The Globalisation of Theology

John D’Arcy May

In 1981 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the great historian and theologian of understanding among religions, published his Cadbury Lectures under the title: Towards a World Theology. This was not the only such venture to have appeared around that time, but its humane person-centred approach to interreligious relations makes it stand out, even today, though it was contested at the time. For Smith, such a global theology was feasible only if suitably informed representatives of religious traditions learned to do theology collaboratively, and he even gave an informal and amusing sketch of how such collaboration might work. As someone whose project was to write a history of religion ‘in the singular’, however, he was only too well aware of how humanly difficult and methodologically complicated such collaboration would be. For him, each identifiable ‘religion’ – a word whose use he tried to discourage in the sense of distinct, self-contained religious entities – was a ‘cumulative tradition’ which could only be understood (by the historian) through its interactions with other traditions and (by the theologian) by getting some sense of the ‘faith’ that inspired it, an anthropological constant which it would be found to share with all who were genuinely religious. It is at this point that Smith’s programme becomes problematic, but the world theology he envisaged and the conditions he set for achieving it have a new relevance now that the multi-polar, multi-religious shape of the world has been captured by the term ‘globalisation’.

I propose to use the term globalisation as a purely formal concept, prompting the question: ‘Globalisation of what?’. I think it is best understood as the universalising of communication to the point where time and space are compressed to become a continuous present in what Manuel Castells has called the ‘real virtuality’ created by electronic media (hence expressions such as ‘real time’ banking, gaming, reporting etc.). On this premise, it makes just as much sense to speak about the

---

3 See the rejoinder which Cantwell Smith felt constrained to add to John Hick’s concluding remarks after a conference on religious pluralism in which Smith dissented from the abstract a priori pluralism of some colleagues, John Hick, ed., Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between World Religions (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 156-162.
4 Smith, World Theology, chapter 7.
globalisation of crime, or benevolence, or security, or trade, as it does to talk about the globalisation of theology. Seen in this light, globalisation is a revolution on a par with the invention of the printing press, but it is also a crisis of information overload, as was evidenced in the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, when financial ‘experts’ lost control of the enormously complex transactions they were engaging in. Humans are not equipped, either biologically or socially, to cope with such a rapid extension of our sensory apparatus, and its consequences for the ways we imagine, learn, dream, use language and otherwise respond to the world are yet to be fully understood. But in the case of theology the effects of globalisation are particularly far-reaching. Engagement with philosophical movements such as deconstruction and the acknowledgement of post-modernity as a new intellectual context are only the beginnings of our accommodation to religious globalisation.

For me the key question is the emergence of something like a global civil society and the place of the religions in it. Religious traditions are notoriously resistant to change of any kind, let alone the avalanche of change which is rapidly spreading to the furthermost corners of the world. Modernity, if we take this to mean the transformation of European societies in the industrial revolution and the Age of Enlightenment, redefined the place of the Christian denominations which emerged from the Reformation in societies that eventually became, to varying degrees, democratic or republican. It was taken as axiomatic until recently that this entailed the ‘secularisation’ of society and the consequent ‘privatisation’ of religious convictions as faith receded into the sphere of individual ‘preference’. In the face of tumultuous developments on the global religious scene, such as the reinvigoration of Islam, the popularity of Buddhism and the rediscovery of indigenous religion, the secularisation thesis is being revised.\textsuperscript{7}

Though secularity and the separation of church and state became the defining characteristics of ‘modern’ societies, in the West but also in Asia and Africa, it by no means follows that global civil society will automatically be secular, something that Western media and academic elites have yet to grasp. The dynamics of an inchoate, indeed chaotic world-wide civic space maintained by electronic social media without any overarching global government to moderate it seem to be having the effect of unleashing the best and the worst in the world’s religions, giving free rein to every conceivable kind of fundamentalism but also to genuinely new and hopeful ‘ecumenical’ developments, notwithstanding the protests of those who loudly maintain that the elimination of religion altogether would bring us a giant step closer to solving the world’s problems. This sets the parameters for the following investigation: Is a world theology feasible, is the world society which would be its context viable, and, if both questions can be answered in the affirmative, how would one go about constructing such a globalised theology?

\textsuperscript{7} Notably by one of its main proponents, Peter Berger, \textit{The Desecularization of the World} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); see also the magisterial re-reading of European intellectual history by Charles Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age} (Cambridge, Ma., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
Globalisation of Theology

World Theology?

Each identifiable religious tradition now has no other option than to address these dramatic developments by drawing on its own time-hallowed resources – but in voluntary cooperation with others, no longer alone. In the new situation it is inconceivable that any one religious tradition could define all the others on its own terms and assert that it alone possessed the truth that would be the salvation of all humanity and the earth itself. Yet precisely this is what they have all traditionally done and continue to do. Therein lies the dilemma at the heart of any attempt to create a global theology. Indeed, this unhappy state of affairs has drawn alongside the problem of evil and the claims of rationalism as the third great objection to religion as such. These peremptory assertions now need to be substantiated.

In the case of Christianity, the core doctrines of incarnation (the assumption by Godself in the person of God’s Son of the full humanity of the man Jesus of Nazareth) and redemption (the death of Jesus as a propitiatory sacrifice offered to the Father on behalf of sinful humanity) are constructed in such a way that they present themselves as definitive and unsurpassable, superseding every other revelation, whether historical or conceivable. What God reveals is not an additional insight into religious truth but Truth itself, Godself. As Karl Barth, in a stroke of theological genius, concluded, only faith, as a response to this revelation gifted by divine grace, can work salvation; everything else, including the ritual and institutional paraphernalia of the Christian churches, is ‘religion’ and amounts to human presumptuousness, an affront to the divine transcendence. It is only when one encounters attempts to develop this Offenbarungspositivismus (‘revelational positivism’), as it has been called, in a missionary context, as in the work of Hendrik Kraemer – not to mention the single-minded proselytism of Evangelical, Pentecostal or Adventist missionaries, often supported from North America, in the Pacific Islands, Africa and South America – that its full incongruity becomes apparent. 8

That this is not specifically a Protestant phenomenon is shown by Vatican pronouncements such as Dominus Iesus (2000), which by reaffirming the uniqueness and unicity of Christ and the (Catholic) Church as the sole means of salvation threaten to undo decades of patient interfaith theology and dialogue based on Nostra Aetate and other documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). 9 This is mainly because they view the situation exclusively from a Christian-Catholic standpoint, generally without any acknowledgement that other religions might have something to contribute, though one can also find a cautious admission of the necessity for dialogue as a component of evangelisation. Attempts to modify this stance by ‘inclusivist’ theologies which subsume other religions under the Christian scheme of salvation (Karl Rahner) or explicitly ‘pluralist’ proposals

---

Globalisation of Theology

which would equalise and relativise the religions while maintaining their distinctiveness (John Hick) have not met with general acceptance.\(^{10}\)

It may help us come to terms with this unsatisfactory situation if we Christians stand back for a moment from our own preoccupations and take account of the ways in which other religious traditions are beginning to confront similar problems in the same global context. It is by no means unusual for the ‘primal’ traditions of indigenous peoples to assume that they and they alone have been bequeathed the wisdom and prowess to dominate all others; indeed, there are cases in which their word for ‘human beings’ is the same as their word for ‘our people’, as is often the case in Melanesia. In the new context of mobility and rapid communication, however, indigenous peoples are finding that they have much in common, which gives them a basis for cooperation in securing their rights to land and humane treatment. But their traditional attitudes to ‘others’ – strangers and enemies – show how radically human it is to attribute exceptional status to ‘our’ group.

In the case of Muslims there is often a quite unselfconscious assumption that the Prophet was vouchsafed the final revelation of the way believers should live, superseding all others whether past, present or future, so that questions of comparison and relative validity do not really arise. With these convictions Muslims can usually find their place in the pluralist mix of secular societies with only minor irritation in matters such as diet or dress, but movements such as the Wahhabi Islam emanating from Saudi Arabia give this innocent absolutism a much more sinister cast, even to the extent of denying the status of Muslim to coreligionists who do not conform to its strict standards and calling on all true Muslims to wage violent jihad on infidels.

There is much more to be said, however, about the capacity of Islam to participate in a truly global theology. It is not generally realised that throughout the Middle Ages Muslims were much better informed about other religions and more objective in their judgements of them than Christians.\(^{11}\) The emergence of Islam was “frightening” for Christians, who regarded it as a particularly perverse heresy...

---


\(^{11}\) See Lloyd Ridgeon and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, editors’ introduction, *Islam and Inter-Faith Relations* (London: SCM, 2007), 3, citing the view of Harold Coward and referring to more detailed research by Jacques Waardenburg. I shall refer to this series of lectures and responses frequently as an example of the kind of collaboration that is now becoming possible.
Globalisation of Theology

– for Luther, on a par with the Papacy! In its early history Islam was progressively politicised and ideologised as it became a force for social order and was thus intertwined with the state, so that the originating vision (al-dīn) was reduced to institutionalised Islam, and Islam was reduced to shari‘a. The present-day revival of Islam is itself a response to globalisation, but the ubiquity of modern communications media has created a ‘global ummah’, a virtual world-wide Islamic community, resulting in a “polemical spiral” which is “playing havoc in cyberspace”.

It may seem surprising that quite intransigent attitudes to other religions have been commonplace in Buddhism, despite its reputation for tolerance. On the contrary: historically, Buddhists have shown little or no interest in understanding or even acknowledging other traditions such as Islam or Chinese religion. Theravada Buddhism has an inbuilt conviction that its Dhamma is the one and only sure way to liberation from the suffering (dukkha, more properly ‘unsatisfactoriness’, ‘unease’) endemic in the human condition, and the appalling violence which has characterised the conflict in Sri Lanka has been legitimised by this conviction, which fuses ethnic and religious superiority into one nationalistic amalgam, equally intolerant of Hindu-Tamil and Western-Christian otherness. The case of Buddhism is particularly discouraging because of the prominence of wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā) in all its very diverse schools and its ideal of equanimity or even-mindedness (upekkhā) as a basis for rising above passion and prejudice in resolving conflict. It is perhaps the cultivation of a kind of sublime indifference that has sometimes led Buddhists, for example Japanese Zen masters and their followers in the time of imperialistic militarism before the Second World War, to obey the Emperor’s command to take up arms without reflection, as an archer, a flower arranger or one performing the tea ceremony eliminates self and lets the action take its own course (as eminent an authority as D. T. Suzuki could say that Zen simply is religion, implying that nothing else is, a move as strikingly audacious as Karl Barth’s).

More progressive Buddhist thinkers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and the Thai monk Buddhadasa have explored the possibilities of a Buddhist ‘inclusivism’, utilising traditional concepts

---


16 See Brian Victoria, Zen at War (New York: Weatherhill, 1997); on Suzuki, 104-110.
such as the all-inclusive ‘one vehicle’ (ekāyāna) of the Lotus Sūtra or the theory of ‘two truths’, a transcendent truth (paramārtha-satya) which is knowable to liberated ones but inaccessible to reason, and a conventional truth (samvṛti-satya) which is valid in the everyday life-world constructed by language. The problem with such strategies is that they privilege Buddhism while denying that they do so, and the problem is compounded by many Buddhists’ lack of awareness that their inherited traditions are culturally conditioned.\footnote{See Schmidt-Leukel, Buddhist Attitudes, especially the contributions of Kristin Beise Kiblinger, ‘Buddhist Stances Towards Others: Types, Examples, Considerations’, 24-46, and John Makransky, ‘Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections Toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions’, 47-68; see also Kiblinger, Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).}

In the context of replying to the then Cardinal Ratzinger’s Dominus Iesus this assumption that one’s own uniqueness implies superiority over everyone else was well named ‘meliorism’ (from melior, ‘better’).\footnote{Ottmar Fuchs, ‘Plädoyer für eine ebenso dissensfähige wie ebenbürtige Ökumene’, Michael Rainer, ed., “Dominus Iesus”: Anstößige Wahrheit oder anstößige Kirche? (Münster-Hamburg-London: LIT Verlag, 2001), 169-195.} But once this is acknowledged it at least puts us all on an equal footing in confronting the problem of how we can come together spiritually and collaborate theologically while not surrendering whatever it is that gives us our religious identity and grounds us in our traditions. The framework of secular societies based on liberal tolerance – and indifference to what people believe as long as they do not claim exclusive status – is something quite different, invaluable though it is as an achievement that took the sting out of post-Reformation religious strife. In the future global civil society, as indeed in the increasingly multi-cultural societies of virtually all continents and civilisations, this will not be enough; it may not even be viable. A generalised tolerance, invaluable as it is as the framework for civil rights such as ‘freedom of expression’ or ‘religious liberty’, must progress to the point where it becomes explicit engagement with one another’s deepest convictions. Even ‘dialogue’, difficult and necessary as it is, does not capture the degree of urgency and the level of challenge entailed by religious collaboration, not just in practical cooperation but in theological reflection.

World Society?

It has become de rigeur to dismiss multiculturalism as a failed project, most recently in Britain and Germany, but increasingly in Australia as well. Perhaps it is the ‘-ism’ that puts people off, but whatever we call it, we have no choice, in my view, but to learn to live with culturally and religiously different ‘others’, from the streets and neighbourhoods of our local communities to the emerging global community of peoples, nations and states. If we do not make this considerable ecumenical effort, the inevitable conflicts tend to become violent and nation-states ensconce themselves behind restrictive immigration laws and the rejection of refugees. When racially motivated violence is reinforced by absolutist religious convictions, it can become ineradicable. To advocate an ecumenical alternative to...
the religious sanctioning of ethnic conflict and economic rivalry is thus not mere idealism: it is radical realism.

Western liberal societies, following the pattern established above for the religions, tend to take for granted that their kinds of polity set the norm for societies everywhere, and that the coming global civil society will inevitably follow this pattern and be judged by this norm. But this assumption begs two questions. Having spent all my life in democracies of one kind or another, I am keenly aware of what a privilege it is to live in a society where basic rights are respected and freedoms granted, and where a certain level of prosperity and security is attainable by all. But there are other ways of achieving these goals than Westminster-style parliamentary democracy or presidential-style republican constitutions. If the colonisation of most of the world by Western powers had not proceeded so brutally and rapidly, there may well have been time for alternative models of political society to emerge, and the outcome of the recent upheavals across the Arab world will be extremely interesting in this regard. Enormously important as it was to establish genuinely pluralist societies in which there is room for a variety of ideological and religious convictions, without the need to suppress dissent and with mechanisms for the transfer of power according to the expressed will of the people, and indispensable as it was under the circumstances obtaining in post-Reformation Europe or post-independence India for such societies to be secular, their limitations are exposed as the pressures of globalisation increase. The rationality that sustains science offers little help in solving the human and ecological problems it has created; the ideal of tolerance appears helpless in the face of religious extremism and uncompromising terrorism; and the granting of equal rights to women, ethnic minorities and refugees is by no means complete.  

The second assumption that needs to be questioned is that a future global civil society, if indeed it comes about, will be secular and democratic on the same European pattern. Difficult as it still is to discern its contours, such a society would have no highest authority, no government which could legislate bindingly and to which appeals for justice could be made (the vicissitudes of the United Nations, indispensable as this beleaguered organisation is, only underline its inadequacy in these respects). Nor would there be any ‘outsiders’ in relation to which a sense of identity could be maintained: we would all be ‘insiders’, busily marking off our identities over against others but at the same time striving to construct some kind of global identity. This, as far as one can see, would be an unstable amalgam of inherited identities in a constant state of interaction, with a strong secular component but undoubtedly incorporating powerful religious currents and communities. My point is that a constructed secular framework of ideological neutrality and religious tolerance will no longer be adequate to contain these. It will be necessary for there to be a substantive, not merely a formal

---


Globalisation of Theology

pluralism, an interactive pluralism which will eventually change the participants. In the terms proposed by systems theory: no one of the many functional subsystems which make up a society will be able to define and represent this unstable whole, neither one of the religions nor one of the dominant ideologies.21 No such totalising system could thematise the emergent whole and make a plausible claim to be normative for it. The only social subsystem that has come close to achieving this is the market, with economics as its ‘theology’ and all-pervading ‘economism’ as its normative value.22 The poverty of such a scenario was brutally exposed by the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, and it is manifested in a different way as China rises to global economic prominence while denying and suppressing the spiritual heritage of its great religious traditions.

By now the problems these developments pose for theology, whether Christian or otherwise, should be apparent. In the world order – or perhaps disorder? – I have sketched there is no place in principle for exclusivistic, dogmatic worldviews of any kind, yet what we see in practice is a proliferation and intensification of them – and by no means only religious ones. In ways that are yet to be fully understood, this is a response to the pressures of globalisation, but it does not mean that the collective religious convictions inherited from traditions great and small should be relativised and neutered, so that they become mere options in the supermarket of ideas. How to achieve this in the new situation is the ecumenical challenge of our time. It implies that we must disabuse ourselves of the idea that the ecumenical is the soft option for liberals and agnostics who are not particularly committed to any faith but are prepared to entertain a selection of them at a safe distance. The kind of ecumenism I am proposing is one where religious convictions do not simply evaporate in a general climate of tolerance but strengthen as they engage with the equally strong convictions of religious others, coexisting with them and interacting with them until such time as ways can be found to sustain together shared visions of hope for the human future and agreed ethical bases for action in the present.23 It may well be that such a pluralistic coexistence is a more realistic goal than a prematurely constructed ultimate commonality which only intellectual elites can fully grasp.24 Not all would put it as bluntly as Majid Tehranian: “The new Global Civilization demands a new faith. That faith has to transcend all existing faiths”.25 If a Muslim can assert this, then Christian theologians have much to ponder. One thing, at

21 See Peter Beyer, Religions in Global Society (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), with reference to systems theory as developed by Talcott Parsons and applied to religion by Niklas Luhmann.


any rate, is clear: if we are even to approximate to these goals, we must all change the way we do theology.

Towards Collaborative Theology

Many who are working intensively in the field of interreligious studies are beginning to realise that we need to go beyond objective surveys of the ways the religions represent themselves in the public sphere to the point where they begin to engage with one another theologically. In the case of Christianity and Islam, Martin Bauschke can assert:

In face of fundamentalist demagogues both sides have the responsibility to create an alternative to … a ‘theology of hate’, that is, a theology of reconciliation and friendship between Christians and Muslims. This theology needs to be developed jointly and, being a common Christian-Muslim theology, it is therefore different from either a ‘Christian view of Islam’ or a ‘Muslim view of Christianity’ as we have presented here.26

Any such venture, of course, has presuppositions which are only just beginning to be explored; as Bauschke continues:

In order to develop a Christian-Muslim theology of reconciliation and friendship we need a common Christian-Muslim hermeneutics of their sacred Scriptures.27

Remarking on how teachings such as ‘skilful means’ (kauśalya-upāya) have allowed Buddhists to assimilate viewpoints from other schools while maintaining the doctrinal superiority of their own, John Makransky acknowledges that

Buddhist traditions of Asia, and now of the West, are products of the recurrent, fresh integration of non-Buddhist religious and cultural elements into new Buddhist frameworks.28

Agreeing with Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis that religions need one another in order to plumb the depths of their own truths, Makransky goes on:

It is not just that Buddhahood is speaking itself through other religious traditions so as to include them as lower levels of preparation on the ladder to Buddhist enlightenment. Rather Buddhists need the wisdom of religious others to help disclose to them what lies outside of the

historically conditioned limitations of their own tradition, to help them receive more of the truth that frees, perhaps sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways…

In developing what he unapologetically calls a Buddhist theology, notwithstanding the absence of a personal God in traditional Buddhist thought, Makransky freely acknowledges the influence on him of Christian colleagues such as the Jesuit Francis Clooney, whose essays in a Hindu-Christian ‘comparative theology’ have excited much interest.

These few examples suffice to show that we are on the threshold of what I would want to call ‘collaborative theology’ in which the most fundamental presuppositions of each tradition would be debated across institutional boundaries in much the same way as doctrinal matters have been within the traditions, except that now, instead of being taken for granted as data of revelation or self-evident truths, these presuppositions would be mutually challenged at the deepest level. Only communication partners with a mature level of trust could undertake such a project. This might well take place in a spirit of competition, but even in the midst of conflict space needs to be made for this further reflection, for by expanding the context of conflict in this way and drawing on the deepest resources of each side even violent conflict can be resolved by the parties to the conflict themselves. But, to borrow a remark of the recently deceased former Irish prime minister Garret FitzGerald, ‘That’s all very well in practice, but how would it work in theory?’ The hard intellectual work of reconciling fundamentally opposed religious viewpoints remains. It is no solution to achieve this in the abstract in ways which actual religious believers cannot accept. One does not compose hymns to abstractions, nor can they console the grieving or inspire hope in the suffering. The task for collaborative theology is not just to ‘mention’, but to ‘use’ religious language in all its particularity in ways which gradually expand its field of reference so that it is understood beyond the cultural boundaries of determinate traditions. This is not just a matter of finding ‘common ground’; indeed, ‘common’ ground only too often turns out to reflect the basic doctrines of one of the parties to the discussion.

One way of approaching this problem would be to explore symbolic equivalences between the ruling metaphors which govern the ‘deep structures’ of each tradition’s language. Much work has already been done along these lines, e.g. correlating the Christian concept of God with the Buddhist Dharma; the Kingdom or Reign of God in Christian tradition with Nirvana as the Buddhist Ultimate which is nevertheless non-dual with contingent existence in time; or the Trinity-Incarnation complex with the

---

29 Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism”, Schmidt-Leukel, Buddhist Attitudes, 64.
31 See Marc Gopin, Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Just as Gopin has seen this potential realised in the Middle East, I have observed it in Northern Ireland.
Three Bodies of the Buddha (*trikāya*) and the Three Characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*). There is also much potential in concepts such as hope, compassion and reconciliation. In many such cases one comes to the realisation that Buddhism and Christianity, in their most fundamental aspects, are at one and the same time – sometimes in respect of one and the same question – radically different and radically the same, notwithstanding the Buddhists’ reservations about the separate existence of a Creator God, the personal nature of God, or indeed the reality of a personal Self. One glimpses the possibility of re-tracing intellectually the ground already staked out by Christian and Buddhist spiritual practitioners who are open to dialogue.

Another line of approach, which perhaps offers more immediately attainable results, is the path of ethics, where agreement can often quickly be reached about basic principles and practices whose contexts and motivations may nevertheless differ considerably. The differences involved often turn out to be more cultural than doctrinal, e.g. in Japanese attitudes to contraception and abortion, which are generally supported by Buddhists but would be rejected by many Christians. Questions of human rights and social responsibility confront us with the widely differing views of the person in the two traditions, yet the Socially Engaged Buddhism which has now emerged, especially in Southeast Asia, shares practical goals consonant with those of Christian Liberation Theology. Now that ecology is being seen as an ethical issue, involving in some way as yet difficult to grasp for Western traditions the ‘rights’ of species and of nature itself, Christian thinkers such as Paul Knitter and John B. Cobb have found much to ponder in the Buddhist conception of universal interconnectedness of all components of reality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). The trans-theistic Buddhist perspective still leaves Christians with

---


puzzling questions: Are Buddhists in a position to take history seriously, and does the elimination of
the individual self attenuate the moral responsibility contingent upon individual existence in time? Yet
in practice such issues are very often resolved, suggesting that their resolution in theory is attainable.

What seems to be called for in the globalisation of theology, illustrated here all too briefly by reference
to Buddhist and Christian collaboration, is something like the philosophical conversion undergone by
the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) under the impact of Zen Buddhism’s
helplessness in the face of imperialistic militarism at the height of the Second World War. It led him to
resign his chair at Kyoto University and withdraw to the mountains, only emerging when he had
fashioned what he called a ‘metanoetics’, a turning around of Buddhist-inspired philosophy
reminiscent of Christian metanôia but resolutely intellectual, not moral, in conception.36

In the flux of global communication in the emerging global public sphere religious thinking becomes
elusive, which possibly explains why people of faith – in all faiths – turn to varieties of
fundamentalism as a refuge from the kind of radical questioning hinted at here.37 The examples given
above are taken from only one set of interreligious relationships, though surely one of the most
intellectually and spiritually challenging; in principle, and increasingly in practice, such mutual
questioning is opening up among all religious traditions with more or less determinate doctrinal
structures. These exchanges are taking place against the background a global fusion of philosophies,
cultures and languages, and if they are still somewhat inchoate, they certainly transcend the sterile
debates sparked off by the so-called ‘new atheism’. They may be daunting for the more doctrinally
developed religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, in which the questioning of fundamentals
appears to threaten whole doctrinal edifices erected over the centuries to safeguard central beliefs. But
those who have entered into them with openness to new insights and trust in their own fidelity and their
partners’ integrity regularly report that they have been liberated from culturally conditioned narrowness
and inspired to renewed faithfulness to what really matters in their respective heritages.38 The outcome
of such reciprocal engagement is not knowable in advance; to embark on it demands a special kind of
courage, which is more likely to be found among lonely pioneers than the hierarchies of religious

---

(Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992); J.D. May, “'Rights of the Earth’ and ‘Care for the Earth’: Two

36 See Makoto Ozaki, Introduction to the Philosophy of Tanabe: According to the English Translation
of the Seventh Chapter of the Demonstratio of Christianity (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi; Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Warning: Tanabe’s thought is bafflingly difficult, even for those versed in
the thought of the Kyoto School!

37 This line of thought is developed, with often colorful examples from the Australasian context, by

38 One of the most remarkable testimonies to such a conversion through dialogue is Paul F. Knitter’s
authority. But if theology – now of an intercultural and interreligious type\footnote{See J.D. May and Linda Hogan, “Visioning Ecumenics as Intercultural, Inter-religious, and Public Theology”, Linda Hogan, Solange Lefebvre, Norbert Hintersteiner, Felix Wilfred, eds., \textit{Concilium: From World Mission to Inter-religious Witness} (London: SCM, 2011), 70-81.} – is to keep pace with the breathtaking developments of globalisation, the construction of such theology, shared among all traditions willing to participate, would seem to be the true ecumenical alternative to ethnocentrism and religious absolutism.