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Smashing the 'idol' of religious superiority

Pluralist theologians gather in England for international summit

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
Birmingham, England

Jewish lore offers a story about Abraham set in the workshop of his father, who, according to the tale, was a maker of idols. One day the father ran an errand and left the young Abraham in charge. In that moment, Abraham had his revelation about the one true God, and set about smashing the idols. He left only the biggest one intact, and put his hammer in its hands.

When his father returned, he flew into a rage.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"They had a fight," Abraham said, "and the biggest one killed the others."

"What are you talking about?" the father demanded. "They're just statues."

"Ah," Abraham replied. "Then why worship them?"

American Rabbi Michael Kogan related the story at a first-of-its-kind international summit of theologians committed to the pluralist view of religions in early September, and it nicely crystallized their aim: smashing what these thinkers regard as the "idol" of claims to superiority by one religion over others.

Roughly, pluralism is the claim that all the world's great religions are valid paths of salvation. In theological debate it's contrasted to "exclusivism," the view that only one religion saves and followers of others are excluded, and "inclusivism," the view that only one religion saves and followers of others can be included. The official Roman Catholic position is a form of inclusivism -- salvation comes from Jesus Christ, but non-Christians can receive its fruits, though in a less comprehensive way.

Over four days, Sept. 6-9, 40 leading pluralist theologians gathered in Birmingham, England, the home of English philosopher John Hick, who at 81 is the acknowledged father of the movement. In books such as 1986's *God Has Many Names*, Hick argues that since Christianity does not produce more kindness and goodness than other religions, it's untenable to regard it as a superior revelation.

Catholic luminaries such as Paul Knitter of Xavier University and Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight and Chester Gillis, both of Georgetown University, took part, as well as Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and Sikhs. All told, some 40 scholars from 16 countries participated, a virtual "who's who" of the pluralist movement. Participants adopted a statement of key principles.

Tensions at the summit included:

- Is it important to persuade religious institutions of the pluralist view, or is it better to make the case from the outside, assuming that institutions will catch up?
- Are the pluralists on a frontier where the mainstream will eventually arrive, or is pluralism destined to remain at the margins?
- How far is too far? Should pluralists press ahead with radical new approaches or should they slow down for the "people in the pews"?
- Do pluralists primarily want dialogue with others, including fundamentalists who reject pluralism? Or do they want to be evangelists, converting those who don't agree?

Guardians of orthodoxy in most traditions, perhaps especially Christianity and Islam, take a dim view of pluralism, since it relativizes their priesthood, cult and revelation. In Roman Catholicism, this backlash was expressed in the September 2000 Vatican document *Dominus Iesus*, which insisted that followers of other religions are in a "gravely deficient situation" in comparison to Christians who alone "have the fullness of the means of salvation."

Catholic critics worry that pluralism produces relativism, meaning skepticism about objective truth. They also say that pluralism implies at least a reinterpretation, if not an outright rejection, of elements of the Nicene Creed -- such as that Jesus is the "only Son of God," not one savior among many, and that he came for the salvation of all, not just of Christians.

Knitter argued that the pluralists accept universal but not absolute truth -- a doctrine can be true for all, but it cannot be the only truth.

As for the Creed, Hick said alternative readings are possible.

"Once [pluralism] is accepted, the theologians and exegetes, who operate when necessary as theological spin doctors, will find ways to give it the stamp of approval," he said.

Hick's own biography offers an example of the costs of embracing the pluralist view. In 1987, while teaching at the Claremont Graduate School in California, he was rejected as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States after a wrenching four-year debate. A Jewish participant pointed to Britain's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was threatened with a heresy trial for offering a positive view of other religions in his 2002 book, *The Dignity of Difference*. In the end, Sacks revised the book.

Despite such tensions, Hick insisted that the pluralist view will prevail, comparing it to the acceptance of biological evolution by mainstream Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Others were less sanguine.

"I have no expectation that pluralism will become the official understanding of the Roman Catholic church," Haight said. "What I'm trying to do is carve out space for it to be accepted as an orthodox Catholic view, even if it's a minority."

Haight's 2000 book *Jesus, Symbol of God*, in which he presents a doctrine of Christ that stresses his humanity in order to support a pluralist approach, triggered a Vatican investigation that is still underway.

Ursula King of the University of Bristol argued that interfaith dialogue is often blind to gender, while feminists aren't generally interested in religious diversity.

"At the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, 10 percent of the participants were women," King said. Observing the low percentage of women in Birmingham, King said: "We haven't come very far in 100 years."

Some practitioners of Eastern religions asserted that pluralism comes naturally to their traditions. Japanese participants observed, for example, that it's common for them to practice both Shintoism and Buddhism. Others, however, argued that Eastern religious history is not quite so harmonious, pointing to the long history of Buddhist/Hindu conflict and the current wave of Hindu nationalism in India.

Christian struggles with pluralism found parallels in other traditions.

Abdulkarim Soroush, a Shiite Muslim from Iran, said theologians committed to a "reformed Islam" are reinterpreting the Quran, drawing on the distinction between portions revealed in Mecca and those in Medina. In Mecca, Soroush said, Muhammad was strictly a prophet, and these texts are positive about other religions. In Medina, Muhammad ran a state, and the revelation became more legalistic and harsh toward "nonbelievers."

Traditionally, Soroush said, Islamic jurists have favored the Medina texts. Reform-minded theologians argue that the Medina revelation represents only one possible application of Mecca's religious and moral principles, which should be seen as more fundamental.

Kogan advocated a similar reinterpretation of Jewish doctrines.

"I believe God chose the Jewish people," he said. "But who said God can only make one choice?" He described pluralism as a shift from the definite to the indefinite article -- from being "the" chosen people or true church to "a" chosen people or true church.

In the end, Haight suggested the summit think of itself as the nucleus of "a single, salutary multireligious prophetic voice in our world."

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* Rome correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@natcath.org.

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