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Books in Review

No Other Gospel! Christianity Among The World Religions

A Lutheran Affirmation

No Other Gospel! Christianity Among The World Religions. By Carl E. Braaten. *Fortress Press. 142 pp. $10.95 paper.*

Reviewed by Leslie Newbigin

CARL BRAATEN gives us here a spirited and well-grounded affirmation of the centrality and finality, the uniqueness and universality, of Jesus Christ, and a frontal assault on the relativism that marks so much contemporary theology. (The exclamation point in the title is a response to the interrogation mark in the title of a book by Paul Knitter entitled *No Other Name?*) At the same time, Braaten is concerned that in affirming the centrality of Christ we do not deny that which God does beyond the bounds of the Church and the Bible. Braaten upholds the necessity and the possibility of a Christian theology of the religions. The book is made up of papers and addresses given at different times and suffers a little from this, but it is held together by "the biblical-Christian claim that in Jesus of Nazareth the eschatological truth has appeared once for all in a unique event with universal relevance." Holding this conviction, Braaten insists that the writing of theologians like John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others is incompatible with the integrity of Christianity and would, if it were to prevail, do nothing less than destroy the Church.

Recognizing that the key issue is Christology, Braaten surveys contemporary Christological writing in the United States and finds it wanting. He invites American theologians to sit again at the feet of Jonathan Edwards. Chapter 2 provides an illuminating survey of the discussions of "the absoluteness of Christianity" in the past two centuries, giving major attention to the work of Ernst Troeltsch and of Wolfhart Pannenberg. The following chapter examines the very different approach of Karl Barth, offers a much needed protest against the caricatures of Barth in current circulation, and shows how Barth's radical Christo-centrism could, in his later work, sustain a generous understanding of the world's religions. Chapters 4 and 5, beginning from Luther's doctrine of general revelation, seek to develop a Christian theology of the religions. Braaten rejects a theology that would live in "splendid isolation" from the rest of human affairs, and affirms that "the history of religions lies within the orbit of God's revelation to the world." But, before this is said, it has to be said that "only in the missionary encounter of the religions does this meaning come to light." Jesus is the eschatological fulfillment of the religions. He does not destroy but fulfills. And when we say this, we are not speaking of a "Christ principle"-a discarnate logos that can be shaped to suit our wishes-we are speaking of Jesus of Nazareth.

CHAPTER 7 puts the whole discussion into a Trinitarian perspective, affirming with Karl Rahner and other modern writers that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity" and that what is given to us in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit is the very being of God. The attack of the pluralists requires the full armor of Trinitarian doctrine if it is to be met.

The last chapter is a strong affirmation of the Lutheran doctrine of the orders of creation and the two kingdoms. This might seem to hang a little loosely with the rest of the book, but it is part of Braaten's argument that the affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus must go with a recognition of the works of God outside the Bible and the Church. To quote his final word: "It is ultimately for the sake of [the Gospel's] integrity and uniqueness that we need to rehabilitate the old Lutheran doctrine of the orders of creation."

I am grateful for this book and am in deep agreement with its central thesis, namely that the kind of pluralism expounded in the writings of Hick, Knitter, et al.-if accepted-must destroy the Church. I am also grateful for the discussion of the way in which the relation of the Absolute to history has been argued in the past century-as well as for the way a strongly confessional Lutheran can give such a fine exposition of the work of Barth.

Still, there are problems. The pluralism of Hick and company is part of the wider phenomenon of relativism. It is part of the pervasive influence of the Kantian affirmation that ultimate reality is unknowable and that we can know only the phenomena ordered according to the categories imposed by our minds. When Braaten says that the acceptance of Hick's position would wreck the Church, he is right. But the reply might well be: "In that case, we don't need the Church." It seems to me that we cannot meet the challenge Braaten faces without a wider epistemological discussion. It is part of his Lutheranism that he makes a sharp distinction between faith and reason. We can know the orders of creation by reason, but it is only faith that enables us to know that God is their creator. Braaten seems to follow Aquinas (and Aristotle) in making this sharp dichotomy. I think that we are on firmer ground if we follow Augustine's *Credo ut intelligam*. Faith is the only way to understanding. Polanyi has convincingly shown that there is no knowledge of any kind without the personal commitment of the subject. Faith in Jesus is not a totally different thing from the faith that enables us to learn by trusting a cultural tradition, and from the faith that there is yet more to be discovered, which is the fuel that drives the restless search for knowledge. It is the line of Augustine rather than that of Aquinas that makes it possible credibly to affirm the Gospel as public truth in the relativistic climate of contemporary Western culture.

AS A LUTHERAN THEOLOGIAN, Braaten sees as central the question "How can we be saved?" Here he occupies the same ground as Hick, who says that religions are not accounts of what-is-the-case but alternative (and roughly equal) ways of salvation. Barth, in the Reformed tradition, does not place this question in the center but rather the question: "How is this glorious God to be glorified?" I think that the interreligious discussion is made very difficult if it is a discussion between those who are going to be saved and those who are going to be lost. "Dialogue" is hardly appropriate in such a situation: the only relevant category is rescue.

One can then be grateful for Braaten's strong affirmation of a Trinitarian theology that combines an affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus with an affirmation of the work of God outside the Bible and the Church. Still, if we are to have a Christian theology of the religions, is it one best grounded in the Lutheran doctrine of the orders of creation or in Barth's doctrine of the work of the ascended Christ? In Chapters 4 and 5, Braaten deals with the religions as the area of God's working outside the Church, but in Chapter 7, it is the law that is the main locus of this action and religion is one of those things that becomes "idolatry and blasphemy" when it makes totalitarian claims. But religions *do* make totalitarian claims: it is almost their distinctive character. Can "religion" be put with race, family, state, law, conscience, etc. as one of the "common structures of human living" ? There are people who claim to be without religion. Or is religion, as Barth maintained, a form of unbelief-something totally different from these "structures"?

It is difficult to accept the belief that the common structures (which certainly do exist) have a relation to God from which Christ is totally separated. There is more illumination to be found in the Pauline doctrine of the "principalities and powers," which include such things as the law, the political order, philosophy, and religion. These things, according to Paul, are created in Christ, and for Christ (Col. 1:16) but have been "disarmed," robbed of their totalitarian claims, by Christ (Col. 2:15). It follows that it is the privilege and calling of the Church to make known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10).

An absolute separation between the "structures of human living" and human living in its individual expression is neither acceptable nor even entirely intelligible. The distinction is important, and to ignore it dangerous. And in this respect, the Lutheran tradition may provide an important warning.

But structures do change, and the Gospel can be a power to bring about such change. The way in which Paul deals with the slave Onesimus is a canonical example of the way in which the Gospel can change the structures without either ignoring them or pretending to demolish them. Christ has disarmed the powers but he has not destroyed them.

If this is applied to the matter of a Christian theology of the religions, it would imply that the ascended Christ is ceaselessly at work in the lives of people of other faiths. It would also mean, as Braaten says, that Christ is the true eschatological fulfillment of the religions. But it would mean as well that this fulfillment comes only

through the missionary encounter and through conversion. There is no unbroken line from the religions (including Christianity as a developing historical movement) to the End. Jesus said, "I came not to destroy but to fulfill," and Paul the Christian could affirm this (Rom. 3:31), but only after a radical conversion to the one whom he had seen as subverter of the law.

Braaten is committed to the cause of Christian unity, and neither he nor I would wish to get into an inter-confessional wrangle. But he writes as a Lutheran, and I want only to offer another perspective that might help the Church as a whole to affirm both the uniqueness and finality of Jesus

Christ, and also the gracious work of God among people of all faiths and none.

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