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... IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY²

ABSTRACT

Questions on religion and pluralism are complicated by the fact that central terms in the discourse, such as “pluralism”, “religion” and the “secular”, can be interpreted in a variety of ways and are also seriously contested. A plausible argument can be advanced to the effect that the problem of religion in a pluralistic society cannot be solved by opting for a kind of secularism that suggests the possibility of a neutral, non-religious public space. An alternative model of pluralism is both conceivable and preferable. Within the latter model a specifically Christian motivation for supporting a pluralistic society has to and can be developed.

TWO MEANINGS OF “PLURALISM”

What is a pluralistic society and what is, or should be, the role of religions, specifically Christian faith, with regard to it?

The word “pluralism” can refer to the phenomenon of social plurality – the fact that societies consist of a variety of religious, cultural, linguistic, political, gender, professional, and other communities (see Brand 2011:122-123). In this sense, all societies are pluralistic to some degree – often to a much larger degree than is generally recognised.

However, “pluralism” can also refer to societies in which such plurality is consciously tolerated, welcomed, or even encouraged. By contrast, a society that regards plurality or diversity as something unfortunate that should ideally be done away with, or at least managed or contained in the way crime or disease is managed and contained, would then not be regarded as a pluralistic society.

The ultimate form of non-pluralism in this sense would be the evil plan of the alien Gallaxhar in the movie *Monsters versus Aliens*,³ who sets out to create an army of clones

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3 See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0892782/>

of himself with which to conquer Earth, having destroyed his own planet of origin due to a childhood trauma that left him angry at everything and everybody. Luckily, Gallaxhar does not really exist and no society has ever been, or can ever be, totally anti-pluralistic!

Likewise, no society can be totally pluralistic in the sense that it tolerates every conceivable kind of difference. There is always a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of difference. Most societies do not tolerate a culture of theft as something to be welcomed and supported, but rather as something that should be eradicated. Debates about pluralism typically turn on the question of which forms of plurality should be accepted. Pluralism as *habitus*, attitude or policy is therefore a matter of degrees (Brand 2011:120-121).

IMPLEMENTING PLURALISM

To add to the complexity of the picture it should be pointed out that pluralism as a way of dealing with plurality can take many different forms, and pluralists (those who welcome or promote plurality) often disagree about the best practical way in which to recognise diversity.

For example, sociolinguists, whose insights can be drawn on by pluralists, distinguish between two different principles of national language policy, both of which are regarded by their supporters as being friendly towards linguistic diversity: the territorial principle and the personal principle (see, for example, Schürholz 2008:5). The territorial principle requires that the state establishes geographical territories in each of which a particular language will serve as the dominant language. Examples are the language policies of Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada. The personal principle, by contrast, demands that every individual should have access to education and other public services in the official language of his or her choice throughout the national territory. An example is the way English and Afrikaans were treated in South Africa during roughly the second half of the twentieth century: a bilingual civil service for the white minority, rather than separate territories for the two languages.⁴

A third possibility could be a *laissez faire* approach, where the state has no legally determined official language, but the right of individuals to use the language of their choice is recognised. In practice, however, *laissez faire* approaches are followed by governments with a negative, rather than a positive attitude towards linguistic plurality. The expectation – and then the aim – is, that linguistic plurality will not flourish under such a system, but that one language will “naturally” gain ascendancy in the linguistic “market”. The United States of America is the classic example of this.

Similar differences in approach among pluralists could be highlighted in several other areas as well: the rights of ethnic minorities, the diversity of religious-philosophical communities, codified versus indigenous law, etc. With reference to all such forms of plurality, those who claim to welcome the plurality in question disagree among themselves about the best way to deal with plurality fairly and realistically. Such debates can be fraught with very strong disagreements about fundamental values. In apartheid South Africa, for example, appeals to

⁴ Under the apartheid policy of the time, this principle applied only in the so-called “white” areas of the country. Outside this area, the territories of the so-called black “homelands” were mapped according to the dominant language and culture in a particular area, i.e. more in accordance with the territorial principle.

pluralism were among the arguments offered in favour of separate amenities for black and white, and for the policy of establishing independent so-called “homelands” for blacks. These oppressive policies went hand-in-hand with remarkable efforts by the state and financial investments to support the study, development, and active promotion of indigenous African cultures and languages. At one point the Department of Bantu Affairs was even renamed the Department of Plural Affairs (Pickles 1991:180), which resulted in many jokes, both racist and anti-racist, about encounters between whites and “plurals” ... This is one of the reasons why the very term “pluralism” is viewed with much suspicion by intellectuals from among the black majority, even in the present context. At the same time, the contingent historical link between apartheid and pluralist ideals is sometimes cynically used to delegitimise any demands for even the most modest recognition of cultural or group rights.

PLURALISM AND DISCOURSE

Pluralism is not only an idea to be considered, but is thoroughly embedded in the power plays of public discourse. In a broader global context, thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (1997) have pointed to the way in which the politically-correct celebration of difference and diversity in the West can function as the counterpart of a very intolerant, monolithic ideology of capitalism: as long as everyone worships the same global market, the differences between them do not matter. Personally, I have often been struck by how, in South Africa, class is sometimes listed alongside race, gender, religion, etc. as one of the types of diversity that should be celebrated by the rainbow nation. The implication is clear: inequality should not be eradicated, but embraced.

The concept of pluralism – whether meant in a descriptive or in a normative sense – is, therefore, a rather slippery one. This should be kept in mind when reflecting on “religions and the public good in pluralistic societies”.

PLURALISM AND “RELIGION”

It gets worse, however. For what is religion? Richard Dawkins, in his popular book *The God Delusion* (2006:20), defines it as belief in “supernatural gods”.⁵ Such a definition hardly includes Christianity, his main target, and certainly excludes Buddhism, yet both Christianity and Buddhism are typically described, in everyday English usage, as religions. Even a leading sociologist of religion like Peter Berger has on occasion defined religion as belief in “a reality beyond the reality of ordinary, everyday life, and that this deeper reality is benign” (Berger 2004:1, emphasis added; cf. Grossman 1975), but this would exclude Buddhism, for example, from the category of religion, which would run against conventional usage. What do these things called religions have in common, if not belief in spirits or gods?

The only characteristic I can think of is that all of them – from Judaism and Islam to Taoism and African Traditional Religion – deal with “ultimate concerns” (to borrow the phrase Paul Tillich (1957:1) uses), both ontological (Tillich’s “ground of being”, 1952:182)

⁵ Emphasis in original.

and axiological (Vincent Brümmer's "primary determinant of meaning", 1981:122, 134f., 220, 238, 257, 260, 282, 284). The problem with this definition of religion, however, is that it includes views of life that are not typically referred to as "religions". Do not all human beings have ultimate convictions and ultimate values – whether consciously or unconsciously? Is not everybody then, simply by virtue of being human, necessarily "religious" in one way or another? Is this, perhaps, precisely what the modern term "religion" tends to disguise (see Brand 2011:133-134)?

PLURALISM AND "SECULARISM"

When the question about religion in pluralistic societies is raised, it is often done in terms of the modern, liberal distinction between the religious and the secular. The logic typically goes something like this: Although all the different religions have a right to exist in liberal societies, such societies also require a neutral public space, which is essential precisely because of the great diversity of religious convictions. Without such a neutral space the different religious communities will constantly be at each other's throats, for they will only have their own traditions and authorities to base their arguments on, and will, therefore, never be able to have sensible rational discussions about issues that affect everybody.⁶

In a sense, then, this neutral public space is seen as a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between religious communities – i.e. for a policy and culture of pluralism. For their part, the different religions should, therefore, respect the supposed neutrality and non-religious character of the public domain by restricting themselves to the private domain. Among other things this entails keeping religious arguments out of public debates about the common good. Only secular reasons – reasons that, in principle, could convince anyone, should be offered when discussing matters that concern everybody. (At stake here is not a specific political system, which differs between states, but rather a set of influential and popular philosophical assumptions that cross borders between differing states.)

Stanley Fish, in discussing Steven Smith's book *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (2010), challenges the modern, liberal account of religious pluralism at its most fundamental level by asking the question, "Are there secular reasons?", and answering in the negative. How so? Fish summarises Smith's position as follows:

While secular discourse, in the form of statistical analyses, controlled experiments and rational decision-trees, can yield banks of data that can then be subdivided and refined in more ways than we can count, it cannot tell us what that data means or what to do with it. No matter how much information you pile up and how sophisticated the analytical operations you perform are, you will never get one millimetre closer to the moment when you can move from the

⁶ Probably the most influential contemporary thinker in this tradition is Jürgen Habermas. Despite the fact that, in more recent publications, like *An Awareness of what is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (2010), he has moved toward a greater appreciation of the public role of religion, he still maintains that "the religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality". On this, see the review by Stanley Fish, "Does Reason know what it is Missing?" (2010). For an account of Habermas' changing thinking on, among other themes, the public role of religion, see also Dirk Smit (2007).

piled-up information to some lesson or imperative it points to; for it doesn't point anywhere; it just sits there, inert and empty.

Once the world is no longer assumed to be informed by some presiding meaning ... and is instead thought of as being “composed of atomic particles randomly colliding and ... sometimes evolving into more and more complicated systems and entities including ourselves” there is no way, says Smith, to look at it and answer normative questions, questions like “what are we supposed to do?” and “at the behest of who or what are we to do it?” (Fish 2010a).

As C.S. Lewis (1978:22) succinctly argued: “‘*This will preserve society*’ cannot lead to ‘*do this*’ except by the mediation of ‘*society ought to be preserved*’.” At stake here is the so-called “naturalistic fallacy”: drawing normative conclusions from factual premises.⁷ Smith puts it like this:

... the secular vocabulary within which public discourse is constrained today is insufficient to convey our full set of normative convictions and commitments. We manage to debate normative matters anyway — but only by smuggling in notions that are formally inadmissible, and hence that cannot be openly acknowledged or adverted to (Smith quoted in Fish 2010a).

ONLY ONE *RELIGIO LICITA*?

Going one step further, I would argue that this form of “smuggling” is not merely the inadvertent result of a mistaken philosophical analysis, but serves an ideological purpose. The very distinction between public and private domains, and between religious and secular reasons, serves to mask what amounts to a rather drastic anti-pluralistic move. The religion that then dominates public debates is that of the nation state and the market, of Caesar and Mammon (Cox 1999), which acquires its dominance over other religions, firstly by not announcing itself as religious; and secondly, by literally banning dissenting religious voices from all discussions that really matter. Other religions (called simply “religions” within this discourse) are allowed to exist as long as they have no significant impact on the way things go in society.

A helpful architectural symbol of how this might be understood is provided by the many so-called *schuilkerken* (hidden churches) that can still be seen in the Netherlands today – but only if pointed out by a knowledgeable travel guide.⁸ These churches, which look like normal houses, date from a time when Roman Catholicism was officially banned in the Protestant Netherlands, so that Catholics could only worship in secret. However, these *schuilkerken* were not really all that secret. The authorities were aware of them, but deliberately turned a blind eye. The idea was not so much to eradicate Catholicism as to prevent it from having any meaningful influence on society at large. Today we frown at such anti-pluralistic practices from the past. Yet, is the myth of the neutral public domain, where only “secular reasons” deserve a hearing, not structurally identical to it? (The point here is not to highlight the

⁷ For a survey and critical discussion of various versions of this fallacy, see Oliver Curry (2006).

⁸ An informative account in English is given in Rech (date unknown). See Brand (2011:134).

occurrence of such attitudes in specific legal or state principles differing among states, but rather to characterise a cultural attitude.) The official religion, or *religio licita*, involving the worship of, and sacrifice to, the nation state and the capitalist market⁹ is quite willing to turn a tolerant blind eye to other faiths as long as the latter remain hidden in private spaces so as not to interfere with the smooth running of things.

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

What are the alternatives to this absolutism masked as pluralism? Should the separation of church and state be undone? Should the state simply openly adopt one religion, say Christianity or Islam, and enforce it while suppressing others? Should we just bite the bullet and accept that different religious communities will never be able to persuade one another or come to any agreements in public debates? The myth of the neutral public domain pretends that these are the only alternatives, but I am not convinced that they are.

Richard Rorty famously argued (for example, in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989) that liberalism is not the fruit of universally compelling philosophical arguments by the likes of Lock, Kant, and Jefferson, as is often fondly believed, but rather an unintended result of coincidental historical developments. To put it simply: Europeans grew tired of killing and being killed by one another because of religious differences and eventually just gave up the fight. Societies became more tolerant of religious plurality not on principle, but because they had no choice. It is only once this state of affairs was reached that intellectuals started to draw on all sorts of old and new arguments to defend it – to show that a liberal society is perhaps not all that bad and may even be preferable to what had preceded it.

The weakness in Rorty's analysis is its reductionism – the way in which he declares liberalism to be “nothing but” the result of blind historical chance, and completely disregards the possibility that ideas can have an influence, however modest, on history.¹⁰ He also ignores a point that any good postmodernist should be very much on the lookout for: the fact that the new tolerance of liberalism has served to mask the new intolerance to which I have alluded above with reference to the forging of the cult of the nation state and the free market into one *de facto* state religion displacing all others. Nevertheless, what we can learn from Rorty's analysis is that it is possible for some mutual agreement between communities, some social contract or *modus vivendi*, to come about without it being based on a single set of arguments and presuppositions shared by all concerned.

⁹ For an instructive theological analysis of “neo-liberal capitalist globalization” as a form of (idoltrous) religion, see the Accra Declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now also endorsed by the newly formed World Communion of Reformed Churches). On the application of the concept of sacrifice to the contemporary political economy in African womanist theology, see my *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (2002:160-169).

¹⁰ In this respect Rorty's analysis is similar to those Marxist and capitalist analyses that reduce all social developments to purely economic factors. As such, it is vulnerable (perhaps ironically) to standard post-modern critiques of modernity's “grand narratives” in general.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

Thomas Aquinas, who notoriously defended the right – even the duty – of Christians to suppress other faiths, could, nevertheless, countenance the possibility that a situation might arise in which it would be, as it were, the lesser of two evils to leave “infidels”, “heretics”, and “pagans” unmolested:

... the rites of ... infidels ... are not to be tolerated ... except perhaps to avoid some evil, to wit scandal or a division that could arise from this or an obstacle to the salvation of those who would gradually be converted to the faith if they were tolerated. On this account the Church has sometimes tolerated the rites of even heretics and pagans when there was a great multitude of infidels (Thomas Aquinas quoted in Noonan 1998:47).

However unpalatable we may (quite rightly) find this way of looking at things, the historical fact of the matter is that precisely the kind of situation envisioned by Aquinas – one characterised by “a great multitude of infidels” (*sic*) – did come about in Europe several centuries after Aquinas, towards the end of the religious wars preceding the rise of modern liberalism. It should be clear that when Catholics and Protestants decided to stop waging war against one another (and against Anabaptists and other so-called “heretics”) it was not because they suddenly valued mutual tolerance between denominations. They may even have made peace grudgingly.

However, further reflection on the stalemate that had resulted inevitably led many Christian thinkers on all sides of the divide to see the hand of providence in it, so that they were enabled to rediscover a more authentically Christian understanding of faith as a gift from God that cannot be forced down someone else’s throat, and of the church as a community that depends on God’s grace, rather than on worldly power, for its survival and victory – to the extent that today it has become a theological commonplace to condemn what John Howard Yoder called “Constantinianism” – the linkage of church authority and state power starting with the conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.¹¹ Such theological developments can be seen as analogous to the philosophical defence of liberalism after the fact, to which Rorty points.

A society that tolerates or embraces religious plurality can come about if, and only if, a large and determined section of that society is convinced that it is desirable, or at least preferable, to other available options. However, they need not be convinced of this for the same reasons. Some Christians, while believing that it would be better if everyone were Christian so that religious plurality no longer existed, might nevertheless accept a policy of tolerance because they also believe that people cannot be forced into accepting Christian faith (see Slenczka 2010). Others may have more positive Christian reasons for affirming a pluralist approach, such as the conviction that God may also have been revealed to non-Christians, so

¹¹ The classic critique of Constantinianism is found in John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* (1972).

that Christians have something to learn from them, and vice versa.¹² These are but some possibilities within the one, broad tradition.

Some Muslims may want an Islamic state while realising that this is, at least for the time being, not feasible given their minority status in a particular society, so that freedom of religion is currently in their own best interest since it allows them to survive. Other Muslims may welcome pluralism because they have a different understanding of *jihad* – one that does not aim at acquiring political power.

Some “confessing atheists”¹³ like Dawkins may think it preferable that religion, or at least the religious education of children, be banned altogether (see Dawkins 2006:309-344), but realise that this might lead to such extreme conflict that one will just have to grudgingly accept tolerance of religion – a kind of “Thomist atheism”.¹⁴ Other atheists might be less hostile to religion and simply desire to be left alone in their unbelief, on which condition they are also prepared to let believers go about their strange business.

Some citizens may even believe deeply in the false doctrine of a neutral public space and support religious freedom on that basis.

Other examples of reasons why different groups of people may want to live in a society tolerant of religious plurality could be multiplied at will. My point, as I have already indicated, is simply that supporters of pluralism as a social ideal do not require a single, shared set of arguments based on incorrigible or universally-accepted premises stripped of all tradition or authority in order to realise that ideal. They can all agree – for reasons on which they will differ – that the state should not have an official religion, without thereby implying that public life can be religion free.

What is required is not a “one-step apologetics”¹⁵ for pluralism, but enough people who are willing to join forces in support of such pluralism for reasons based on their diverse, and often even contradictory, fundamental commitments. Those involved need not assume a universal, non-religious starting point (whatever that may be) on which to build their co-operation, but can *discover*, through (often strained) dialogue with one another, that they share certain assumptions, while recognising the differences that remain.¹⁶

I as a Christian, for example, might share numerous social aims with a Buddhist, and even understand the Buddhist’s reasons for her commitments to those aims, without those reasons being my reasons and vice versa. In fact, I could even try to persuade the Buddhist of, say, a particular policy on the basis of some of those very Buddhist reasons I do not share – i.e. I could provide reasons for her that are not reasons for me.

12 See, for example, John Stackhouse Jr (2002:228): “... we can recognize that God may have given them some things to teach us, and we gratefully receive them in the mutual exchange of God’s great economy of shalom.”

13 I borrow the phrase “confessing atheists” (Afrikaans: belydende ateïste) from the literary scholar J.C. Kannemeyer (personal communication).

14 See Aquinas quoted above by Noonan.

15 On “one-step apologetics” (in a completely different context), see John Frame (2000:132-134).

16 A similar logic lies behind Denis Beckett’s playful but very readable novel, *Magenta* (2008), and its non-fiction sequel, *Themba’s Head* (2009).

We should also guard against an essentialist understanding of religious identity. It is always a simplification to speak of what “Buddhists” or “Christians” or “Jews” believe, as if all those sharing a certain tradition believe the same things, and as if the beliefs of individual members of the species *homo religiosus* remain unchanged throughout their lives. When people interact, even if they participate in very different religious traditions, they inevitably rub off on one another. A Christian need not convert to Islam for him or her to be influenced by the Islamic tradition. Christians can even gain new insights into their own faith by understanding Islam better.

The same dynamics apply at levels other than the religious. A society will tolerate, welcome or actively support cultural, linguistic and other forms of plurality only if enough members of that society see this as desirable. Those who support it will do so with varying degrees of enthusiasm and without necessarily agreeing among themselves on the reasons for doing so, but one thing that all those reasons will have in common is that, ultimately, they are religious in nature. Here, as in the case of explicitly religious plurality, agreement on “what needs to be done” (to quote Fish again) will not rest on a universally shared foundation, but on the always shifting overlaps between different ways of looking at, and being in, the world.

PRECARIOUS PLURALISM

One possible objection to this understanding of pluralism is that it makes tolerance and mutual respect seem very precarious. What if the different reasons why different groups of people subscribe to a more or less liberal arrangement lead, at some point, to a parting of the ways and a collapse of the social contract?

That is indeed an ever-present danger, but it is also an inescapable part of the human condition. Have not humane societies always been precarious, always tottering over the abyss? Was there ever really a single set of reasons shared by all so-called secular thinkers for supporting liberal democracy over, say, communism or theocracy?

A related objection might be phrased by means of the question: What to do with those who do not support a pluralistic arrangement? They will have their reasons for not supporting it, just as pluralists of various stripes will have their own reasons for supporting it. “So it goes” (to quote Kurt Vonnegut). But again, it is no different with the myth of a neutral public space: There have always been, and probably will always be, people who do not want to respect or even tolerate others and who will therefore not play by the agreed upon rules. Surely no-one ever believed that the discovery of a knock down argument for liberalism, based on incorrigible premises, would lead to everyone falling in line with the rules of civility?

CHRISTIAN REASONS FOR PLURALISM

If my analysis is correct, it follows that it is one of the tasks of Christian theology to look for, and to explicate, convincing Christian reasons why Christians should support social arrangements that are plurality friendly – rather than buy into so-called secular reasons that are in fact disguised religious reasons. Whole books can be, and have been, written about this,

but let me point very briefly to three perspectives that seem fruitful to me: one Christological, one ecclesiological, one linked to the doctrine of God.

Christ and pluralism

In answering the question, “How can one speak of Jesus theologically in the face of the accusation of intolerance?”, Ralf Wüstenberg (2009)¹⁷ makes a number of points that can assist in developing a strong Christian case for pluralism. First,

Those who accuse Christology of being in principle incapable of dialogue, overlook the fact ... that the question of Jesus Christ appears in diverse ways in domains outside Christianity.

That is to say, Christians do not own Jesus. Jesus is also known and appreciated, albeit in different ways, in other religious traditions, and in philosophy, literature, arts and forms of popular culture that do not reflect a Christian outlook. What Christians have to say on the basis of their commitment to Christ is therefore of interest also to non-Christians (and the other way around).

Second, supposedly pluralistic objections to the “absolutist claims” of Christianity “cannot be satisfactorily dealt with either by relativism or by moralism”. For Wüstenberg, the principle of tolerance is “hidden in faith itself”:

Faith is a gift and therefore not absolute; for Christian faith only God, whose essence is truth, is absolute. All truth, wherever it appears, is relative in relation to that truth. There exists, therefore, no absolutist claim of *Christianity*, which one would need to defend on theological grounds (Wüstenberg’s emphasis).

Third, Wüstenberg appeals to the biblical tradition, which “significantly strengthens the notion of the value and dignity of the human person”. The fact that faith in Jesus Christ does not depend on itself, but on God, opens, “from the inside” (“arising from the nature of faith itself”), a door to religious pluralism:

The impossibility of achieving faith autonomously implies a faith based freedom from all powers and authorities; it is also the reason why, in Christian faith, the temptation must be withstood to try and force others to believe.

Finally, “for Christian faith the possibility cannot be excluded that God may also have made himself known to others in different ways”. The same point is made differently by Hendrikus Berkhof (1979:199), when he writes: “the knowledge of God in Christ is not *exclusive*; it is *normative*”.¹⁸

Thus, Christologically, it is precisely from the point of view of Christianity’s “absolutist claims” that a case for pluralism can be made. Faith in Christ, depending on how it is construed, may even translate into an “absolutist” commitment to a radical form of pluralism.

¹⁷ All English translations from this book are my own.

¹⁸ See also the references to Stackhouse and Slenzcka above.

Church and pluralism

At this point, Wüstenberg's argument resonates strongly with Christoph Schwöbel's suggestion¹⁹ that the church is called to be "a school of pluralism". The church, according to this view, is a "cultural space"²⁰ characterised, among other things, by pluralism. Therefore, Schwöbel (2003) can even speak of "Christian faith in pluralism". The church is the embodiment of faith in the God-given possibility of living in solidarity with the other.

From this kind of perspective, the problem of pluralism is not one that confronts the Christian community only secondarily. On the contrary, the church exists for the very purpose of expressing unity in plurality, and as such to function as a radical critique of unredeemed humanity's inability to establish true pluralism. It is a "school of pluralism", not only in the sense that it teaches Christians a truly pluralistic outlook and trains them in the requisite skills, but also in the sense that, by its mere existence, it bears witness to what it has learned.

Ecclesiologically, then, it is precisely from within a particularistic community of believers that vistas are opened up towards an eschatological future of universal unity in plurality.

Pluralism and the Other

A central theme in the theology of C.S. Lewis is "the taste for the other".²¹ Throughout his work he interprets salvation and sanctification, and consequently Christian ethics, in terms of a looking away from oneself towards what is outside and other than oneself. By contrast, damnation or "hell" is conceived, by Lewis, as being turned completely into oneself (like Gallaxhar in *Monsters versus Aliens!*²²). (Herein, Lewis clearly stands in the Augustinian tradition with its concept of *homo incurvatus*.)

A healthy "taste for the other" would involve both a love of nature and of simple pleasures, as well as interest in and concern for other people. However, all these "others" point to the divine Other, of which they are reminders. In his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* (1966), Lewis tells the story of his discovery that "joy" can only be had when one is focused neither on it, nor on other persons and things associated with it, but on the One to whom it bears witness. And even then "joy" is itself a longing, an absence which points to the Other as the future of uninterrupted union with God.

According to this view, an outward orientation, an interest in and passion for what is different – "the taste for the other" – is what men and women are made for. Ethically, this has the implication that there is no place for egotism, chauvinism or intolerance, for these vices all reflect a love of oneself and what is *of* oneself, rather than a taste for the other. Otherness then becomes not a threat to one's identity, but that which needs to be given space to exist in order for one to become who one truly is.

¹⁹ In a lecture at the University of Groningen in 2000. See also Christoph Schwöbel (2000).

²⁰ See previous note.

²¹ For a detailed study of this theme as a central key to understanding Lewis' work, see Gilbert Meilaender (2003). A similar line of thought is developed by David Kelsey (2009).

²² See the introductory section of this article.

Thus, theologically, it is precisely from the starting point of a radically transcendent otherness – one with a “habitation and a name”: that of Triune God – that believers are freed from selfishness and sameness towards not only tolerance of difference, but an eager taste for it. Much more needs to be said of this, but what has been mentioned is offered as mere suggestions of directions in which some theological themes might be developed.

CONCLUSION

In short: The celebration, defence and promotion of plurality are not *adiaphora* (“indifferent things” from the point of view of the gospel), but a central part of the Christian faith. Pluralism is not a modern “problem” with which Christianity is unexpectedly and unhappily confronted. It lies, rather, at the very heart of the gospel itself. This gospel is to a very large extent a message *about* pluralism.

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