

By J. DEOTIS ROBERTS, SR.

“Theology of Religions: The Black Religious Heritage”

In this study I am thinking aloud about some crucial considerations facing those who desire an encounter between the religions. Many individuals have unintentionally arrived in their ecumenical experience where they must out of necessity deal with the issues involved in inter-religious dialogue if they are to maintain intellectual integrity and spiritual honesty. We live in a time of world history resulting from breakthroughs in science and technology as well as the social and cultural revolutions. We must also reckon with the knowledge explosion in pre-literate studies (i.e. anthropology, archeology and linguistics) as well as the reverse missionary zeal manifest by non-western religions. In our own country the appeal of Zen to young White intellectuals is matched by the appeal of Islam to Black intellectuals.

My own wrestle with truth, mainly in the treatment of the problem of faith and reason and the study of Christian Platonism, has led me step by step to a consideration of what Wilfred C. Smith has called “questions of religious truth.” My interest in ecumenical discussion began when I was a seminarian and increased through travel and experience. In addition, my present teaching has caused this interest to reach a level of intensity which now requires some serious attention. First of all I wish to make a brief exploration into what has been done. Then I shall make some preliminary suggestions concerning guidelines for future discussions, personal encounter, mutual understanding, and cooperation between persons of various religious backgrounds.¹ What is being attempted here is exploratory — it is a maiden voyage into what may almost be described as “an uncharted ocean.” It is a sincere effort to cast some light upon a very important contemporary issue in religious thought. The questions are searching and numerous. Some are: Is it possible to be a Christian theologian, to take seriously, even convictionally, the thought, faith, and experience of the Christian Faith, and at the same time ascribe to the claims to religious truth and meaning of other religions? Is it possible for the ecumenical movement to be inter-religious as well as inter-denominational and inter-faith in character? Is it possible for a black theologian to make contact with the traditional African religions and forms of non-Christian black nationalism?

¹The Temple of Understanding to be built in Washington, D.C. and which is designed to be an educational, cultural and worship center for six of the world's great religions has real promise as a “spiritual United Nations.” It has been my privilege to see the development of this “idea” into a near reality. Most of the participants in this effort in the D.C. area have been engaged in discussions and programing on the Washington Inter-religious Committee. As a participant, I am hopeful of what this venture may mean in the very near future. See, “The Validity Which Each of the World Religions Accords to Other Religions,” findings of The First Washington Conference on Inter-religious understanding, The Hague: Dr. W. Junk N.V., 1968. See also, *Congressional Record*, Feb. 28, 1969.

I. THE ATTITUDE OF CHRISTIANS TO OTHER RELIGIONS

The approach or method to be employed in the investigation of other religions will be determined in large measure by our attitude. Rather than a definitive or schematic analysis of possible attitudes, I shall present some examples of varied postures assumed. There are several important studies dealing with this crucial matter. Hendrik Kraemer, E. C. Dewick, A. C. Bouquet, Arnold Toynbee, E. L. Allen, Ninian Smart, Paul Tillich, Heinz Schlette, Arend T. Van Leeuwen, Kenneth Cragg, Cantwell Smith, Houston Smith, Kenneth Morgan, Philip Ashby, Joseph Kitagawa, Charles Long, Leonard Barrett and many others continue to treat this urgent problem. If there is any justification in my looking at the problem, it may be that I am not completely satisfied with what has been done so far and that so few theologians are seriously engaged in this effort.

It is far easier for a philosopher, an anthropologist or historian of religion to develop a healthy attitude in the investigation of an alien faith than it is for a theologian — even a philosophical theologian like Tillich. No one, save perhaps a missionary of a fundamentalist stance, has more difficulty than a theologian in conceding to the possibility that other religions may have the right to the claim of religious truth.

The stature of Karl Barth, together with his Christo-centric understanding of revelation, eclipsed whatever dialogue between the Christian Faith and other religions which had appeared earlier in the writings of Ernest Troeltsch and Rudolph Otto of Germany, G. van Der Leeuw, W. Brede Kristensen and C. P. Tiele of Holland, Nathan Soderblom of Sweden, and William Temple and Herbert Farmer of England, to mention only a few. Barth maintained that the Christian revelation was not to be questioned — “God speaks and man listens.” He then went on to make his view of revelation dependent upon the Bible as witness to the Word of God centered in this revelation in Jesus Christ.

Some modification of this is found in Brunner’s “special” — “general” division of revelation. This was rejected by Barth with an angry *Nein*. In *Revelation and Reason*, Brunner had seen the possibility of some knowledge of God as coming through the instrumentality of human reason. Barth declared that any attempt at seeking such knowledge through reason was futile, meaningless and even sinful. Brunner’s view of revelation was so patronizing in reference to non-western religions that even the Christians in Japan rejected it saying, “leave us alone with Christ.” Western civilization suffers from pride and even Christian theologians suffer from pharisaism.

Hendrik Kraemer agrees with Barth that there is no point of contact between Christianity and other religions. Whatever his difference with Barth, he is likewise convinced that there is no valid revelation outside the Bible. All non-biblical religions, if not sin, are what Kraemer calls “naturalistic religions of transempirical realization.”² That is to say, men

²Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. This work resulted from the World Missionary Conference held at Tambaram, India in 1938. Kraemer’s later works, i.e., *Religion and the Christian Faith*, London: Lutterworth, 1961 and *World Cultures and World Religions*, London: Lutterworth, 1960, have about the same stance.

in these religions try to save themselves, to become divine, and have no authentic revelation from God. Kraemer's book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* was launched in 1938 by the International Missionary Council. Archbishop William Temple, whose own position was so different from Kraemer's, praised this effort in his foreword to the book. Kraemer's work was a reaction against what he regarded as extreme liberalism. The book succeeded in creating a split in the world-wide missionary movement between the major theologians of the day. Kraemer argues in circles and evades the real problems of the confrontation of religions. Even though Kraemer was once a missionary in Indonesia, he illustrates the worst in "Theological Colonialism," and his works, though scholarly, reveal no real openness to truth. Among black theologians, James H. Cone is closest to Barth and Kraemer. This is indeed unfortunate since he is the pioneer among black theologians and the dialogue with Africans has just begun. We shall pursue this point later.

At an earlier meeting of the World Missionary Conference at Jerusalem in 1928, some distinguished delegates had urged cooperation of Christians and members of other religions in the face of the rising secularism of today.³ In 1932, W. E. Hocking in his *Living Religions and World Faith* looks towards a single world religion similar to what he envisioned as a world government. He speaks in the volume of a "re-conception" or rethinking of one's own religion and the willingness to accept help from other religionists in order to distinguish what is vital and what is only tertiary in our faith. A Christian theologian would be wise to sit loose to any trend leading to a single world faith. Syncretism is a "dead-end-street" of "everything" and "nothing." It is wise in recognizing what religions may have in common, but in so far as it ignores fundamental differences, its zeal for unity leads to the bankruptcy of all vital religion.

We have reasons to be grateful to many Christian thinkers who have been students and learners as they have observed the faithful in many lands and among many religions. If these have not answered all our questions they have surely pointed in the right direction. Many have observed with appreciation what may best be described as "cosmic persons" whose lives radiate the best values in religion and ethics as we Christians know it. How is a Christian theologian to explain such a phenomenon? In some cases, the deep spirituality and moral integrity of a Zen Buddhist or a Bhakti-Hindu cannot be explained by any known contact, religious or cultural, with the Judaeo-Christian West. Few Christian theologians would find it possible to agree with Cantwell Smith that a Christian should rejoice upon meeting such a person.

Canon E. C. Dewick, inspired by the Quaker Robert Barclay, argues that even the heathen might be saved.⁴ According to Dewick, the Word

³The result was a volume entitled, *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems*, London: I.M.C., 1928: Some writers of essays were: Nicol Macnicol, William Temple, Kenneth J. Saunders, Rufus Jones and A. K. Reischauer.

⁴E. C. Dewick, *Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1953.

of God, Christ, is to be found far beyond the New Testament, operative in creation, in the Old Testament, and beyond. The Logos-doctrine, applied to other religions, is supported in the writing of William Temple. According to Temple the Word of God—that is to say by Jesus Christ—gave utterance to Isaiah, Plato, Zoroaster, Buddha and Confucius. This one Divine Light enlightens every man in his own measure.⁵ God's revelation radiates throughout all creation as well as in the Incarnate Word.

The Swedish Archbishop Soderblom wrote *The Living God*.⁶ In this work he summed up what he understood to be the truths of other religions. He inquired not only if God reveals himself to other peoples, but does he continue to reveal himself. He regards as absurd the notion that divine revelation was finished in the Bible. God is a living God, and man is always seeking him, so he is always responding to men. Indeed, any other view would be a denial of the nature and activity of God, as love and living. The Logos-doctrine, which had been taught in the early Church by such men as Justin Martyr and Origen, had been eclipsed, but now theology must recover it again in the light of the modern knowledge of other faiths. All religions are rooted in the revelation of God and all valid religious experience comes from God. Soderblom concludes that if there is no revelation outside the Bible, there is no revelation inside it. With this conclusion William Temple would agree:

“Unless all existence is a medium of revelation, no particular revelation is possible . . . Either all occurrences are in some degree revelation of God, or else there is no such revelation at all; for the conditions of the possibility of any revelation require that there should be nothing which is not revelation. Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky can He be revealed in the rising of the Son of Man from the dead.”⁷

From the Roman Catholic standpoint R. C. Zaehner sees other religions besides Judaism as preparations for the Gospel. Both Zoroaster and Muhammad were true prophets. Muhammad's Semitic religion is nearer to us than that of India and further East. That God revealed himself “at sundry times and diverse manners” is to be extended beyond the Old Testament. The words of the Epistle to the Hebrews refers to a “Gospel according to the Gentiles.” All partial revelations of God fall into place when seen perfected in Christ.

The Indian religious tradition is most impressive to Zaehner. His comparative study of Sankara's bhakti-mysticism with Muslim Sufi

⁵ See my *From Puritanism to Platonism*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968, p. 253.

⁶ Nathan Soderblom, *The Living God*, Boston: Beacon, 1962. Nels Ferre' explores the openness of the love-motif to world religions in his *Finality of Christ*, New York: Harper, 1963. Ferre' asserts first that all truth is universal. Then he holds that all truths belong to the Christian and that Jesus Christ is not unique but final. This is a “liberal” view which turns out to be very narrow.

⁷ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, London: 1943, p. 306. Quoted by J. D. Roberts, Loc. Cit. see, A. C. Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions*, London: James Nisbet, 1958, pp. 335-423, has provided what he called a “theological revaluation” of non-Christian religions. It is a praiseworthy historical summary of what Christian scholars had done down to 1958.

mysticism in the Indian environment ranks with Otto's *Mysticism East and West* and Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. Zaehner's book is entitled *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*. In Zaehner's view, after Israel and the Semitic religions, India comes next. It is strange that Christianity has recognized the virtues of Greek philosophy, but has overlooked the more profoundly religious insights of the Indian religions. Zaehner observes that as we have become aware of the sacred literature of Asiatic peoples in the last two centuries, it would have been well to have looked for the *praeparatio evangelica* among the nations of Asia rather than so much among the Greeks. Zaehner reveals no interest in African religions at this point. In his later more extended volume, *Concordant Discord*, Zaehner explores the unity-in-diversity among religions, but African religion receives no real consideration.

Asia, according to Zaehner, is the birthplace of every religion that has stood the test of time. The progressive revelation of India began with the disclosure of one principle which informs both the cosmos and the human soul and finally asserts that the human soul is immortal and that God is personal. Zaehner regards the religions of Asia as preparatory to Christianity where the highest insights of Hindus and Buddhists are fulfilled.⁸ This treatment of all non-Christian truths as subservient to one's own faith is part of our problem. Hindus are just as anxious to conclude that all religions are Hindu as we are to make all religions Christian. This is common notwithstanding the fact that few Hindu scholars have attempted to study any non-Indian religion. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Zaehner's predecessor at Oxford, though well exposed to Western thought and experience, tries to convince Christians that they are really Hindus under the skin. Thus, this position, from either East or West, is too narrow in motive and does not account for the fulfillment which hundreds of millions of humans find in their own religion.

While natural law, the revelation of God in nature and the conception of the revelation through reason in Roman Theology have left the door open, there are signs that more vigorous efforts are now required by this tradition. In Karl Rahner and Heinz Robert Schlette we have indications that there are those who are willing to meet the new challenge. Vatican II has pointed the way by its urging "a deeper study" of the church's relationship with non-Christian religions.⁹ It is instructive to note, in the meantime, a considerable amount of constructive thought by Roman Catholic theologians on the encounter between religions.¹⁰

⁸ R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times* (London, 1958), pp. 27, 165-166, 183. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, New York: Oxford, 1959, pp. 306-348.

⁹ See, "Declaration on the Relationship of The Church to Non-Christian Religions," *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York: Guild Press, 1966, pp. 660-668. Cf. Robert Avens, "The Other Dialogue: Christianity and Non-Christianity Religions," pp. 65-69 in *The Catholic World*, May, 1968.

¹⁰ I owe a great debt to my students in Non-Western Religions at the School of Sacred Theology at Catholic University for such enlightenment as I now have on this contribution. Much of the material is still in articles. Two worthy examples are: Gregory Baum, "Christianity and Other Religions," *Cross Currents*, XVI: 4 (Fall, 1966), pp. 447-462 and Antonio R. Gauller, "Descriptive and Evaluative Formulae for Comparative Religion," *Theological Studies*, Vol. XXIX: I (March, 1968), pp. 57-71.

Rahner, in a lecture delivered to students at Innsbruck in 1961, advocated a more positive evaluation of the non-Christian religious world.¹¹ It is a breakthrough by virtue of the fact that Rahner asserts that the non-Christian religions are positive, legitimate, divinely-willed ways of salvation. He reasons that a morally good act is supernaturally elevated because of the supernatural order in which man exists, and any moral action is necessarily social because of the social nature of men who perform moral actions. Therefore, the institutional religions comprising these men who perform moral actions are supernaturally elevated also.

Schlette is concerned with the problem of hermeneutic in comparative religion, the place of non-Christian religions in the history of salvation and the future prospects in the developing theology of religions.¹² According to Schlette, world history and the history of salvation are not antagonistic but complementary. He sees "world history religions" as "ordinary" means to salvation and the "history" of salvation as the "special" or "extraordinary" means of achieving salvation for man. Those who are elected to the special call are to be deputies of salvation for all.

E. L. Allen, as a philosopher-theologian, accords full value to the spiritual structures of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Their value is independent of any incidental relation to the Christian Faith. The great religions are to be accepted for their own sake and not for the tribute they may pay to Christianity.¹³ They are important for their worth in view of what they mean to multitudes who have found shelter and inspiration in them. Their stance is invaluable when we consider how religions impinge upon each other today. Other lines of development exist besides our own which have their value. New lines of truth appear, which may strengthen or challenge the Christian Faith. Other religions should be studied from "within", they are to be understood in their own historical and religious setting in the *light of the worship and life of their devotees*. Kenneth Morgan through his attitude and concretely through the trilogy of volumes on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, has pointed us in this direction.¹⁴ According to Allen, *The Gita, Dhamma-*

¹¹ See Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," *The Church: Readings in Theology* (New York: Kennedy, 1963). Noteworthy also are: Christopher Derrick, editor, *Light of Revelation and Non-Christians*, Staten Island, New York: Pauline Fathers, 1965, and Jean Danielou, *The Salvation of The Nations*, Notre Dame, Md.: University Press, 1962.

¹² See Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965, pp. 63-107, 117-118.

¹³ See E. L. Allen, *Christianity Among the Religions*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960. Cf. Ninian Smart, "Christianity and Other Religions" in A. R. Vidler, editor, *Soundings* (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1966), pp. 105-121. Smart argues that Christians may no longer be isolationists, ignoring the claims of other religions. We should seek an unbiased knowledge of other faiths. In his *World Religions: A Dialogue* (London: S. C. M., 1960), Smart attempts to enter into theological dialogue with other great religions on such matters as creation and salvation without sacrificing his own Christian convictions. He reveals real *empathy* for other faiths and is able to appreciate the most subtle differences in meaning.

¹⁴ Kenneth Morgan edited the essays written by native scholars who "believe in these religions. Through Morgan's interest in this approach, many young scholars, including the present writer have had the experience of travel and personal dialogue with non-Western religionists."

pada and *Quran* are devotional works for millions whose lives are strengthened by their teachings.

Arnold Toynbee, a Christian and a historian of distinction, is keenly aware of the importance of inter-religious dialogue. He is against intolerance and for charity among the religions. He makes the point that the great religions hold in common the belief that man is not the spiritually supreme being in the universe.¹⁵ Toynbee reasons that the affirmation of a divine reality should unite millions of adherents around the globe against the self-defeating assertions of both Communism and Nationalism.

Arend Theodor Van Leeuwen takes the theme of Harvey Cox's *Secular City* into world history. While Cox speaks mainly to affluent White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants in suburbia U.S.A., Van Leeuwen is concerned with the world-wide mission of the church.¹⁶ First he attempts to interpret the effect of Western civilization and the Judaeo-Christian tradition on the great technological advance and progress made in the Western world. This progress, according to Van Leeuwen, has begun to affect the nations of the East and Africa, and thus for missionaries it has created unprecedented problems in bringing the Gospel to all creatures.

After surveying the whole cultural history of man and the role of religion in various cultural contexts, he lifts up two key ideas — "ontocracy" and "theocracy." According to Van Leeuwen, the civilizations of the Near East, the Middle East and Far East, likewise the peoples of Africa are "ontocratic." Ontocratic civilizations view the world as one reality — the sacred and the secular are merged. This identity makes progress difficult if not impossible. Change is anathema; for everything comes from God and is seen as a part of the divine world order which man dare not upset.

By an analysis of both the Old and New Testaments, Van Leeuwen sees the biblical ideal as theocratic. God is supreme over all creation and nothing in creation is like him. Because of this there was a distinct division between the sacred and the secular. He adds to this the Greek achievement. The biblical ideal together with the Greek ideal of the *Logos* provide an "unbeatable team" which set the stage for the modern scientific and technological revolution.

It is obvious that Van Leeuwen is biased in his study toward the superiority of both western culture and religions. Such subjectivity cannot be rewarded by any deep understanding of the "faith of other men." Surely there must be a method by which theologians may overcome such a negative impasse in the attempt to have a vital encounter with other religions. But to his credit he does include the African experience. Others have left it out.

¹⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, New York: Scribner's 1957, pp. 85-112.

¹⁶ Arend T. Van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, New York: Scribner's 1964 I am deeply impressed by Geoffrey Parrinder's *Comparative Religion*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962, especially chapter IV, pp. 47-55. Though following his lead, I have gone beyond his discussion both in investigation and criticism.

II. RELIGIONSWISSENSCHAFT AND THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Resources on the history of religions as well as the phenomenology of religion are now rather abundant. My concern here is to indicate the manner in which these academic disciplines have influenced theology. While I am aware that there is a distinction between phenomenology of religion and history of religions, the technical distinction is observed here only for convenience of discussion. Continental scholars such as Van der Leeuw, W. Brede Kristensen, Mircea Eliade and C. J. Bleeker are strong on phenomenology of religion. American born or educated scholars like Joseph Kitagawa and Charles Long have done extensive research in the area and are strong on the history of religions. Both movements belong to the "science of religion" or *Religionwissenschaft*.¹⁷ British scholars seem to sit loose to both and emphasize comparative ideas or beliefs. Two excellent examples of the British stance are Geoffrey Parrinder and Ninian Smart. My view is in favor of suspending theological judgment until considerable non-theological investigation has taken place. Better still, theological comparison should be informed by relevant non-theological scholarship.¹⁸

The search for a rapprochement between theology and *Religionwissenschaft* goes back at least to Hegel and Schleiermacher. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel investigates all religions as they evolve into the perfect expression of religious consciousness in Christianity. Hegel's studies were limited, but the concern he had and the skills employed in the handling of his data were exemplary.

Schleiermacher is concerned about the study of religions in his *Speeches*. The fifth and final *Speech* is devoted to the religions. Most of it is taken up with the distinction between positive and natural religion. His phenomenology of religion is fundamental to his distinction. He suggests that the Infinite is always attempting to communicate with the finite, a communication which does take place but to different degrees and in different manifestations. The religious sentiment then admits of great variety; yet there is truly only one religion, and it encompasses all religions. Schleiermacher approaches his study while holding Christianity in the highest regard as a positive religion and while disclaiming natural religion.

According to John Carman, Gerardus van der Leeuw was one who applied phenomenology to theology as well as to world religions. Though known in this country as a phenomenologist of religion, much of his work in his native Dutch is in the field of Theology. There are certain steps in the science of phenomenology according to Van der Leeuw: (1) empathetic understanding of the phenomenon; (2) ordering

¹⁷ Here I refer the reader to Robert D. Baird's excellent discussion entitled: "Interpretative Categories and the History of Religions," *History and Theory*, Beiheft 8, pp. 17-30.

¹⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speech to Its Cultural Despisers*, New York: Harper, 1958, pp. 217, 231, 233. See also, Nolan P. Jacobson and William E. Winn, "Christianity's Debt to the Cultural Despisers," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, XX: 1, 1963-64, pp. 53-60 and J. Deotis Roberts, "Grace in Hindu Personal Theism," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 1, July, 1967, pp. 30-40.

of the material: "We must find the understandable relations which make of the melody *one organic whole*." (3) "drawing up *ideal types and ideal-typical connections*," which have no "reality-value" but which constitute the realm of meaning; (4) *understanding* of structures which is as complete as possible. This requires restraint from any truth judgments about the phenomenon. It is not surprising that his phenomenological method leads him into the comparative study of religion. As Carman points out, however, his devotion to Incarnational Theology is so strong that the link between the Christian Faith and non-Christian religions is not clear.¹⁹

The book that has challenged mystics, phenomenologists, psychologists and many others who study religious phenomena is Rudolph Otto's *Idea of the Holy*. It is little known that Otto was well established as a theologian, that he spent some time in India, studied Sanskrit, translated the *Gita*, wrote a book on Bhakti-Hinduism, *India's Religion of Grace* and a comparison of the mysticism of Sankara of India and Eckhart of Germany, *Mysticism East and West*. Otto, in *Idea of the Holy*, attempted to examine religious experience. He finds a feeling of terror before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), the majesty (*majestas*) that emanates an overwhelming superiority or power; he finds religious fear before the fascinating mystery (*mysterium fascinans*) in which perfect fullness of being flowers. Otto characterizes all these experiences as numinous (from the Latin *numen*, god). They are induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power. The numinous presents itself as something "wholly other" (*ganz andere*). It is like nothing human or cosmic, confronted by it, man senses his profound nothingness.²⁰

Eliade in *Sacred and the Profane* asserts that man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane (secular). To designate the act of manifestation, Eliade proposes the term *hierophany* — that something sacred shows itself to us. The sacred stone or tree are worshipped because they are hierophanies, because they show something which is no longer stone or tree, but the sacred.²¹

Paul Tillich, in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, recommends "a critical phenomenology" as a method which supplies a normative description of spiritual meanings. He draws his inspiration as Eliade does from the *Idea of the Holy*. Tillich's concern for revelation outside the Bible, his interest in a theology of culture, his travel to the East which involved conversations with Buddhists and Shintoists, led him to seek what he called the *telos* of existence in non-Christian religions.

¹⁹ John B. Carman, "The Theology of a Phenomenologist: An Introduction to the Theology of G. Van de Leeuw" (from an unpublished paper). Professor Carman of the Harvard World Religions Center is a specialist both in Phenomenology of religion and Indian religious thought.

²⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, New York: Oxford, 1958 (tr. by J. W. Harvey), pp. 3-40.

²¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harper, 1959, pp. 11-13.

In his *Christianity and The Encounter of World Religions*, Tillich insists that Christianity must dialogue with other religions, but rather than start every discussion by enumerating their contrasting concepts of God, man, history, or salvation, they should begin with a consideration of the question of the intrinsic aim of existence, the "telos." It is his belief that from this beginning the parties to these encounters will find a method of approach to further considerations, and to mutual appreciation and respect.²²

Tillich was asked the question near his demise, if you had the opportunity to begin as a Theologian again, where would you start? His answer was that he would begin with the history of religions. His later thought was greatly influenced by his association with Eliade. Eliade, in his essay about Tillich's interest in the history of religions, concludes that Tillich would never have been a historian of religions. Tillich, according to Eliade, was interested mainly in the existential meaning of history. What he was accomplishing was "a renewal of his own Systematic Theology." He was fighting his way to a new understanding of systematic theology.²³

The work of W. C. Smith, the present Director of Harvard's World Religions Center, is worthy of consideration. Smith began as an Islamicist with a critical orientation in sociology of religion. He is now an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada, and has a lively theological interest in world religions. He sincerely wants to understand the "faith of other men" from the "inside." His phenomenological interest extends to all levels and forms of religious experience, but his theological comparisons are restricted primarily to Islam. According to Smith, the word "religion" has been overworked, misused and ill-defined. It is "reified" — it no longer carries the freight of meaning it once did. It is, therefore, inadequate to give an explanation to religious experience. In place of "religion", Smith would substitute "personal faith." Those who wish to study religion must be able to intuit the religious life of the faithful and not be a mere observer as was the case with the historians of religions earlier. On one hand, there is the "cumulative tradition" and on the other, there is "faith". The link between the two is the living person.²⁴

In his inaugural lecture at McGill University, Smith said that "faith is a quality of men's lives."²⁵ He contended that the study of tradition other

²² Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, New York: Columbia University, 1964, pp. 63-64.

²³ Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, edited by Jerald C. Brauer, New York: Harper, 1966. See the essay by M. Eliade, "Paul Tillich and the History of Religions," pp. 31-36. According to Joseph Kitagawa, in a personal conversation, Tillich and Eliade dialogued in a joint seminar for about two years. Tillich's own essay in the same volume, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," pp. 80-94.

²⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: The New American Library, 1963, p. 141.

²⁵ W. C. Smith, "The Comparative Study of Religion: Reflections on the Possibility and Purpose of Religious Science," *McGill University, Faculty, Inaugural Lectures* (Montreal, 1950), p. 51 as quoted in Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa, editors, *The History of Religions: Essays on Methodology*, Chicago: University Press, 1959, p. 34.

than one's own must be a study not merely of tangible externals, but of human hopes and aspirations.

Smith summarizes his program as follows:

"The traditional form of Western scholarship in the study of other men's religion was that of an impersonal presentation of an "it." The first innovation in recent times has been the personalization of the faiths observed, so that one finds a discussion of a "they." Presently the observer becomes personally involved, so that the situation is one of a "we" talking about a "they"! The next step is a dialogue, where 'we' talk to 'you'. If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that 'we' talk with 'you'. The culmination of this progress is when 'we all' are talking with each other about 'us'!"²⁶

III. TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

We bring our discussion to a close with several important considerations. It is important, I believe, for those trained and committed to the tenets of the Christian Faith to investigate non-Western religions. The study of world religions in this time of world history should not be left to anthropologists, historians, linguists or philosophers. Most of these scholars study religion only from the "outside" and philosophers with a religious bend are likely to be syncretists.²⁷ Full appreciation of the convictions of other religions may be had only by those who have deep convictions in reference to their own faith. A theologian should not only have a faith, but "reasons for that faith."

The theologian needs to be informed by inter-disciplinary studies in religion. It is important to become acquainted with "religion" before attempting to study the "religions." The academic study of religion should be on the same basis as anthropology, sociology or psychology. It may therefore, be referred to as "religiology." The objective study of religion should be "descriptive" rather than "evaluative." Most theological studies of other religions are too subjective in the sense that they hasten to pass judgment upon other religions before a careful study is made of what these other religions *really* hold up as beliefs. Christian theologians need a grasp of the phenomenology of religion. According to Jurji, "... phenomenology (in the realm of religion) denotes an order of attested spiritual manifestations as well as a body of verifiable doctrines and persuasions. Its standards include an objective description of realities and a systematic evaluation in keeping with what primary sources reveal."²⁸

The theologian, then, is in a unique position to be able to appreciate what personal faith means to the devotees of other religions once he

²⁶ W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither - and Why?" in Eliade and Kitagawa, *op. cit.*, p. 34. This is the spirit of the phenomenological approach as introduced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology, according to Husserl, is a rigid descriptive analysis of "that which displays itself." We see the object as "essence" or *eidos*. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, tr. by Dorion Cairns (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1960), pp. 69-72.

²⁷ See Robert D. Baird's informative discussion entitled: "Syncretism and the History of Religions." *The Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 1967-68.

²⁸ Edward J. Jurji, *The Phenomenology of Religion*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, p. 1.

commits himself to *listen* and *observe* while suspending judgments which are evaluative. Standing as he does in "The Theological Circle" of his own faith and being involved in the task of giving "intellectual justification for the intellectual content" thereof, he is less likely to suggest "a one least common denominator" religion with assorted segments from several religions.

Syncretism is not as attractive to him as it may be to others who are equally devout. The encounter with other religions must be for him not merely emotive, but cognitive as well. He understands the careful and complicated historical and theological development of each and every doctrine of his faith. He understands the interdependence and inter-relationship of doctrines and is aware of their coherence. Thus, in any theological comparison he makes with another religion, he is aware of what is involved. It is possible, however, that the careful study of other religions may lead to an enrichment of his understanding of his own faith. Such a study need not uproot nor replace his faith. A theologian should not be in search for a faith. He should be seeking a deep meaning and understanding of his faith for himself and others. As he encounters faiths other than his own, he should be in a position to lift up the *real* agreements and the *actual* differences between religions at the depth level of analysis. In an ecumenical dialogue which includes, at least all the other religions, he is not limited to "life and work" considerations, but may deal with "faith and order" questions as well.

We may be surprised to learn that the study of other religions often leads the theologian to a deeper understanding of his own faith. Just as the ecumenical movement has led many theologians to a deeper awareness of what is really essential in their own denominations, even so, an ecumenicity which embraces world religions, may drive a theologian to deep insights, and subtle shades of meaning in his own religion. What inter-faith dialogue accomplishes on a limited scale inter-religious dialogue may achieve on a universal outreach. It was the study of the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, which led Gandhi to a deeper understanding of Bhakti-Hinduism in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Is it possible that the Buddhist understanding of suffering may in some way enhance our appreciation of the meaning of the Cross? It is my candid opinion that a careful study of religions by a Christian theologian should lead to a deeper understanding of the Christian Faith. We cannot overlook the impact of Gandhi's use of *satyagraha* upon Dr. M. L. King's understanding of *Agape*.

IV. BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

It is now obvious to most students of black religion that all blacks with a religious commitment never have and perhaps never will be Christian. How then may we relate in the cause of black liberation to those religionists who have associations with other religions? In the search for the roots and the continuity of the black experience in our culture, how may we affirm the traditional African roots of our culture

and religion? How may we accept and make constructive use of Africanisms within the black church and community? It is clear that the process of making black theology native to the African-Afro-American heritage can never be completed unless our constructive theologians develop a theology of religions. It is equally certain that the Christo-centric theology of J. H. Cone with its heavy reliance upon the same Barthianism which cut off the dialogue between religions for Euro-American scholars cannot serve the interests of black theologians any better.

While Cone admits that there is revelation outside of the Bible and in history, he sees this as applicable only to oppressed people.²⁹ Cone takes his firm stand with Karl Barth on a Christo-centric view of God's revelation as follows: "God has revealed himself fully in the man Jesus so that the norm of all existence is determined exclusively by him."³⁰ Cone does go on to indicate how Christ is at work in history as liberator, but his Christology is so captive to the black condition that one wonders what has become of the Universal Word, the Desire of all Nations. Black theologians as ethno-theologians must be open to the possibility that the savior of *each* people may be Lord of all people. Our African brothers who speak out of the convictional language of the Christian Faith are in search of a cosmic Christ who reveals himself in nature and who reveals himself in history as well as in the Bible.

If the Christological importance of Jesus Christ is to be associated merely with his blackness and if the oppression-liberation formula only applies can Christ be the savior of all men? Has God then left himself without witness to all sorts and conditions of men? The question remains even if blackness is expanded to a universal symbol of human oppression. There are black religionists here at home who cannot accept the narrow Christo-centric structure Cone has upon God's liberating work in the world. Black theologians like William Jones and myself find it impossible to embrace this rigid provincialism. It is even more difficult for Moslems and Jews among us to go along with this even though these may equally affirm the fact that God is at work liberating the oppressed. While the bite in Cone's thought is his dogmatism, it is too soon for theological scholasticism to set in in black theology. Black theology is in the making and it may be that a black scholar yet unborn may write the definitive statement on a theology of religions from the black perspective.

At this point, I will react to Charles Long's efforts at correcting Cone's deficiencies. Long has pressed Cone to provide more breadth in his theological program. Thus far Cone has responded by researching black music and folklore, but at the same time imposing the same narrow theological structures on this material. One gets the feeling that Cone is attempting to present materials which could be best treated by Long. Cone's program has not been greatly advanced, thus far, by these explorations, for his theological stance is too provincial and his investi-

²⁹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), p. 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

gative skills are too limited. As a theologian his efforts would best be used in careful theological reflection, checking and re-checking deficiencies and building carefully along the way.

Long is a careful researcher, but a reluctant writer. His essay: "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States,"³¹ reveals his mastery of sources in the study of the religions of man as well as extensive research upon black religious experience as a whole and especially through folklore. He is extremely critical of social science studies as well as those by black Christian apologists like Cone and Cleage. He sits loose to any convictional stance on Christianity and seeks to understand the pan-African religious experiences and to interpret the myths, symbols and images emerging from that experience. Studies by G. Wilmore and L. Barrett were not available or his criticism would deserve some modification.³² Long's position is obviously invaluable to the black theologians who must dig deeper and deeper into the depths of the black religious experience to be authentic, but a theology of religions must not shy away from an avowedly apologetic stance. Long does not, perhaps he cannot, help the black theologian assume the burden of this task.

As a person with a profound personal faith, the black theologian stands in a circle of faith not merely as a believer, but also as an interpreter of that faith for a believing community. He is seeking a way to enter into a climate of creative encounter and dialogue with religionists at home and abroad who share a common religious and cultural heritage without surrendering his own affirmation of faith. If he is a Christian, as I am, his task is to present a meaningful interpretation of the Christianity in such ways as to present it from the "inside" of commitment without closing the door to real communion and cooperation with those who stand in another circle of faith with the African-Afro-American religious heritage. The God of such a theology of religions must be one who unveils His mind, will and purpose in all creation, in all history and among all peoples even though He may yet be known most completely through the Incarnation. The alternative to this would be a "religion of black power" a la Vincent Harding. This general religion is a syncretism of everything in general and nothing in particular. At best it would be a least common denominator religion with no distinctive creed. It is not necessary to deny a faith of deep personal commitment which has brought sanity and survival, protest against injustices and profound meaning into the lives of blacks in order to appreciate the convictions and beliefs of other black religionists. It is rather through our deep religious understanding that we appropriate and appreciate the faiths of other men.

I consider the observations of A. C. Bouquet to be laudatory, and in spirit, at least, a summary of my own conclusions. Thus I close the

³¹ Charles Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religions* (II, I, August 1971), pp. 54-66.

³² G. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) and L. Barrett, *Soul-Force* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

present position paper as follows: . . . To be what Dr. Inge called "an honorary member of all religions" gets one nowhere. Nevertheless I do not think the discipline of making an objective study of the religions of the world, and of listening to what each has to say about itself before fitting it into any general theory of one's own, is one which ought to be discarded. I consider it a good discipline for the mind of the would-be theologian, provided that he also masters thoroughly the meaning and claims of Christianity, and knows it in worship and practice, from the inside. After that he can go back again to non-Christian faiths and appraise them in the light of his Christian experience. However, if he begins this appraisal before he has heard what they have to say for themselves, he will run the danger of being unjust and will in any case be acting in violation of the best principles of scientific method."³³

³³Bouquet, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

