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Pluralists of the World Unite!

In The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels called for the laboring classes of the world to join the communist revolution and promised assured liberation: "Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains." In similar fashion, the prophets of religious pluralism promise world peace and true spiritual happiness if Christians will just abandon Christianity and join the pluralist revolution. Ready to join?

Thursday, October 9, 2003

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Of all the doctrines revealed in the Bible, the exclusivity of the incarnation of Jesus Christ stands as the great embarrassment to liberal theologians. The logic is quite simple: If the historical Jesus was God in human flesh, and if He made atonement for our sins, and is therefore the only means of salvation—all other religions are false and lead to death.

For post-Christian theologians, this is simply too much to take. A group of theological pluralists met for a major consultation last month in Birmingham, England. Led by John Hick, a philosopher who has been the primary exponent of religious pluralism in the academic world, this consultation was built as a "multi-religious exploration" of religious reality. As you might imagine, the conference was a caldron of confusion.

Religious pluralism is based in the belief that all religions lead essentially to the same divine reality and that one faith is, in effect, as good as any other. By definition, theologians and philosophers committed to religious pluralism are considered heretics by biblical Christians. This is a label pluralists are increasingly willing to bear.

According to press reports, the pluralist conference, held September 6-9 at the University of Birmingham, was a festival of theological denial. In order to claim that all religions lead to the same divine reality, these thinkers are required to reject Christianity's clear and undeniable claims of exclusive salvation through Jesus Christ. The pluralists are aware of their predicament.

They argue that Jesus should be seen as a great religious teacher and that Christianity should be seen as an important historical reality, but that Christians are deluded in believing that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, and that salvation is found only through Him.

As a matter of fact, speakers at the pluralism conference accused traditional Christians, as well as traditional Jews and Muslims, of holding to the "idol" of religious exclusivism. This "idolatry" is the great enemy of world peace and understanding, they argue, and sophisticated moderns must be rid of it.

According to the conference's official press release, "the great world religions...are authentic paths to the supreme good." Each of these religions promotes some healthy values, they argue, but these are often corrupted by exclusivists. Paul Knitter of Xavier University in Cincinnati asserted that orthodox believers misuse religion "for purposes contrary to those very values."

The organizers of the conference identified nine key principles that would outline a "pluralist model of religion." These principles include a call for religions to relate to one another by dialogue and engagement. This dialogue would require, of course, that the religions surrender all absolute truth claims, because such claims "can easily be exploited to incite religious hatred and violence." The entry ticket to such a dialogue would require that all parties "affirm ultimate

reality/truth which is conceptualized in different ways.” Recognizing that the various world religions are just different ways of looking at the same reality, each religion should recognize that all others “constitute authentic paths to the supreme good.”

Does this sound meaningful to you? If so, hold hands and sing “The Pluralist Internationale.”

John Hick, the godfather of the movement, is certain that the pluralist model will eventually prevail. He compared religious pluralism to the concept of biological evolution, claiming that the acceptance of evolution in a secular society will be followed by the acceptance of religious pluralism as necessary for world peace in a postmodern world.

Most Christians have failed to notice that the theological world has shifted quickly in the direction of pluralism. The Roman Catholic Church, which had long claimed to be the only vessel of salvation, now accepts the notion that persons may become Christians unconsciously. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argues that these “anonymous Christians” are following the light of other religions, but will eventually be included in Christ’s work of salvation. This position, known as “inclusivism,” stands in stark contrast to Scripture, which points us to the claims of Christ.

According to John 14:6, Jesus Christ claimed to be “the way, the truth and the life.” Furthermore, Jesus added, “no man comes to the Father, but by Me.” This is a stone of stumbling that modern secular intellectuals cannot tolerate. Their rejection of historic and biblical Christianity comes precisely at this point, for Christianity claims not only to be a superior revelation, but insists that the only means of salvation is personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hick’s writings in this area have outlined his position in stark detail. “Jesus Christ is not God in human flesh,” argues Hick, but rather the “metaphor of God incarnate.” This metaphor means that “we see in Jesus a human being extraordinarily open to God’s influence and thus living to an extraordinary extent as God’s agent on earth, ‘incarnating’ the divine purpose for human life. He thus embodied within the circumstances of His time and place the ideal of humanity living in openness in response to God, and in doing so He ‘incarnated’ a love that reflects the divine love.” That’s it. For Hick, Christmas is just a metaphor in a manger.

John Hick knows this is not orthodox Christianity. In his recently published autobiography, Hick traces his own pilgrimage from “orthodoxy to heterodoxy.” On his way, Hick “came fairly soon to see that for Christianity the problem of religious plurality hinged on the central doctrine of the incarnation. If Jesus was God incarnate, Christianity alone among the world religions was founded by God in person and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others. This made me look again at the traditional doctrine and its history.” After his “look,” Hick decided to abandon the doctrine. He developed what he calls his “pluralistic hypothesis” and argues that Jesus did not even claim to be the unique revelation of God. Hick asserts that those words from the Gospel of John “are not words of the historical Jesus, but words put into his mouth by the writer of St. John’s Gospel.”

He goes on to make this audacious claim: “It is the consensus of the great majority of the New Testament scholars today that Jesus Himself did not claim to be God incarnate and that his deification was the gradual work of the church.” Professor Hick needs to get out more often. This is an example of the sloppy thinking and intellectual dishonesty that marks the pluralist movement. The conference in Birmingham provides further evidence of the fact that it is hatred of Christianity that drives these thinkers rather than a serious and thoughtful concern for the evidence.

Of course, for John Hick to deny the exclusive claims made by Christ in the Gospel of John, all he has to do is deny that the gospel is authentic. Liberated from Scripture he can then accuse the church of twisting the message of Jesus into a message of salvation and of putting words into Jesus’ mouth in the New Testament.

A Christianity that accepts the “plural hypothesis” ceases to be Christianity at all. These liberal theologians and philosophers would remake Christianity in their own image. Christ becomes just another teacher of holiness and preacher of platitudes. God is no longer recognized as the creating and redeeming God of the Bible, but is reconceptualized as an amorphous deity that is nothing more than an impersonal “transcendent reality.”

Hick’s confidence in winning the war against Christian orthodoxy is based in the fact that he believes that theologians and biblical scholars will “operate when necessary as theological spin-doctors” and “find ways to give it [pluralism] the stamp of approval.” In *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Hick argued that the survival of institutional Christianity is at stake. He applauds the “willingness” of liberal churches “to rethink their beliefs.” He goes further to assert that the “mainline

churches” have been saved from becoming “marginalized” in a cultural ghetto by their abandonment of core Christian doctrines.

The arrogance of this claim is matched only by its imbecility. How can any sane observer of the contemporary religious scene point to liberal mainline denominations as models of cultural relevance? These churches are hemorrhaging members even as they progress toward the total abandonment of orthodox Christianity. They are now of interest primarily to an intellectual elite who finds them to be non-threatening venues of “spirituality” that require no commitment to truth.

More than anything else, this conference of pluralists demonstrates where theologians and philosophers feel free to go, once they are liberated from the authority of Scripture. Rejecting scriptural claims of exclusive salvation through Christ, they invent a new religion of relativism, and then dare to call Christians to follow their example.

These pluralist proponents have already rejected Christianity and gone over the intellectual cliff into theological nihilism. If the incarnation is merely a “metaphor,” and if Jesus Christ is just one savior among many, then Christianity is at its end. These pluralists do not really seek to transform Christianity, but to make the preaching of the gospel unthinkable and unacceptable in modern secular culture. Pluralists are the perfect embodiment of the postmodern mind. They want to launch a theological revolution. We can only imagine their slogan: “Pluralists of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your faith.”

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