

Theme: Christian Theology's Engagement with Religious Pluralism:

Biblical Texts and Themes

Shanta Premawardhana, National Council of Churches, USA, Presiding Sunday - 9:00 am-11:30 am

Theme: Christian Theology's Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Biblical Texts and Themes

In this forum, scholars of religion and theology discuss the challenges religious pluralism poses to Christian theological thinking with a specific focus on difficult biblical texts and themes. How have traditional biblical ideas such as the dualisms between light and darkness, the divine and the demonic, heaven and hell, and the exclusive claims regarding Jesus Christ shaped Christian thinking about religions? How are Christians in the twenty-first century wrestling with these biblical texts and motifs in their efforts to articulate a theology of religions today?

Amos Yong, Regent University — "The Light Shines in the Darkness": Johannine Dualism and the Challenge of Christian Theology of Religions Today

Gerald R. McDermott, Roanoke College — Gods, Principalities, and Powers in the Bible: Implications for Christian Theology of the Religions

Marjorie Suchocki, Claremont School of Theology — Transforming Heaven and Hell

Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University — John 6:68-69: How My Study of Hinduism Illumines, Contests, and Intensifies Peter's Confession

Responding: S. Wesley Ariarajah, Drew University

John 6:68-69:

How My Study of Hinduism Illumines, Contests, and Intensifies Peter's Confession

John 6:67-70

67 So Jesus asked the twelve,
 'Do you also wish to go away?'
68 Simon Peter answered him,
 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.
69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'
70 Jesus answered them,
 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.'

I. Interpreting John 6.67-70

1. John 6: 68-69 as the climax of a spiritual exercise — a sadhana — not a contextless theological claim that can be simply universalized
 - a. thus, it needs to be read in the context of the entire chapter

In Context

2. The work and deeds of Jesus in Chapter 6 and the “progress” of the chapter

Jesus in action

- a. multiplication of loaves and fishes
- b. refusal to become a king
- c. departure to pray alone
- d. walking on the water

The discourse

- e. the synagogue, and the discourse on the bread of life
 - i. arguing with the listeners about this food and his own identity
 - ii. on the limitations of the tradition of Moses
 - iii. the increasingly intense, personalized challenge: eat my flesh, drink my blood

In consequence: from many to very few

- f. dwindling support

- i. the 5,000
- ii. the smaller audience of the apostles and those who come to see him
- iii. the departure of many disciples
- iv. the twelve
- v. even among the twelve, Judas

The Exchange of Jesus and Peter

3. Jesus' leading question: won't you also go away?
 - a. expecting smaller and smaller numbers
4. Peter's response:
 - a. Lord, to whom would be go?
 - i. the existential exclusion of alternatives others have obviously taken
 - b. You have the *words* of eternal life.
 - i. the words of life — one must be listening
 - c. You are the holy one of God.
 - i. in John, also: God is Holy; the Spirit is Holy
 - ii. the implications of recognizing the holiness of God
 - d. 'Did I not choose you, the twelve?
 - i. it is primarily Christ's action, not that of the follower
 - e. Yet one of you is a devil.'
 - i. one of the select is a devil — not those who have stayed away or gone away
5. John 6:67-70 then describes and creates an existential choice, but is not easily generalized as a claim that Jesus alone has the words of life

II. Reading with the Hindu tradition in Mind

6. Finding similar paths of existential choice in other traditions
 - a. intensity, total dedication, and no thought about going elsewhere
 - b. texts that are resources for sadhana
7. Remembering appropriate Hindu parallels
 - i. eg, *Mahabharata*: Arjuna and Duryodhana make their choices regarding Krsna
 - Arjuna's choice for Krsna alone, rather than all the armies of Krsna
 - ii. eg, *Ramayana*: Vibhisana's prapatti

- the appropriateness of total surrender, with nowhere else to go
- iii. The maxim of the Brahmastra
- it will always protect the user, if that user trusts it and employs no back-up mechanism
- iv. eg, devotional poetry: *Tiruvaymoli* 6.7

One God only:

- When there was nothing, neither god, nor world,
nor life, nor anything else at all,
he made the Four-faced god and the gods with him,
and the life's breath of the world,
this first lord who dwells in tall Kuruhur, its jeweled terraces like mountains:
apart from him, do you seek another divinity? (4.10.1)

God in particular:

- "My rice for eating, my water for drinking, my betel for chewing,
my Lord Krishna!"
her eyes flowing tears, she keeps crying;
when she searches for his city, abundant in his excellence in all the earth,
Kolar is surely the place my young doe will enter. (6.7.1)

8. Admittedly, these texts too need exegesis, as did John 6
- a. but in all these examples, the affect and intensity can be recognized as parallel to John 6

III. Reading John 6 with Hindu Exemplars in Mind

9. One might imagine mutual contradiction, forcing a choice
10. But one can also see the parallels as *sadhana* and processes of *intensification*
- a. In fact, recollecting the Hindu texts enables me to appreciate *more* the need not to water down John 6
- b. recognition and likeminded intensity, enhanced by taking all such instances seriously
- c. the prompting to take John 6 more and not less seriously
11. The literate choice
- a. aesthetically conceived
- i. passion
- ii. the non-foreclosure of other possibilities, without making any choice for them

IV. Toward a theology of religions?

12. The problem for the theology of religions

- a. Reading texts first — but when does theorizing come back in?
 - i. When are we in a position to judge/rule upon such texts and the truths they inculcate?
- b. There is no need to rule out theological judgments on religions seen in the light of Christ; but there is also no rush to get to such decisions
- c. This clearly is not a satisfactory situation for the person seeking a robust theology of religions, but I suggest that staying closer to whole texts and their transformative power — in the Bible, in other traditions — is valuable in itself, and changes the climate in which we think about making judgments.