

My Journey as a Religious Pluralist: A Christian Theology of Religions Reclaimed - Alan Race

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Few theologians have approached the many questions and challenges that religious plurality poses for Christian theologies of religions with such honesty and depth as Alan Race. Never the one to dodge difficult questions, Race has both problematised as well as probed, with passion and profundity, a wide-range of themes and questions that are concomitant to Christian understanding and engagement with other religions. This particular collection of essays brings some of Race's contributions stretching across thirty years in a 'loose systematic format' all bound together (literally) by Race's conviction that "time can occasionally play tricks, such that earlier arguments when revisited later in the day can seem as fresh as when they were first formulated" (p.xx).

Divided into four helpful parts the book begins with a section on 'Critical Foundations'. The section highlights the inevitability of a hermeneutical posture that is marked by both inventiveness and tentativeness for Christian faith to embrace 'a dialogical future' in constructive interaction with historical change. The second of the two essays in this section deconstructs the idea of tradition as a fixed marker of identity, lifting up the multiply-constituted nature of human identities. Race's observation that "we have historically in Christian tradition not so much a fugue with a strong recurring theme as a medley of variations, perhaps even enigma variations"(p.30) is a telling reminder of the empirical untenability of dominant notions of tradition as 'fixed'. The critical potential of such deconstruction in a global context where 'rigid' notions of identity are invoked to add venom to virulent, and often violent, nationalisms cannot be undermined.

Sections two and three of the book, titled 'Constructive Theory' and 'Ethics in Dialogue' respectively, delve into some of the theoretical questions that concern the theology and practice of dialogue. These include some of the perennial questions that have dominated the tables of interreligious dialogue

like the question of truth and the understanding of salvation vis-à-vis Christ, as well as questions concerning hospitality, religiously-motivated violence, religious absolutism, Christian support for democracy and the current ecological crisis.

What emerges in this set of essays is the spirit of realism that springs from the seasoned experiences of one who has not just written about dialogue but has lived it, both in its formal and non-formal manifestations. One good example is the chapter titled ‘Hospitality is Good, But How Far Can it Go?’, which was originally published in *Current Dialogue*, the World Council of Churches’ journal for interreligious encounter, of which I later served as editor. Here, Race acknowledges that focussing on the theme of hospitality when discussing religious plurality and Christian self-understanding can amount to “a strategy of deflection away from the arbitration between mission and dialogue” that has been “the usual background of Christian uniqueness versus worldly plurality”. However, he concedes that in our “globally troubled times”, “valuing hospitality could well act as a necessary antidote to the endemic fears that are the result of the misperception and stereotyping of the so-called other” (p.96).

Race infuses this spirit of realism with generous imagination. In fact for me the distinctiveness of Race in section three lies in the way he revisits familiar themes in the interreligious terrain and unpacks their polysemic (multi-layered) nature in order to engender a fresh theological vision for Christian interreligious engagement in the public square. In his typical style Race relentlessly pushes the horizons of theological thinking so that the present impasse within interreligious dialogue – namely the lack of critical action – is not glossed over but grappled with in a spirit of honesty, not in a patronizingly prescriptive manner but in a robustly reflective one. This explicitly emerges in his proposal to interweave the Global Ethic into Christian engagement in contemporary democracies, as well as his suggestion to combine *contemplative wisdom* with *prophetic discernment* in the contemporary search for a sustainable future in the midst of the current ecological crisis.

In the final part titled ‘Epilogue’ Race includes a chapter which engages with some of the criticisms to his threefold typology of theology of religions. The enduring relevance of his typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, despite the criticism it continues to draw, testifies to his persistent influence in contemporary conversations on Christian theology of religions. To this essay Race adds a sermon that serves to refute the common notion that

pluralist theologies undermine commitment to the Christian faith. Together, these two contributions not only reiterate his unapologetic identity as a Christian pluralist but also serve as a Christian apologetic for the pluralist framework Race embodied.

Reflecting on this collection of essays one question that strikes me is Race's glaring omission of one of the persistent criticisms of interreligious dialogue – namely the question of the 'margins' (those undermined and side-lined by and within religious traditions) and their invisibility in interreligious dialogue. I have often questioned whether this omission was a conscious one. The seemingly tacit inclination of Race to ignore issues of marginalization within religions and the religious lives of the marginalized in his otherwise extensive repertoire of scholarly engagement in interreligious dialogue, leaves open the question about the critical edge that the perspectives of the margins could have added to Race's incisive thinking about God, religions, and pluralistic. This elision is, at its very least, enigmatic.

All in all this book is in its very essence a classical 'Alan Race Reader'. What we have is a stimulating collection of sustained theological analysis that provides a provocative lens to probe some of the pressing questions that have perturbed and preoccupied the minds of many Christians. In line with the metaphor of the journey evoked by the seemingly autobiographical tone of the title, one can say that these essays serve not only as milestones in Race's personal theological journey but also as shifting signposts of the rapidly changing landscape of Christian theology of religions, that Race so influenced with his clarity, creativity and courageous Christian commitment.

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