

Steps into a Pluralist World: Commitment and Accessibilism

KNUD JØRGENSEN

I have for a good many years been an eager student of Notto Thelle, both his popular books or reflections on spirituality, published in several languages, and his valuable contributions to dialogue and to a Christian theology of religion. My background is different from Thelle's, in the sense that I am "African" while he is "Japanese"; this may be one reason why his ears are more attuned to listening to the voices from people of other faiths, while I am the strategist who is eager to see the job done. Maybe that is why I have listened to and learned from him – and why he has stimulated – or should I say, provoked – me to become engaged in the study of theology of religion. This study has become an existential journey for me.

Along the way I have returned to Thelle to listen and read, both when he focuses on Karl Ludvig Reichelt and when his aim is to open up the gates of dialogue. Recently I was lecturing at universities in China, telling the students about how enriched I had been by an article on *Relation, Awareness, and Energy – Three Languages, Three Worlds* (Thelle 2005). In a simple, yet profound, way Thelle tells about the Semitic religions of the ear (the creator speaks, and it happens), the religions of the eye (primarily Buddhism), and the modern search for empowerment, i.e.

energy or qi (Japanese) as we meet it in new spiritualities. And in all three categories Thelle finds something valuable and enriching for dialogue: “Should we not be inspired by the East to investigate more thoroughly the potential of impersonal God-language?.....What if it is simply that the grace of God is merely a universal energy – just like love?” (Thelle 2005: 61f).

In his honour I shall focus on two essential steps in my own existential journey in the realm of theology of religion: *Commitment and accessibilism*. “Commitment” is not a new concept in my life, but how do I, as a so-called Evangelical, uphold commitment in a pluralist world? And how does my commitment fare as my thinking has moved in a direction where I believe in “a wideness in God’s mercy”?

I realise that it would be easier, when dealing with these issues, to lean on such statements as the WCC San Antonio statement from 1992: “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ. At the same time we cannot set limits to God’s saving power....This tension we shall not attempt to solve”. In the following I shall, however, take a couple of steps further into a pluralist world.

Committed Pluralism

The claims of Rationalism have left us with a heritage that gives priority to the world of facts in the public realm while faith and values belong to the private sphere. In the private sphere our Western culture has accepted pluralism. The Christian faith, together with other religions and religious worldviews, has been relegated to this sphere where pluralism reigns in a growing jungle of religiosity and values, and where facts and truth are absent – they belong to science in the public sphere. One major consequence is that we have lost the concept of Christian faith as a *public truth*, i.e. as a truth that relates to all of us and which has importance for society and community. This development may be acceptable for some religious views and for new spiritualities, which view themselves as an esoteric gnosis to be worshipped in closed circles. For the Christian faith it is different: The Christian faith is a confession to Jesus Christ as Lord, not only my Lord or the Lord of the church, but Lord of creation. This confession cannot accept to be relegated to the sphere of the individual, and it

cannot accept that there is more than this reality – the reality over which Christ is Lord. If it “accepts” itself as a value based interpretation of history – among other interpretations – it comes close to denying the Incarnation. The claim of the incarnation is that God has entered our common history, not just as one offer of interpretation among many, but as his presence in flesh and blood (see e.g. Newbigin 1986).

This does not imply that we should return to a Constantine era where only one truth was allowed, as if we wanted Christian control on Areopagos. Neither does public truth imply a truth that cannot be discussed or queried, as if it originated from mathematics. It is rather so that only claims that may be questioned, have to do with real life. By talking about the Christian faith as a public truth we therefore accept pluralism in the public room, instead of relegating it to a private sphere. In other words, truth about faith is as valid as other truths; from a Christian view we therefore accept pluralism, but we also maintain the right to challenge pluralism – challenge because we insist that there is something called truth also in the realm of religion. And for this truth I am ready to dialogue, argue, and debate.

I think this is what Lesslie Newbigin calls *committed pluralism*, in contrast to *agnostic pluralism* (Newbigin 1989). Agnostic pluralism – which Western culture subscribes to – has renounced any talk about knowledge and truth in relation to faith. The committed, engaged pluralism, on the other hand, takes other religions more seriously and dares to raise questions about the other’s faith – and dares to reveal the dogmatic background for the rationalistic claim about the world of facts. Committed pluralism will argue for a place in the public sphere and it will reveal the idols of materialism, consumerism and individualism; it will call the many spiritualities to account in a public discourse – spiritualities which often disguise themselves in a private sphere (Arendt 2004:12-14).

Religion as Ultimate Commitment

This view of committed pluralism is in Newbigin’s thinking based on his understanding of religion as that which has final authority for a believer or a society. Each religion is in that sense based on an *ultimate commitment*, and these different commitments cannot be brought together in a single framework (as e.g. John Hick has

tried with his “Copernican revolution”). As my ultimate commitment, my faith must defend its claim to truth over against other truth claims. This implies,

that the Christian will meet his friend and neighbour of another faith as one who is committed to Jesus Christ as his ultimate authority, who openly acknowledges this commitment, and seeks to understand and to enter into dialogue with his partner of another commitment on that basis (Newbigin 1978: 185).

As a Christian believer I enter the dialogue on the basis of my own belief or confession – and recognize that others will do the same. This stance further implies for me as a Christian that truth is to be found in a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ as he is known through a life lived “in the community of disciples, in faithfulness to the tradition about him, and in openness to all truth which may be discovered in the history of the human race” (Newbigin 1978:187). My commitment is to a historic person and to historic deeds. Without these events, my faith would be empty. And I cannot see that there need be any dichotomy between “confessing Christ” and “seeking the truth”. As I meet the other, I expect and hope to hear and learn more of truth. Granted, I shall interpret these new truths by means of the truth I have already committed my life to. How could it be otherwise, how could I shed my faith in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, as the true light and the true life? My encounter with Christ through Scripture and faith represents my ultimate commitment. And I expect that my neighbour will be in the same position: The faith of each provides the basis of hers or his own understanding of reality and truth.

Commitment without Judgement

What then does this mean for my understanding of other faiths? My Evangelical background has led me to consider many of the divergent answers given to this question: other religions and ideologies are wholly false, non-Christian religions are the work of the devil and demonic cunning, other religions are a preparation for Christ (which the Gospel fulfils; this was the view of Edinburgh 1910), there are essential values in other religions, the Roman Catholic view of the world religions as concentric circles

(with the Catholic Church as the centre), Karl Rahner's view of non-Christian religions as the means through which God's salvation in Christ will reach those who have not been reached by the Gospel ("anonymous Christians"). I have the feeling that some of these answers somehow judge my neighbour even before we have started our dialogue: I am "saved", he/she is not. And as I meet my neighbour, I do not feel especially "saved"; what I do feel is that I am a witness (martyr) who has been placed in this relation where I can only point to Jesus as the one who can make sense of my situation and the whole human situation – situations which my neighbour and I share as fellow human beings.

And so, says Newbiggin (1978:197ff), I am committed to believing that every part of the created world and every human being are already related to Jesus (cf. Paul's speech on Areopagos where the presence of the altar for the unknown God implies that God is already there). Everything was made through the Logos, he is the life of all, and he is the light that gives light to every man. *The presence and work of Jesus are not confined within the area where he is acknowledged.* In every human there is not only a moral consciousness (Rom 2:14-15), but also a religious consciousness (Thiessen 2004: 107ff). This does not imply that everything is light; both Scripture and experience make it abundantly clear that there is also darkness, but the light shines in the darkness. And this light may also shine in the lives of other human beings: My Christian confession does not force me to deny the reality of the work of God in the lives and thoughts and prayers of men and women outside the Christian church. Neither am I denying the dark side of religion, but this dark side does not prevent me from seeing the light of God in the lives of men and women who do not acknowledge him as Lord. Paul's speech on Areopagos points to a *continuity* between our lives and the only God, at the same time as there is *confrontation* and a call to conversion.

Revelation in Other Religions?

Thiessen defines religions as ambiguous responses to divine revelation (2004: 358). Within every religion there is a dark side, but there is also "revelation", says Thiessen:

Both the institutional religions and the persons within them are responding to general revelation, but they may also be responding to universally normative special revelation that they have encountered or to remnants of such revelation that may exist in the traditions that have been passed down. Additionally, there may have been instances of particular, but not universally normative, revelation that contributed to the formation of an established religion or to the personal religious commitment of an individual within one of those religions (2004: 358ff).

As examples, Thiessen points to some of the stories told by Don Richardson in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts* – stories about particular divine revelations to groups and to individuals. This does in no way mean that the universal Christ goes by many names; and where revelation is encountered apart from the self-revelation testified to in Scripture, we must stress that the God who is revealing himself, is always the triune God who made covenant with Israel and the church and who revealed himself in Jesus – even though the people receiving such revelation live outside the covenant community in the past or today.

Let me add, as also Thiessen does, that I do not view the scriptures of other religions in themselves as instances of divine revelation. These scriptures lack, in my view, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and they are a mixture of truth and error.

The Cross of Jesus and the Religions

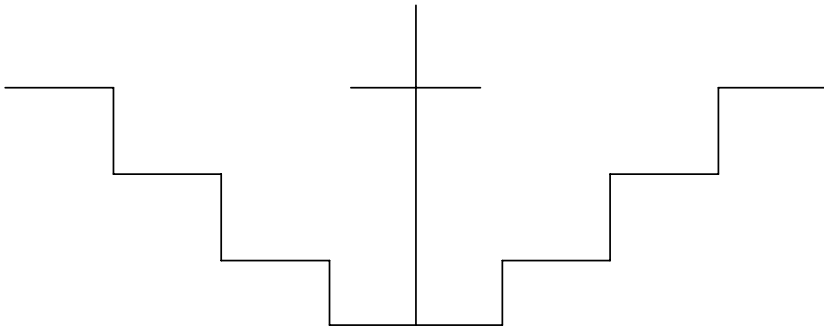
Let us for a moment return to Newbigin. He sees the cross of Jesus as the exposure of our rejection of God and of our sin – *and* as God’s way of meeting this rejection. The power of God is hidden on the cross *sub contrarie specie*, as Luther says, i.e. under its contradiction. What looked like defeat, turned out to be victory. This historic deed, which we confess as the true turning point of history, “stands throughout history as witness against all the claims of religion – including the Christian religion – to be the means of salvation....religion is not the means of salvation” (1978:200). At the same time the cross becomes *the master clue* in our common search for salvation (Newbigin 1989: 158): In obedient discipleship with him, I find the truth, in faithfulness to the traditions about him, and in openness towards all truth that may

come to light in the history of humankind. And it is along the same way that we are forced to wonder whether we who follow Christ, can be saved apart from all who have not yet had the opportunity to respond to the Gospel.

The church, therefore, as it is in via, does not face the world as the exclusive possessor of salvation, nor as the fullness of what others have in part, the answer to the questions they ask, or the open revelation of what they are anonymously. The church faces the world, rather as arrabon of that salvation – as sign, first fruit, token, witness of that salvation which God purposes for the whole (Newbigin 1978:203f).

The church and we as Christians must therefore live in dialogue with the world, giving witness to Christ, but also open to whatever riches God may give us through others.

Newbigin's overall focus is on what he calls *the scandal of particularity* in the way God relates to the world. It is this scandal of particularity that we meet supremely in the Christ revelation as the master clue. At the same time we cling to God's "amazing grace" and the confidence that this grace is sufficient for me and all other creatures. Therefore we look for and welcome all signs of this grace in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord. We may not set limits to God's grace, but at the same time we must reject an inclusivism that regard other religions as instruments for salvation in a Christian sense. Perhaps, says Newbigin, we could use a simple sketch, developed by Walter Freytag, to indicate the basis for dialogue between Christians and those of other faiths:



The staircase represents the many ways by which we learn to walk up towards God's purpose. Here we find all the ethical and religious achievements of humankind, including the Christian religion. But in the middle of them and at the bottom is placed a symbol that represents something different – the historic place and the historic deed in which God exposed himself: God comes to meet us at the bottom of our stairways, not at the top – “I came to call not the righteous, but sinners” (Newbigin 1978: 204f). As I meet my neighbour, I meet him or her at the bottom of the staircase.

The Category of Accessibilism

In his book *Who Can Be Saved* (2004) Terrance Thiessen lays aside the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Instead he operates with the following options:

- Ecclesiocentrism asserts that since Christ ascended and sent the Holy Spirit, only those who hear the Gospel can be saved. Therefore salvation and church belong together.
- Agnosticism asserts that we do not know for sure whether God saves anyone who does not hear the Gospel. Thus the focus is on the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*).
- Accessibilism asserts that Jesus Christ is exclusively God's means of salvation but that there is biblical reason to be hopeful about the possibility of salvation for those who do not hear the Gospel. Non-Christians can be saved but religions are not God's designed instruments in their salvation.
- Religious instrumentalism asserts that Jesus is, in some sense, unique, normative and definitive but that God reveals himself and provides salvation through other religions and their structures.
- Relativism designates the position, which asserts that all major religions have true revelation in part and are more or less equally true and valid as paths to salvation.

The aim of Thiessen's book is to develop and defend his own view of accessibilism. His own way towards this view went via a study of Irenaeus and, later, of the so-called “wider hope” position (especially Pinnock's *A Wideness in God's Mercy* from 1992). For me it was enlightening to follow his historical overview of

some of the theologians who have held to this more hopeful vision of God's work in the world:

- Justin Martyr's view of *logoi spermatikoi*.
- Clement of Alexandria who proposed that God had given the law to the Jews and philosophy to the Greeks.
- Irenaeus who, like his contemporaries, assumed that the Gospel had been taken throughout the world by the apostles. Had he known otherwise, he would have been optimistic about the salvation of the unevangelized, thinks Thiessen, since Christ's incarnation implied a *recapitulation* of the history of fallen humanity, and since people will be judged according to the privilege of revelation that they have received.
- Examples among Roman Catholic theologians from the 16th century and onwards, including Pope Pius IX who "held as certain that those who are in ignorance of the true religion...are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord" (quoted from Thiessen 2004: 53), and *Lumen Gentium* from Vatican II which states that "those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God..." Even in the more strict declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) it is emphasised that "the salvific action of Jesus Christ...extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity".
- Martin Luther rarely spoke about the unevangelized. However, in his commentary on Romans, he writes about those who have not heard the Gospel that "all people of this type have been given so much light and grace by an act of prevenient mercy of God as is sufficient for their salvation in their situation, as in the case of Job, Naaman, Jethro and others" (from Thiessen 2006: 56f).
- Lesslie Newbigin who, as we have seen, denied that the church is the exclusive possessor of salvation, stated his position in the following way:

The position, which I have outlined, is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of

the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism, which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism, which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ (Newbigin 1989: 182f).

- The well-known missionary and theologian J.N.D. Anderson who affirms the uniqueness of Christ but also affirms that where the God of all grace has been at work in the hearts of individuals, they too may profit from this grace.
- Alister McGrath, a contemporary evangelical Anglican, states:

We cannot draw the conclusion...that only those who respond will be saved. God's revelation is not limited to the explicit human preaching of the good news, but extends beyond it. We must be prepared to be surprised at those whom we will meet in the kingdom of God (McGrath 1995: 178).

Thiessen strongly emphasises the uniqueness of Christ: Anyone who ever has been, is now or ever will be saved is accepted by God on the grounds of the sacrifice of Christ and our identification or union with him. There is no other ground (2004: 85). To this should, however, be added that God gives to every human being a revelation sufficient to elicit saving faith; no one will be condemned because of lack of revelation. This implies for Thiessen that God reveals himself through creation, moral consciousness, religious consciousness, providence, dreams and visions – maybe at the hour of death. And he may still do so in order that no one will be left without witness of God.

I have found Thiessen's views particularly helpful since they grow out of a missiological framework. His own background is missionary service in the Philippines, and his conclusions are in no way to be perceived as an attack on the motivation for mission. I have so far belonged in the group of agnostics, taking refuge in the concept of the hidden God whose will we do not know. Thiessen's arguments have opened up the option that *God does*

give everyone revelation that is sufficient for salvation if it is responded to properly, but that the necessary faith varies with the kind of revelation an individual receives. When God inflames some spark of grace among humans, I no longer believe it is only to leave them “without excuse”. Rather I dare hope that God somehow works in the lives of individuals and groups in order to open their hearts to his grace.

At the same time I affirm what Scripture says about salvation and perdition. In a number of places the New Testament refers to both (e.g. John 3:16 and Eph 2:1-3). Scripture makes it quite clear that it is faith in Jesus that saves. Perdition or being lost is therefore a result of the disobedience that says no to the word of the Gospel about salvation. I dare believe that all of us in one way or another shall have an opportunity to chose between faith and unbelief. Along these lines I read John 3:16 to say that those who deliberately say no to faith in Christ, are lost. The verses in Eph 2 emphasize that all of us as humans (by nature) are under the wrath of God, in the same way as Paul argues in Rom 1-2, but this does not eo ipso imply that those who have not heard the Gospel, are lost.

No Need for Mission?

Since the late 19th century the ecclesiocentric conviction has played a large role in missionary motivation: Those who die without the saving Gospel of Christ face an eternity apart from God. I have struggled with this view – and reached the conclusion that it is outrageous: At least 75 % of those who have lived and died throughout history have never heard the Gospel. In spite of our best efforts today and in the future there will be millions more who, through no fault of their own, will live and die without being presented with the good news. John 3:16 talks about those who believe in him (that they will be saved) – and about those who are confronted by him and do not believe, but it hardly talks about those who are not rejecting him or failing to believe in him because they have never heard about him (Thiessen 2004: 264) – at least I have always taken its reverse side to be addressed to those who respond in disbelief. But does not Rom 10 argue for the necessity of preaching the Gospel for people to be saved? To be honest, I have preached several sermons along those lines,

based on Rom 10. Today I realise that the point Paul is making relates to *the Jewish people* and not to everybody else: God has sent messengers, the messengers have preached, and their message has been heard. Nevertheless, Israel has not believed – even though they have heard, Paul says (10:18). So the point I and many others have made when using this text, is *not* addressed in the text at all. The focus is on people who have heard the Gospel, but have not believed.

But what is then the motivation for mission? Is not the primary motivation for mission the glory of God? I am not questioning the essential role of sending missionaries, but is it not so that God goes out ahead of his church – and that he calls us to follow? In that sense mission is *missio Dei*, God's work, carried out through us and others, upon his authority. The Pentecostal Amos Yong claims that the New Testament never makes “a direct link between missionary motivation and the fear of eternal damnation” (2003:51-52). There is a clear mandate from the Lord to disciple the nations, without any warning that apart from their preaching people would be lost. Let me hasten to emphasize that I firmly believe that there is a clear and strong mandate in Scripture to evangelize and disciple, but the motivation for so doing is *the Gospel itself* as Paul says: “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:23).

When Jesus sent out his disciples on his mission, he showed them his hands and his side. They will share in his mission as they share in his passion, as they follow him in challenging and unmasking the powers of evil. There is no other way to be with him. At the heart of mission is simply the desire to be with him and to give him the service of our lives. At the heart of mission is thanksgiving and praise...Mission is an acted out doxology (Newbiggin 1989:127).

But what then about the *urgency* of mission? John Stott could speak about urgency to us when we were young missionaries, but his primary concern was a burning zeal for the glory of Jesus Christ. And he would remind us that all peoples deserve to have the good news preached to them because it is good news also for the life we live now. So Thiessen is right when he concludes this

argument by saying that “the point of accessibilism is not to undermine the uniqueness of the gospel or to diminish the necessity of its proclamation; it is to vindicate God’s justice toward people who have not heard the gospel” (2004: 283f). Scripture does not tell me how many will be saved, but it does give me a firm hope in a God who is rich in mercy and whose heartbeat is to yearn for all of us to return to the Father’s house.

Literature:

Arendt, Niels Henrik: ”Når de nu alle sammen tror på Gud...”, in: Harald Nielsen: *Religionsteologi*. Fredriksberg: Unitas Forlag, 2004

Hick, John: “A Pluralist View”, in: Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Philips: *More than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996

McGrath, Alister: “A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach”, in: Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Philips: *More than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995

Newbigin, Lesslie: *The Open Secret*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978

Newbigin, Lesslie: *Foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids. William Eerdmans Publishing Company 1986

Newbigin, Lesslie: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989

Pinnock, Clark H.: *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992

Thelle, Notto: *Relation, Awareness, and Energy – Three Languages*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005

Thiessen, Terrance L.: *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions*. Downers Grove & Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004

Yong, Amos: *Beyond the Impasse: Towards a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003

Knud Jørgensen, 1942, journalist, cand.theol. fra Københavns Universitet, 1970, Ph.D. i missiologi fra Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980, har bl.a. vært programsjef ved Radio Evangeliets Røst i Etiopia, eksekutivsekretær for kommunikasjon ved Det Lutherske Verdensforbund, rektor ved Gå Ut Senteret, informasjonsjef i Kirkens Nødhjelp, og siden 1988 direktør for Areopagos. Har skrevet en rekke artikler i bøker og blad, bøker om kommunikasjon og lederskap, og er medredaktør av *Missiologi i dag*.