In the Trinity, this is the constant exchange of immanence and emptiness by which each divine person indwells the others and makes way for their indwelling. People who are in close proximity register the physical activities of others, an awareness that need not be conscious. Just as human personhood is not discernible at the level of the molecular interactions in our bodies, so God is impersonal when encountered solely in this dimension. In scripture this dimension of the Trinity is reflected in manifestations of God as wind, fire or a kind of raw, dangerous power, like high-voltage electricity.

God's relation with creation displays two sides of this impersonal dimension. The first is the "withdrawal" in which God makes space for creation's own being and freedom. This reflects the continual process in which each triune person continually empties itself or "makes space" within the divine life for the unique identities of the others to be expressed. The second is the immanence with which God sustains creation, reflecting the way that each triune person is fully present in the others. Humans can thus tune in to this dimension of God in two ways, each with its own integrity. God's contraction to make way for creation makes possible a valid human insight into the insubstantiality of all being. If creation is examined rigorously on this

frequency—through meditation or science—we can rightly find “emptiness” at its base. Quantum physics provides an illustration, an account in which matter itself seems to dissolve into energy, or mathematical probability. All enduring, distinct identities seem to dissipate.

Such insight, and rigorous practice based on it, result in a religious fulfillment described by Buddhists as nirvana. This insight is far more developed in Buddhism than in any facet of Christian tradition. To realize such emptiness is to cling to nothing, not even an identity, and to be surely delivered from all suffering, estrangement and relationship. Salvation is a distinctly different end, seeking plainly for enduring participation in the dimensions of relation from which nirvana offers release. This Buddhist vision is an accurate description of one of God’s relations with the world. It also grasps an ultimate reality in the divine life—the emptying of each triune person in relation to the others.

A second way to tune to this frequency is to focus on God’s identity with the world rather than God’s withdrawal from it. In this frequency, the constant flow of the divine life is taken as the substratum of one great self, whose body is the universe. From this perspective, it is a mistake to take emptiness or flux as the real story. Every individual part may change and pass away, like cells in a body, but the one self goes on. When we look deeply into ourselves or nature—by meditation or science—we find an underlying reality, present alike in all that is. Quantum mechanics may seem to dissolve matter into “no thing,” but in this view all things rest on an underlying order.

The Vedanta tradition of Hinduism expresses this perception powerfully. Brahman, the one unshakable reality, sustains all things by pervading all things. If pursued intensely and separately, this insight suggests an end in which the small “I” of the particular creature resolves into a perfect identity with the one existing “I” of the absolute being. This end is plainly different from salvation, for it relinquishes the distinct identity and reality that God has granted the creature. But it is grounded in a true dimension of God’s own nature and of God’s relation with the world. The creature can realize the impersonal immanence of the divine as his or her sole being, and yield back all unique identity and relations.

Either of the apprehensions we have described can lead reasonably to the conclusion “I am that.” The boundaries that mark off any persons or creatures from

others are only apparent. All things, including me, are empty or literally one being. The convictions that samsara is nirvana and that atman is Brahman are two distinctive religious conclusions born of such insight. They point to two distinct religious ends, tuned to aspects of the dimension of the divine life we have been discussing.

The personal dimension of the Trinity: Within the Trinity, each of the three persons encounters the others in freedom, with a unique character. The triune God as a whole also encounters humanity in this dimension. It is the impersonal dimension that makes the personal dimension possible. God withdraws and blends in, setting the stage for a free and historical encounter of humans with God as a single “Thou” in the drama of history. In the dimension of personal encounter, relationship with the divine is marked off from other possibilities. This encounter is the characteristic shared feature of biblical and Qur’anic traditions—an encounter with a personal God who speaks and acts with humanity.

What distinguishes this dimension as a whole from the impersonal one is that it allows for, indeed requires, contrast and tension. Encounter points to the fact that the divine is not empty nor is all being already in perfect identity with it. There is a distance between us and God, between us and our religious end, which must be traveled. This dimension has a strong moral emphasis, a drive toward transformation. The motto is not “thou art that,” but “become what you are called to be.”

A trinitarian perspective suggests that what is apprehended in these cases is the external unity of the Trinity, its cooperative unity in willing the good for creation. Faithful response to this encounter can lead to distinct religious fulfillments. Such ends are distinct from the personal communion that constitutes salvation, but they are authentic responses to God’s expressed purpose, grounded in God’s personal character.

Christianity characteristically extends its grasp of the personal dimension of God in two ways. The first is in its conviction that the crucial locus for personal encounter with God is the living person, Jesus Christ. The second is the understanding of God as Trinity, which finds this single divine “I” grounded in a communion of persons.

The communion dimension of the Trinity: The triune persons do not only share

one divine life process. They do not only meet as distinctive others, honoring and enacting their identities. They also enter into communion with each other, indwelling each other as different persons. The incarnation is a window into this trinitarian communion, and the path to participate in it.

This is the dimension of the divine life that constitutes salvation, the dimension that conditions Christians' participation in the other frequencies of relation. In human experience we know that there is communion so real that a person can rightly say of certain aspects of her own willing, longing or loving that they seem to arise more from the indwelling of the other person than from any purely isolated individuality of her own. The typical feature of this communion is the discovery in ourselves of an openness or response to a third person that we can hardly credit as coming from us, except by virtue of the indwelling of a second in us.

The effect of communion is openness to communion. It is not an accident, of course, that this reflects the classic trinitarian formula that sees in the unity of any two of the triune persons the implied participation of each in the third. The motto of this dimension is "transformation through communion."

Participation in Christ is an instance of communion that opens believers to proportionate participation in all of the dimensions we have discussed. Salvation is a complex state, for in it a person is open to each of the dimensions of the divine life that we have described. That is why it requires sharing with others: it is crucially dependent on intersecting communions. No individual can or could realize the complete fullness of possible relation with God in all these dimensions in a self-contained way. But she or he does approach that fullness through communion with other persons and creatures, each of whom in their relations with God and with others fill out aspects that would be lacking for any one individual. Salvation is actually much more than the sum of any individual perfection.

The way we can most deeply participate in a divine fullness that literally overflows our finite capacities is through mutual indwelling with other persons. Humans' communion with each other is also an instrument of the fuller communion with God. This is rather like a set of parallel computers or processors that together can solve a problem beyond any one alone, or that can together produce a graphic image of depth and resolution impossible otherwise. Keeping the trinitarian pattern in mind, we may say quite seriously that the divine nature is so great that even God cannot

encompass it except through sharing. Our finite receptions of the triune self-giving multiply each other, in a kind of spiritual calculus that deepens each one's participation in the communion of the triune life itself.

"Saints" are as much those who have learned to participate by communion in others' communion with God as they are those who have perfected their individual faculties for unity with God. This is precisely what the communion of the saints is about. This is also why in Christian tradition the community, the actual concrete body of the church, has been regarded as fundamental to the Christian life, even to salvation itself.

The only truly unique component of the Christian identity is communion in Christ. But we should not frame this uniqueness as simply one separate kind of relation with God over against any other mode of relation with God. If its distinguishing feature is precisely a relation that reconciles these various dimensions of relation with God in a unity-in-difference, then it must embrace these dimensions as they can be found concretely in other religions. Communion cannot function as an identity of contradiction.

If God is Trinity, the various relations with God we have outlined are themselves irreducible, rooted in permanent coequal dimensions of the divine nature. Anyone who clings to the truth of one of the relations in isolation can never be forced from it by pure negation (by being proved flatly wrong); one can only be attracted by the possibility of enhancement. All three dimensions of relation connect with the Trinity's own reality, though not to the same cumulative extent. All three are a feature of the triune God's integral reality, but contact with God in a single dimension does not compel one to participate directly in all dimensions. Participation in God by communion has its own limitation, precluding the intensity and purity of those religious ends that take other dimensions as ultimate and regard communion as unreal or transitory.

Christians can understand the distinctive religious truth of other religions as rooted in connections with real dimensions of the triune God. I am convinced, for instance, that the Theravadan Buddhist end is, in fact, as that tradition claims, a cessation of suffering. In that concrete respect, it is similar to salvation. But realization of this end relinquishes (as unreal) a whole range of possible relations with God and others whose presence is essential to the end that Christians seek. In that respect the

Buddhist end is similar to what Christians mean by loss. The fact that it may be “the same ultimate reality” behind distinct religious experiences does not by any means require that they result in the same religious end.

It is popular in some circles to envision the afterlife as a parliament of world religions—where Jesus and Buddha and Shankara and Muhammad and Confucius and Mahavira and Moses, along with shamans, bodhisattvas and spirit guides of all descriptions would converse and commune together. They would share appreciation for one awesome divine reality, each seeing and celebrating the value of the other’s truth. We rarely note the heavy Christian bias in such a picture.

The charge of Christian bias may seem strange, since many Christians understandably recoil from blending Jesus into such a crowd. What I mean is that this is a vision of personal and interpersonal relation in difference. As such it is an outright rejection of many religious traditions’ ultimate aims. By virtue of its very categories, this picture of a final human end would be unacceptable or inconceivable for Buddha or Shankara, the great sage of Vedanta. In fact, for many religious traditions, this scenario could be at most a kind of kindergarten metaphor, a preliminary and quite unsatisfactory state. Of course, it is not an adequate description of salvation in Christian terms either, but it encompasses many of salvation’s categorical essentials: relation, the integrity of personal selves, communion-in-difference, even a personal relation with Jesus for everyone.

Ihave tried to sketch the way in which different religious ends might be related to the triune God. This is plainly a Christian description: the faithful in these traditions do not understand themselves and their practice in trinitarian terms. A benefit of this particular description is that it makes clear how other religious traditions would describe Christian experiences in their terms, and why Christians could view those “outside” descriptions as rooted in real religious truth.

The particular value of this approach for a Christian theology of religions is that it recognizes truth in the convictions of these other traditions in the terms concretely stated and believed by those within those traditions, and it recognizes their status as true alternatives to Christian faith. This is a fruitful Christian basis for both dialogue and witness.

Recognizing such difference would mean that Christians could understand other

religions as something other than secondary means of being Christian. Surely persons may navigate from within any tradition toward the salvation Christians seek, but those traditions are ordinarily and primarily means of attaining their own unique ends, not salvation. Their different ends give them the purchase to interpret the Christian aim as penultimate, and to witness to Christians that they should seek a better way.

In this perspective, the religions play a truly providential role. They reflect the fact that every human response to any dimension of God's manifestation and revelation meets from God only affirmation, only God's "yes" of grace. Every response to the divine initiative has its reward. Every quest for relation with God that proceeds on the basis of some dimension of God's self-giving to us meets the fulfillment for which it aims and hopes, even if it cannot be persuaded to hope further. Insofar as realization of relation with God in one of the dimensions we have discussed excludes communion as a permanent, coequal dimension, it leads to something other than salvation. And, of course, so long as Christians insist on clinging to distinct identities, relations and communion, they will fail to realize the distinctive religious ends of other traditions.

If God had offered creation only one or only all of these other religious ends, God would have done well. And, to sound Pauline, we would have nothing to complain of. The Christian gospel is not about a God who stints on goodness. It is like that first of Jesus's miracles, when the guests look up in surprise: "You have kept good wine till last."