

# A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger on Religious Pluralism

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Last year Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, addressed gatherings of eighty bishops and of the presidents of the doctrinal commissions of the bishops' conferences of Latin America, on the subject of Relativism as the central problem for the Faith today. In religion, what he calls relativism is what most writers in this area today call pluralism. He says of the 'so-called pluralist theology of religion' that 'only now has it come to the center of the Christian conscience' (*Origins: CNS documentary service*, Vol. 26, No. 20, October 31, 1996, p. 311). On studying the text I find that Cardinal Ratzinger, speaking of contemporary religious pluralism, identifies me as 'one of its founders and eminent representatives' (p. 312).

If I were a Catholic, owing allegiance to the Pope, I would probably not feel able to question Cardinal Ratzinger's pronouncements. But as what he calls an American Presbyterian (I am not in fact an American, although I taught for a number of years very happily in the United States), I feel entitled to respond to the Cardinal as a fellow theologian—a much more eminent one than myself, but nevertheless subject to the same canons of accuracy when expounding views which one intends to criticise. The tone of the Cardinal's address is courteous throughout and I can appreciate the concerns which he expresses from his own very conservative point of view. My regret, however, is that internal evidence reveals that he has relied on a secondary source which has provided him with a misleading version of what I have written. He refers (footnote 6) to two of my books, *Evil and the God of Love*, which is on a different subject altogether and makes no mention of religious pluralism, and *An Interpretation of Religion*<sup>1</sup>, which is indeed largely about religious pluralism. In the case of *Evil and the God of Love* (whose place and date of publication are wrongly listed) the pages cited have nothing whatever to do with the point which they are supposed to support. In the case of *An*

*Interpretation of Religion* the pages cited are, again, on a different topic. The impression of reliance on a secondary source is confirmed when, in a footnote at the beginning of his address, Cardinal Ratzinger cites a book by the theologian K.-H. Menke and acknowledges that 'The following reflections are based mainly on this author' (p. 316). It is surprising that neither Cardinal Ratzinger nor his assistants seem to have checked on the reliability of his informant.

Before coming to the misleading aspect Cardinal Ratzinger's account of my own position, I want to make the wider point that his address mixes together several different issues under the elastic heading to Relativism. These are (1) the moral relativism which denies that 'There are injustices that will never turn into just things (such as, for example, killing an innocent person, denying an individual or groups the right to their dignity or to life corresponding to that dignity)' (p. 311); (2) the religious pluralist denial that Christianity is the one and only true faith and that the sacramental life of the church is the one and only place of direct human contact with God; and (3) the contemporary New Age movements. As a result of presenting these as coming from the same source, the one that I espouse, namely no. 2, becomes tainted with 'guilt by association'. But I am not in fact a moral relativist, and I have no connection with the New Age movements. I shall therefore not discuss here the relativisms which I join with the Cardinal in rejecting, or the liberation theology, with its 'preferential option for the poor', which he also attacks extensively in the same address—although his use of Professor Paul Knitter's writings in this area is as flawed as his use of mine.

Turning, then, to religious pluralism, Cardinal Ratzinger is right in saying that my own version hinges upon the distinction between, on the one hand, God—or, as I prefer in a global context to say, ultimate Reality or the Real—as that reality is in its infinite mystery beyond the scope of the human intellect, and on the other hand as concretely known through the 'lenses' of the human mind. Our awareness of the Transcendent is, I believe, necessarily mediated to us through our own conceptual apparatus. As St Thomas said long ago, 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower'<sup>2</sup>. This is the great theologian's much earlier anticipation of the basic Kantian insight that the mind interprets the impacts of its environment in terms of the concepts and categories which structure our consciousness. In the case of religion, 'the mode of the knower' differs between the different ways of being human expressed in the varied cultures of the earth. Accordingly I see the great religions as embodying different ways of conceiving, and therefore of experiencing, and therefore of responding

in life, to the infinite reality that we call God. Cardinal Ratzinger correctly relays this suggestion in so far as this can be done in two sentences.

However he then goes on to misrepresent it by missing out the vertical dimension of transcendence and reducing it to a purely horizontal horizon. 'In the end,' he says, 'for Hick, religion means that man goes from "self-centeredness", as the existence of the old Adam, to "reality-centeredness", as existence of the new man, thus extending from oneself to the otherness of one's neighbor', which is however, he says, 'empty and vacuous' (p. 313). But any reader of *An Interpretation of Religion* knows that by 'the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness' I am referring to a radically new orientation centered in the divine reality as mediated to us in our religion.

Such a suggestion will of course be totally unacceptable from the standpoint of a Christian absolutism which insists upon the unique superiority of Christianity, or of the church, as the sole channel of divine saving grace. But in my view that traditional absolutism has failed to take account of the apparently more or less equal presence of the salvific transformation within the other great traditions. For it does not seem to me that Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus are in general less good human beings, or less responsive to the Transcendent, than are Christians in general—as, however, surely they ought to be if we alone are able directly to encounter God and feed on the divine substance in our eucharistic worship. In humanity there is, as Cardinal Ratzinger says, an inextinguishable yearning for the infinite, and I believe that the infinite divine reality is present equally to us all throughout the world, when our hearts are open to that presence. I have already said that there are points in Cardinal Ratzinger's address with which I am happy to agree. But, as I have also said, there is a very major point to which I have to take exception as misleading and as evidently not based on a proper study of the texts. There are also other matters in the Cardinal's remarks that I would dispute, but I prefer to keep this present response short. I now submit it to the judgement of the wider theological world.

- 1 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, London: Macmillan and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. German translation: *Religion*, Munich: Diederichs, 1996.
- 2 *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2.