Introduction

'In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God.'[1]

These words from the great Jewish sage, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), indicate that for him no religion has a monopoly on holiness or spiritual insight. Heschel's point about the religions is that they are 'a means, not the end'.[2] Moreover, the notion that religious diversity is God's will is not so much a function of humanity's cultural differences as of the transcendence of God, for 'No word is God's last word, no word is God's ultimate word.'[3] Why, therefore, should our human openness to God issue only in one community of faithfulness?

In 1966, Heschel's bold affirmation was ahead of its time – for Jews as well as Christians. Christian theologians are catching up with the boldness and many are beginning to agree with Heschel, but it has taken theological thought half a century to embrace this realization.

Heschel is an example of one religious scholar's response to the globalization of religion – by which I mean the increased awareness about and access to the religions, whether that awareness and access be through human encounter or education. Since Heschel's day globalization has intensified greatly. Through modern media and the movement of peoples around the world, we are struck by the diversity of religions more than ever before. This means of course that even if you have never met a Sikh or a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu, etc., you are likely to have an opinion about such believers and the religions they represent. But in the absence of real meeting that opinion is bound to be stereotypical at best and could well be even seriously distorted.

This is because one of the new requirements of our time is the insistence on meeting people as a way of becoming informed about what a religion stands for. It is an improvement on the older reliance on travellers' tales or second-hand accounts in books which had an axe to grind.

Affirming religious plurality as not only a human but also a divine good can be unnerving, especially for the so-called monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But I believe the same holds true for those traditions which are often assumed to be more accepting of plurality, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. All traditions which are ordered in terms of what I call 'transcendent vision and human transformation' have a tendency to want to pull others into the ambit of their own sacred space, no matter how much they declare themselves to be universally minded. Difference might not only render human beings curious about the world around them but also generate fear and uncertainty, which in turn potentially opens the door to conflict.

Heschel's daring judgement about religious plurality is not shared by every religious thinker, then or now. Nevertheless, even those Christian theologians who might disagree with him are coming to see that at least the question of plurality is deserving of serious theological debate. This must be so, once we realize that other religions function in much the same way for their adherents as Christian faith does for Christians – that is, they all provide a matrix for responding to the mystery of existence in terms of a notion of transcendent reality and its consequent ramifications for shaping a meaningful life.

This book is about how to interpret the fact of many religions and it concentrates on what we call the 'world religions', for this has been the focus of most of the theological debate over the past fifty years or so. The term theology of religions is concerned with questions of how to interpret religious plurality as a matter

of Christian understanding. Are the non-Christian world religions part of the will of God or deviations from that will, as Christian faith has often construed it?[4] The discipline is primarily concerned with religions as vehicles or mediations of transcendent truth and relationship and not with individual attitudes towards other religious people. It is necessary to point this out as there has been considerable confusion over the lack of a clear distinction between the two.

A good point of entry into the whole discussion is to feel the impact of Heschel's boldness. I call it bold because although we may have been aware of the diversity of religions – of course there have always been many religions in the world![5] – we have not thought that this called for deeper reflection than the default response that they are at best pale reflections of something altogether more profound, namely the Christian revelation. Until now, to think otherwise was tantamount to theological error and even apostasy.

Part of the methodology of theology of religions involves us in making a judgement about whether or not Christian faith can be responsive to new information. Those for whom Christian understanding has been decided and defined once and for all will measure any new information within its inherited frame of reference. In other words, Bible and Tradition (in reality, a certain view of the Bible and a certain view of Tradition) will determine the answer. Those for whom Christian understanding has always been a matter of adjustment and change according to new information – and it might be new information stemming from the natural sciences or from analyses of human behaviour in the humanities – will place equal emphasis on experience and reason in their theological work. This book is written believing theology ought to be a journey which is actively alert to new information and is constantly therefore in need of revision.

The experience, knowledge and impact of other religions represents considerable new lived information for theological reflection and the theology of religions analyses the bearing this has on Christian thought, positively and negatively. In turn, Christian thought will need to make its next adjustment for its next phase in Christian history.

The one and the many

Given the mushrooming literature on the subject of how Christian theology is responding to new lived information from other religions, inevitably a spectrum of Christian responses is emerging and this book will explore some of those responses. The responses are informed by a number of factors, including: the experience of Christian missions of the past 300 years; the rise of interreligious dialogue, which although not wholly new, nevertheless is being shaped by new parameters and assumptions; daily encounters as neighbours are having to learn new ways of living and working together; and educational materials which exceed in quality many publications of previous generations.

Before outlining some of the main contours of various positions being adopted in the Christian debate I would like to illustrate how reflection on the experience of religious plurality is often framed as a function of either quietist private piety or quarrelsome public confrontation, and I shall do this with a vivid example from literary fiction. This might help to clarify the discipline of theology of religions more closely.

In his novel, *Life of Pi*, award-winning author Yann Martel depicts his hero, Pi, as a youth who is attracted to three religions and who absorbs the central impact of these traditions into his own developing maturity. His initial religious love stems from the fact that he is born into a Hindu way of life:

> I feel at home in a Hindu temple. I am aware of Presence, not personal the way we usually feel presence, but something larger. My heart still skips a beat when I catch sight of the murti, of God Residing, in the inner sanctum of a temple . . . My hands naturally come together in reverent worship. I hunger for prasad, that sugary offering to God that comes back to us as a sanctified treat. My palms need to feel the heat of a hallowed flame whose blessing I bring to my eyes and forehead.[6]

Anyone who has attended Hindu worship practice will have witnessed the blessings received by the devotee through *prasad* and fire, each enacting a spirituality based on the unity of all reality; as Martel has it: 'The finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite.'[7] For it is not only the ritual that attracts Pi, it is also the philosophy. There are many Christians who have drunk deeply enough at the well of the Hindu sensibility to know the extent of its resonance with Christian spirituality.[8]

Pi is next attracted to Christianity, or rather, to the figure of Jesus. After encountering a Catholic priest and being troubled by Christian notions of sacrifice and portrayals of miracles (feeding, healing), he nevertheless feels himself attracted to Jesus himself. Pi admits: 'I couldn't get him out of my head. Still can't. I spent three solid days thinking about Him. The more He bothered me, the less I could forget Him. And the more I learned about Him, the less I wanted to leave Him.'[9] Pi learns that the characteristic ethic of Christian faith is love. He finally returns 'to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way'.[10]

Pi's third 'conversion' is to Islam, where he discovers 'a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion'.[11] He makes acquaintance with Mr Kumar, a baker, Sufi practitioner and mystic, who teaches Pi that 'If you take two steps towards God, God runs

to you.'[12] Pi learns through his contact with the baker that the whole earth is filled with the glory of God:

> One such time I left town and on my way back, at a point where the land was high and I could see the sea to my left and down the road a long ways, I suddenly felt I was in heaven. The spot was in fact no different from when I had passed it not long before, but my way of seeing it had changed. The feeling, a paradoxical mix of pulsing energy and profound peace, was intense and blissful. Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity . . . I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal.[13]

This account fits the pattern of what some scholars call 'unitive mysticism', the sense that the whole of life is harmonious because our experience of it is a function of our relationship with the all-encompassing reality of the divine. While this may not be the experience of everyone who visits a mosque, nevertheless the impression of selfless devotion in the company of others and before the holy transcendence of God cannot be missed.

Pi's experience seems reminiscent of the sentiment expressed by the Islamic poet, Rumi, that 'The lamps are many, but the light is one: it comes from Beyond.'[14]

Pi is a character in a novel, but the experience of feeling attracted to a religious outlook by whatever route has presented itself is open to any human being. Something special, unavoidable and life-enhancing makes its impression and it is for us to fold that into our understanding of the world. Occasionally such experiences burst the bounds of what we have come to take for granted or to value so far. When this happens it would be small-minded, even wrong, to ignore its impact.

But the positive construal of multireligious insights creates a problem for the theologian and most often for the representative defenders of religious tradition. This is also true in

Pi's case. The three official clerical leaders are confused and outraged by Pi's multiple affiliations. The Christian Priest, the Muslim Imam and the Hindu Pandit fall to wrangling about who is the greatest in the competition between religions. Each claims Pi as his own, but in their wrangling all three demonstrate their narrow-mindedness, lack of charity and failure to comprehend how it is that the divine might be greater than any one person's or tradition's perception. Still, the Pandit speaks for all three when he says: 'But he [Pi] can't be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose.'[15] That is how many a representative theologian, from whatever tradition, sees the matter.

It is possible to frame the issue of religious plurality in terms of 'new experiences' versus 'established tradition'. Through new friendships, the impressions of authentic lives lived within different matrices of belief and practice, the 'transcendent vision and human transformation' being effected in strange yet resonant forms – all this provides new lived information which religious tradition is called upon to interpret. The absorption of more than one expression of piety by a single human being may harbour elements of naivety, but the Pi fiction makes clear that it is not really possible to ignore the reality of what comes through experience. According to Pi, Heschel's speculative prospect for the future – 'In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God' – is confirmed with a resounding 'Yes'.

On the other hand, the religions are so very different. The Priest, Pandit and Imam are presumably entitled to defend their corners, though in the novel they do so while simultaneously exhibiting remarkable ignorance of one another, but – more than this – none is prepared to hear the others as each himself wants to trumpet his own tradition. The Priest, Imam and Pandit break the first rule of interreligious dialogue, which is not to compare the best of one's own religious heritage with the worst

of others. It is a short step from religious ignorance to bigotry, antagonism and even violence – as history shows.

The common default position that the religions are 'all the same really' (possibly Pi's position), and the equally strongly held position that they are destined to mutual incomprehension/antagonism (definitely the 'official' position), I believe represent two extremes. But they are not the only responses to be found. As a kind of *via media*, the task of theology of religions is to reflect on the relationship between the unity of reality, which all traditions affirm in their different ways, and the facts of phenomenological difference between religious views of that reality. And to that we now turn.