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Using Scripture in theology of religions

The application of Scripture in the context of coming to a Christian understanding of the place of other religions in the purposes of God is bound to be indirect. Why do I say this? There is one good reason, for a start: the Bible knows nothing of the major world religions which we can read about in any religious studies textbook, such Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, Baha'i, Taoism, Daoism, indigenous religions from the Pacific, African or American regions of the world, and so on. This would seem to be a serious defect when it comes to pronouncements, based on the Bible, on the value of other traditions. Moreover, the religions of the ancient Near East surrounding the people of Israel, and those of ancient Rome and Greece in the period when Christianity came to birth, no longer exist. Is it legitimate, therefore, to judge what we should think in the present about religious plurality in relation to the purposes of God if we peer only through the lens of those dynamics from long ago?

However, as we know, this has not prevented biblical scholars and theologians from bending Scripture towards their specific projects or purposes in the arena of theology and interfaith relations. For, at one level, the relevance of Scripture to interfaith understanding is simply one instance of the general hermeneutical task of applying scriptural insights to modern-day realities. In a great many instances, there may be no specific answers to specific problems as these have arisen in contemporary times; nevertheless, there may be general principles which could apply.

For example, take the issue of stem-cell research. The Bible knows nothing of modern genetics but that need not stop us from Christian decision-making about stem-cell research based on some general interpretation of what Scripture entails. These principles could well involve the following: the dignity of individual human lives; the cure of disease by extending belief in divinely intended healing through scientific means; the wisdom of extending medical professional power over unformed human life. Yet the application of general principles in the interfaith arena seems more challenging than in relation to specific problems. To come straight to the point: 'other faiths' present alternative 'soteriological spaces' for the project called 'salvation' and they therefore present themselves, at least initially, as rival contestants for our committed attention. This lends an urgency to the question of how Scripture might be relevant to the interpretation of our multifaith world.

But it is pertinent to ask if there is such a thing as 'the biblical view' on anything – whether we are thinking of specific problems such as stem-cell research or the bigger picture of interpreting humanity's varied religious history. An older theological scholarship, which still continues today in various guises, assumed that such a view was readily available and could be constituted under the rubric of 'salvation history'. This outlook was present already in the New Testament, received its defining outline in the writings of Augustine and flowered abundantly under Protestant (and later Catholic) thought with the rise of the so-called biblical theology movement with its stress on the 'acts of God'. The basic scheme affirmed God's act of creation, lamented the fall of humanity with Adam and Eve, rejoiced in the rescue from sin with redemption won in Jesus Christ and looked forward to final consummation in the fullness of God's eschatological kingdom. God chose a people, the Israelites, to be a light to the nations, but they continually failed in their vocation until the

time of Jesus whose death and resurrection inaugurated a new covenant and the age of the Church. As Oscar Cullman, a key exponent of 'salvation history', expressed it:

> Thus the entire redemptive history unfolds in two movements: the one proceeds from the many to the One; this is the Old Covenant. The other proceeds from the One to the many; this is the New Covenant. At the very mid-point stands the expiatory deed of the death and resurrection of Christ . . . The Church on earth, in which the body of Christ is represented, plays in the New Testament conception a central role for the redemption of all mankind and thereby for the entire creation.[1]

God's saving activity runs as a hidden thread through history, bringing restoration out of defeat and hope out of abandonment. In this scheme the presence of other religions in the world had no place, except that the Jews and Judaism were superseded by the new people of God. It is easy to see why this whole approach remains profoundly inadequate in an age which is learning to value, or at least be open to, the spiritualities and insights of people of other traditions. But more than that, the 'biblical theology' outlook as a whole failed to explain how the activity of God in 'salvation history' related to the passage of time in 'secular history'. Furthermore, how the impact of critical historical thinking might relate to a scheme such as 'salvation history' was largely ignored. What was important was to work with the myth of 'salvation history' as God's story that was alive within a random world history story. It is easy to see why this 'biblical theology' outlook could not survive the rise of multifaith consciousness. Cullman's view that Jesus Christ stood in the midst of time was parochial at best.

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Updating 'biblical theology'

However, the fading of the heyday of the 'biblical theology' movement has not stopped the emergence of various successors who have sought to demonstrate how the sweep of biblical literature and history might relate more positively to the prospects of Christian faith's relations with other religions. An excellent Catholic example of this can be found in the book *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, by scholars Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller. Here is their conclusion following a magisterial account of how the biblical material understands the reality of God who is universally present to the whole world:

> The Bible gives awesome witness to the universal sovereignty of God. His lordship and provident care transcend every human boundary – even those of Israel and the church. His compassionate embrace of humanity cannot be circumscribed by our careful moral calculations. The biblical story constantly shatters the efforts of religious people to bottle up God . . . Any claim to exclusivity or religious triumphalism will eventually run aground on the expansive vision of the biblical God.[2]

For Senior and Stuhlmueller the universal presence of God in the Bible is revealed to the world in multiple ways: through diverse creation, evolving history, human experience and the insight of Israel that God's will intends the salvation of the whole world. In other words, the world is not abandoned in spite of the prevalence of evil or the wilful forgetfulness of God by human beings. The Bible has been described as 'God's love affair with his people', but within the pages of that love affair there are suggestions that God's divine concern is an unrestricted concern: it is alive with all peoples and it can be traced throughout the whole biblical literature. Scholars of this outlook are fond of citing verses which reflect this universality – for example,

the calling of other nations besides Israel, as in Amos 9.7: the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt brought 'the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir'; or the recognition of an outsider's acceptability to God in Luke's story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius: 'I truly understand that . . . in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10.34–35). But it is not simply individual texts that reveal God's universal care; the whole thrust of the biblical literature is non-exclusive. Even when Israel emphasizes its vocation to be a 'light to the nations' or when the Church calls attention to the determinative nature of Jesus's death and resurrection there remains the acknowledgement that God has not left himself without witnesses in other places and among other peoples. In the biblical theology framework this provides permission for openness, generosity and interreligious dialogue in relation to 'others' of our own day.

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Senior and Stuhlmueller are examples of the great flowering of biblical scholarship among Catholic theologians since Vatican II. A similar outlook also prevails among many Protestant theologians, and especially among those who had a missionary career in the twentieth century. For example, the doyen theologian of dialogue, Kenneth Cracknell, ends his survey of biblical literature as follows:

> We have suggested in this survey that all human history, from creation to end-time, in every phase and among all nations and people, must be understood as a single 'history of salvation'. Embedded in the purpose of creation is the reconciliation of all humankind to God. Now we need a way of understanding how God has communicated with humanity through all this history, and in every part of it.[3]

With both Catholic and Protestant surveys the conclusion is similar: the concept of 'biblical theology' is more or less retained but its scope extended. For our purposes, precisely how these surveys then lend themselves to a theology of religions appropriate for the emerging dialogue of our times is less clear. Cracknell slides most easily into an Inclusivist picture by folding the expansive biblical vision into the '*logos* theology' of the early Church which he sees as a direct consequence of suggestive leads in the New Testament. Senior and Stuhlmueller are slightly more guarded when they note that, in the New Testament, 'explicit evaluations of other religions tended to be negative. The Gentiles suffered from "ignorance" and were considered to be caught in a life of idolatry and futility.'[4] Nevertheless, they aver that there are biblical trajectories which can be exploited in stories and renditions of affirmation regarding God's desire for the salvation of all peoples, traces of which may be found in their religious experience, ethical conduct and evident spirituality.

Large-scale surveys of biblical material are often impressive and contain many insights which subvert assumptions that limit God's concerns narrowly to only the people of Israel and the Church, especially when carried out by careful scholars such as the ones I have mentioned. They might have avoided some of the pitfalls of older versions of 'biblical theology' by becoming more nuanced in the ways in which they interrogate the literature, but it is still fair to put the more searching question: why should patterns of faith formulated in very different times from our own, with very different assumptions about what constitutes the 'acts of God' or the flow of history, be *determinative* for the Christian response in the present? The impact of other forms of religious experience (as outlined for example in *Life of Pi* – see the Introduction) make their own claims upon us. To render other forms of experience as also examples

of 'salvation history' could be a sleight of hand when based on biblical considerations alone.

Occasionally the giveaway of this arises when stories are made to yield a conclusion which is probably unwarranted. For example, in Acts 17.22–31 Luke has the Apostle Paul debating with the men of Athens on the Areopagus (Mars Hill). Should this be read as a great argumentative exchange or as a gentle interfaith dialogue? Paul has established 'points of contact' with his audience by letting the men of Athens know both that he has observed their 'altar to an unknown God' and that he agrees with the Stoic or Epicurean teachers of Greek philosophy who accepted that 'In him (God) we live and move and have our being' (v. 28). He agrees with them that God does not reside in gold or silver or stone. But when he announces the purpose of all religious affiliation ('salvation history') as defined and clarified by that declared in the death and resurrection of Christ then the men of Athens either scoff at him or walk away from the encounter. Commentators such as Cracknell, who are inclined towards an optimistic assessment of the story for inclusive 'salvation history' purposes, write that 'Luke was showing us a method for the sharing [of] the Gospel across cultural boundaries',[5] where the dispute is best envisaged as a discussion/dialogue among wise people. The alternative – and to me, more likely – reading is that Luke was interested in the spiritual life of the Athenians with the express desire of winning them over to the Christian message. Therefore Paul is depicted not so much as in a dialogue in the present-day sense of sharing experiences and learning mutually from one another, but as laying out a strategy for conversion emboldened by the superiority of the Christian message.[6]

Does this mean that our present-day context has nothing to learn from biblical scholarship? By no means, and it would be odd to suggest so. Yet perhaps a method of using the Bible for Christian reflection on plurality should be less direct. We enter

the strange world of the New Testament prepared to comprehend with all the historical tools of research available to us the nature of that early Christian context, the reasons for the shape of the New Testament witness (together with that of the Hebrew Scriptures), and so on, and then return to our own day ready to face new questions in new times and in wholly different circumstances. What we bring with us is bound to be less directly applicable than perhaps we would wish. But at least we will not be pressing our present experiences into solutions devised for different circumstances, no matter how 'holy' we deem 'Scripture' to be. As the Finnish New Testament scholar, Heikki Räisänen, has said: 'The exegete may be needed in the global village as the "historical conscience" in the dialogue, as one who warns of attempts to make too direct a use of the texts.'[7]

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Those who rely on 'biblical theology' have at least two broad areas of potential misunderstanding to clarify for any contemporary interpretation of religious pluralism to be convincing. The first is what to say about the category of idolatry, which is a constant bedrock complaint about 'other religions' throughout the Bible; and the second is how to interpret the so-called difficult verses which have been appropriated for polemical purposes against other religions down the ages. Let me say a brief word about each of these issues, before drawing the discussion to a close.

Idolatry

It is abundantly clear that biblical religion is opposed to idolatry. The source of this prohibition is the monotheistic belief that 'God' is beyond compare. The prohibition is there in the