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Narratives? Theology of Religions and
the Flight from Ontology”

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“A World of Narratives? Theology of Religions and the Flight from Ontology”

Many of you are I am sure familiar with George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*. This novel, originally published in 1871 and now considered one of the most important literary works of the Victorian period, reflects upon the intertwined lives of a group of characters from different social classes, thereby affording the reader what Eliot herself calls “a study of a provincial life”. One of the most striking figures in the novel is that of young Dorothea, a well-to-do girl whom many consider overly intellectual and idealistic, and who chooses to enter into an ill-advised marriage with an Anglican priest many years her senior, Rev. Edward Casaubon. Dorothea is struck by Casaubon’s intellect and dedication to his research, whose goal is allegedly the composition of a major encyclopedic work, called *The Key to All Mythologies*. According to Casaubon, all religions are fragments of a lost primordial unity, a sort of *Ur-religion* whose traces can still be discerned by the careful observer. Dorothea is thus deeply saddened when her husband passes away without having completed his work. In his desk, she will find hundreds of notebooks filled with notes on the origins of the Etruscan religion, the history of animal sacrifices in India, or the survival of pre-Roman religion in Sicily. After toying with the idea of completing the work herself, Dorothea abandons the enterprise to oblivion; of the *Key to All Mythologies*, all that survives are unread fragments.

In the eyes of George Eliot, who is ultimately a very English writer, Casaubon’s destiny is the destiny of Continental, or really German historiography, whose grandiose Hegelian designs try to envelop a reluctant history into all-explanatory schemes. Trying

to develop a unifying narrative that accounts for diversity appears to respond to a need that is deeply rooted in the human psyche; after all, randomness is existentially no less than philosophically unsustainable, and a comprehensive explanation offers the seductive impression of being in control. Of course, the problem of religious pluralism is far from new; from the pages of Athanasios or Ambrose, we see how the early Christians lived in cities where Sunday liturgies were celebrated as sheep and oxen were still sacrificed to the gods; Clement of Alexandria mentions how in his city it was not impossible to encounter Indian sages, and as late as the 6th century, when the second Origenist controversy raged in the Middle East, Buddhist monasteries were still flourishing in today's Jordan and Syria. Over the past two centuries, however, the plurality of religious traditions seems to have penetrated into the Christian consciousness as never before, and the attempts to offer an explanation of this pluralism have multiplied correspondingly. The closed world of Medieval Europe, where the only religious interlocutor with whom it was worth debating were the "heretical" Greeks, has been replaced by an intercommunicating and increasingly interdependent planet. In a way that is deeper, and perhaps more painful than ever before, we are now all aware of the multiplicity of religions, and of the many, different answers that these religions offer to ultimate questions. In North America and parts of Western Europe, religious pluralism is a reality with which we confront ourselves on a daily basis, and this continuous interaction has inevitably led to growing theological reflection on the problem. Why are there so many different religions? Are the different religions equally effective in putting people in contact with the divine? How should different religions relate to each other? Can one

learn anything from one religion different from one's own while remaining committed to the tradition that one has inherited or chosen?

Paul Knitter's work on theology of religion offers us a template to classify different approaches to religious pluralism, and I think it is fair to say that the virtual totality of theological models that try to account for religious diversity may be said to be versions of one or the other of these models. What is interesting about these models, however, is also the extent to which their acceptance or rejection by the broader theological community and the community of the faithful may also serve as an indicator of how the very notion of religious truth has gradually shifted over the course of the centuries. In other words, we have grown less and less comfortable with a notion of truth which views truth in terms of correspondence with an external reality, and have gradually embraced a notion of truth that rests on inner, cognitive coherence. In other words, we have gradually abandoned, or perhaps even fled, the realm of ontology, to turn religious truths into different narratives. This is I think an even more crucial point than the actual choice to embrace, say, a Rahnerian model of religious pluralism over a Balthasarian model, or to adopt Panikkar's reflections as a theological reference point. I will now explain what I mean by referring to an article by Sarah Coakley on the nature of Chalcedonian definition, called "What does Chalcedon explain and what does it not" and included in a 2002 collection known as "The Incarnation: an Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God" edited by Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins.

Now, Sarah Coakley's discussion focuses on the famous Chalcedonian definition of 451, whose goal was to bring to conclusion "the tortured debate between the

Alexandrian and the Antiochene schools of Christology”. Whether Chalcedon was a truly successful compromise is of course questionable; while it did succeed to rule out the widely divergent positions of the extreme Nestorians, the Apollinarians, and the Eutychians, the rejection of the definition on the part of the Oriental churches later known as monophysite underscored lingering dissatisfaction with its implications. What concerns us here, however, is what the Chalcedonian definitions intended to achieve; and indeed, Coakley’s considerations may be equally applied to any doctrinal statement.

Citing yet another article by Richard Norris, Coakley notes that Chalcedon might be seen for instance as a form of theological evasion. In this perspective, what the bishops meeting in 451 actually did was to assert that Christ was both divine and human, but they did not offer substantial content to the terms “divinity” or “humanity”; rather, they offered a linguistic paradigm, a transcription or account of “a pattern of predication”. This approach warns us that any temptation to reify the two natures of Christ, or in other words to view them as distinct ontological realities, misses the point of the definition; Chalcedon is only offering us a regulatory grid, a hermeneutic lens through which we may assess the event of the incarnation.

Norris’ approach appears very convenient; a linguistically regulative claim encounters less attrition with contemporary scientific views that question the very notion of substance, and when confronted with Schleiermacher’s contention in *The Christian Faith* that there is no such thing as divine nature, it would simply let go of an assertion that is no longer perceived as “helpful”. Questions about the relationship of two opposed realities such as humanity and divinity are effectively bypassed, since no assertions on the logical, or indeed ontological relationship between humanity and divinity are actually

made. After driving such a secure wedge between a “linguistic” and a “reified” reading of the definition, ontology is silently, but effectively, dropped; one could almost say that fleeing the demands of ontology is a very convenient strategy, since it allows us to concentrate on more practical matters, such as who is within the church and who is not. Theological definitions become signposts of ecclesial belonging; they define one’s identity by establishing a tradition, or in other words, developing a narrative that we inhabit with greater or lesser ease.

What Coakley traces in Norris’ approach to Chalcedon amounts effectively to a flight from ontology, which involves a loosening of the relationship between language and reality. There are different ways in which this may be accomplished, however. Coakley turns to Hick’ notorious piece “The Myth of God Incarnate”, which challenges Chalcedon with the assertion that the notion of a God/man is “as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square”. Hick actually builds on the absence of content that Norris finds in the Chalcedonian definition, and notes that “orthodoxy insisted upon the two natures, human and divine, co-inhering in the one historical Jesus Christ”, but did not really succeed in giving this idea any content. Given Chalcedon’s impermeability to ontology, the only solution is to view the claim of divine incarnation as a linguistic cipher: “the initial idea ha proved to be devoid of literal meaning” and has accordingly being identified as a metaphor. The emergence of this term in Hick’s argument, however, suggests that Hick’s polemic is perhaps less harsh than Norris’ more genteel, but actually more deeply iconoclastic claim. Metaphorical speech does not recede fully from reality; it merely says something with less ontological firmness than if one spoke affirming to make a literal claim.

In order to understand what is really going on here, we should realize that Norris and Hick are sustained by different versions of the same Kantian engine. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant expatiates on the distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon. The latter may be define as the thing-in-itself, what makes object or entity X what it is; the phenomenon is the thing as it is perceived, the extent to which object or entity X is open to cognitive inquiry. Kant is a major champion of epistemological modesty; the noumenon remains forever sealed to human cognition, or in other words it is epistemologically inaccessible. All we can know of reality is what knowledge we can build through sensory perception. The Kantian dichotomy between the noumenon and the phenomenon dismantles the huge cathedrals of Medieval Scholastic epistemology, going even further than Descartes' skepticism in questioning the extent and boundaries of human cognition. Where Aquinas postulated an ontological continuum between the natural order and its creator, Kant positions the divine in the realm of the noumena; where scholastic manuals envisaged theological claims as ultimately grounded in our experience of created reality, for Kant God is known through the moral sense only.

The question is then, how can one do theology after this radical shift? And how should one view past theological claims in the light of this different approach? Norris and Hick share a common faith in the epistemic unavailability in the divine. God per se is entirely off-limits; in Sarah Coakley's own words, theological assertions about the divine reality become "harmlessly ornamental and radical improper". Ornamental, since they cannot really offer any insight into the divine; improper, because they are trying to go beyond the reach of language, doing something language cannot (and hence may not) accomplish. Before we come to an overly simplistic conclusion, however, we should note

that Hick and Norris are not really saying the same thing. Norris, following George Lindbeck's approach, tends to view theological assertions as cultural expressions which do not even attempt to convey beliefs about the nature of reality. Indeed, such is the emphasis on the unknowable character of reality that one starts wondering whether there is really any reality at all. After all, if something is utterly inaccessible to our minds, and nothing at all can ever be said about it, how can we know that this something is actually there at all? In the end, one is not just fleeing from ontology; one is denying ontology altogether. This is what happens in Norris' approach: theological assertions create a hermeneutic circle, a realm of stories; they define our tradition; they are, in a sense, second-order behavioral guidelines.

With Hick, we are perhaps closer to Kant's original paradigm, in the sense that Hick does not deny the existence of an ultimate ontological referent; in his 1995 work *A Christian Theology of Religions*, as well as in other writings, Hick presents his well-known teaching of "The Real", the ontological foundation of all religions, towards which all religious teachings and doctrinal claims point. "The Real" is nothing else but a divine noumenon, about which nothing can ever be said, and which forever eludes all our efforts at analysis or understanding. The real is neither the triune God of the Christian tradition nor the nirvanic reality of Buddhism, and yet it is both these things at the same time; it is neither personal, nor impersonal and yet appears to carry these traits to different people at different moments in history. Here, theological claims are metaphorical gestures that are aware of their own inability to do what they are expected to do, which is to give an insight into ultimate reality.

At this point, one wonders whether either Norris or Hick are really doing justice to what Chalcedon is doing, or whether they are imposing a contemporary superstructure on a theological exercise that served a radically distinct purpose. One wonders whether Norris is truly entitled to distinguish between doctrinal statements that are merely regulatory and other forms of propositional claims; indeed, as Brian Daley comments, there is sufficient evidence to assert that in the early Christian period, theological terms were used with reference to realities, and it was the realities that mattered, rather than the language about them. Equally, Hick's metaphor might be rather too weak a label to apply to theological definitions; rather, they are invitations to move to a higher (deeper) level of perception, letting oneself be surprised by the realities that precede and sustain our language. Tactics of linguistic withdrawal, if pushed to their extreme consequences, cannot but be self-defeating. Yet, the question remains whether the only alternative to this is merely a naïve literalism. Some theologians find this the only viable alternative. In his *The Divine Trinity*, David Brown insists that according to Chalcedon, Jesus is "in some literal sense God". But what does literal mean in this context? The impression is that assertions of literalness oftentimes carry with themselves a presumption of careless univocity, as if divinity were something that we may encounter and measure on a daily basis. In Michael Buckley's words, it is as if we had three bears, a tree, a pair of shoes, and God; and obviously, this is not the case.

The problem with theology of religions, or comparative theology in general, is that the only alternative to an uncritical reassertion of naïve ontological realism often appears to be a watered-down post-Kantian disdain for ontology of all sorts, giving rise to the overarching narratives like the *Key of All Mythologies* of Rev. Casaubon. How this

works out in practice emerges clearly if we take a look at Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, where four different models of religious pluralism are discussed and their relative merits assessed. I think that an analysis of these models will show how three of them suffer from the same unease with ontology that poisons the three approaches to Chalcedon listed so far; namely, a fear, or rejection, of ontology's demands, or a too generous acceptance of its claims.

Let us begin from the model that Knitter discusses at the end, and which comes close to Norris' own model. Interestingly enough, Knitter opens up discussing George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, which Coakley used to discuss Norris' understanding of Chalcedon. In this perspective, religions in general can only be seen as linguistic frameworks that shape the entirety of our life or our thought. For Lindbeck, it is not the case that first we have an experience, and then we express this experience through words; rather, it is words that enable us to have experiences, and to talk about these experiences with other people. Of course, since we do not invent our own language but learn to speak the language of our parents, the religious symbols and words that shape our religious imagination are those of our culture; indeed, these symbols and words are the precondition for any form of religious experience. This approach, which Knitter calls "post-liberal", is paradoxically far less individualistic than it might appear; given that our religious identity is determined by our community of origin, our religious language is chosen for us, and we are born into it already. Lindbeck turns the relationship between epistemology and ontology upside down; the religious language that we speak does not explain the world we live in, but also effectively creates it.

The implication of this position for inter-religious dialogue are far-reaching: there is really nothing that can be considered common ground for all religions, given that really there is no such thing as a ground at all. If one understands language or culture seriously, there seems to be no single or generic universal experience, in the same way as it is not really possible to claim that there is one meta-language that actually underpins all speakers of all different languages throughout the world. In this perspective, Casaubon's *Key to all Mythologies* is a doomed project because it fails to advert to the profound incommensurability of different religions; the religious language of Christianity cannot be translated into the religious language of Islam, or the religious language of Buddhism, and so on. The key term here is "intra-textuality"; religious claims are true only to the extent that they exist within their own textual tradition. Knitter resorts to the term "compassion" as an example; in a Christian context, this term has a specific meaning that is different from the Buddhist meaning. It seems impossible, therefore, to develop a universal theological view that explains everything.

In this perspective, any theology of religion would appear to suffer from the hubristic assumption of Victorian arm-chair anthropologists who have never visited foreign cultures and climes, and yet develop sweeping generalizations about the way they function. Knitter notes that the greatest danger ensues when we begin with our own religious tradition, and use to develop a theory to explain other theories in ways that become a blinder. As a result, we protect ourselves, and in the words of James Fredericks in *Faith among Faiths*, we "inoculate Christians against the power and novelty of other religious traditions." A Lindbeckian, hence primarily linguistic approach to religious pluralism appears to suffer from two simultaneous flows: on one hand, by denying the

existence of an objective referent, it claims that no general meta-narrative is possible; on the other hand, it surreptitiously establishes a meta-narrative of sort, which entails the effective impossibility of dialogue.

If we turn to Hick's model, we will see how the view shifts, and yet similar problems ensue. In *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, Knitter points rather to the example of Raimon Panikkar, who stresses the crucial role of mystical experience as a reality that feeds and sustains the plurality of different religions. This claim alone shows the radical difference from the so-called post-liberal approach which I just outlined; here, we do have a common ontological referent. In his work *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, Panikkar calls it "the fundamental religious fact", or "a fact that does not lie in the realm of doctrine, [but] may well be present everywhere and in every religion". The model is not merely linguistic; it is deeply experiential; this fundamental fact is known by all those who religious experiences, albeit the way in which it is experienced differs from one cultural context to the other. Panikkar's model emphasizes the cosmic dimension of this reality, which in his writings is always said to have three components: the divine, the human, and the world. As in Teilhard de Chardin's notion of Christ, these three aspects cannot exist without being related to each other; they constitute a sort of "cosmotheandric reality", which is not static, but actually depends on how well we respond to its challenge.

While Knitter seems to think otherwise, I am tempted to think that this cosmotheandric reality serves the same purpose as Hick's notion of "The Real"; it is the common denominator that unifies all religions. The problem remains of how the different religious traditions in existence throughout the world are related to this underlying

reality. Knitter quotes a passage from Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ* that offers an interesting insight into this matter:

“It is not so simply that there are different ways leading to the peak, but that the summit itself would collapse if all the paths disappeared. The peak is in a certain sense the result of the slopes leading to it.... It is not that this reality (the Ultimate Mystery) has many names as if there were a reality outside the names. This reality is the many names and each name is a new aspect.”

In other words, this ultimate reality is as diverse as the religions that try to explain it, each in its different ways. Panikkar's model is a sort of mystical Kantianism, where the *nooumenon* is refracted in innumerable religious surfaces, and where each alternative narrative that attempts to describe this ultimate reality is effectively just a metaphor. While this plethora of narratives in this case is effectively grounded ontologically, and thus is different from those postulated in the previous model, we are still in the presence of a reductionist approach that envisages all narratives as merely metaphorical. In this sense, none of them actually says anything that is intrinsically (ultimately) descriptive of this reality. The recess from ontology is still operative; one might say that it does take a sort of Buddhist overtone, since the narratives describe a sort of conventional reality, and “The Real” belongs to a sort of ultimate dimension that, much like nirvana, escapes conceptualization. We still inhabit a world of narratives; but the underpinning meta-narrative, while ontologically grounded, effectively evacuates all the individual conventional stories of any authentic referentiality.

Of course a possibly reaction to these two approaches could be to reassert the actual reified character of ontological claims. Norris and Hick, no less than the post-

liberal and the metaphorical approaches to inter-religious dialogue, dwell in a world where truth is a matter of inner coherence, whereas traditional religious believers view theological statements as factual descriptions of realities that exist somewhere “out there”. Knitter’s reflection on different theologies of religions in the volume with the same title begins with the so-called Total Replacement Model, according to which, God intends that there should eventually be only one religion. This religion will be the one religion that is revealed in Scripture, and thus God’s own revealed religion: the same argument may be made by Evangelical Christians no less than is made by fundamentalist Muslims or Hindus. In this perspective, other religions do not really have any value and are only waiting to be wiped away; at most, they have served a provisional purpose as props of pre-Christian political systems. Knitter points out how all models of theology of religions must find a way to articulate the dialectic between God’s universal love and the particularity of its expression in history. In this model of total replacement, the balance comes down heavily on the side of particularity; Evangelicals, for instance, would claim that it is only fitting that there should be only one source of revelation, and that this source would be the person of Christ. This approach is very much like David Brown’s earlier claim that Christ is “in some literal sense” God. Here, we have a story, which is “in some literal sense” true. But how are we going to confront claims that are present in other religious traditions? We may not want a world just of narratives, but these narratives do play a role in the life of members of other traditions. In a sense, embracing this position amounts to abandoning any attempts at establishing any coherence, much as Casaubon’s widow, Dorothea, eventually locks the fragments of her husband’s work into a drawer.

It is tempting to think that literalness and the ensuing fragmentation is the only alternative to anti-ontological meta-narratives. In a sense Sarah Coakley's essay on Chalcedon shows that Dorothea's decision amounts to a failure of nerves. After marshalling all evidence against the three interpretations of Chalcedon that we mentioned before, Coakley goes on to present the Chalcedonian definition as a "horos", or narrative horizon. Horos enables one to defend the propositional content of Chalcedon's claims, while also resisting the temptation to smuggle under that label anachronistic notions of literalness that are beyond its purview. The definition sets a boundary on what one may or may not say about the incarnation, but it does not intend to offer a systematic account of Christology, nor even a complete and precise description of Christ's metaphysical makeup. It provides a boundary that helps to rule out unacceptable positions such as Nestorianism and Apollinarianism, but also provides a test, to which doctrinal claims have to be brought to be tested against error. In a sense, Chalcedon is a narrative test, which helps one distinguish which elements of other narratives are sound and which are not. It is ontological, but it is not univocal; it draws everything unto itself as Christ says in his nocturnal dialogue with Nichodemus.

If we apply this approach to the Christian story, we can see that we are returning to a semi-Rahnerian vision where the event of the incarnation provides the test for all other religious traditions. Stories spun by the human imagination sometimes intercept the story spun by the divine imagination, and sometimes they do not. Some of view I am sure recognize here the lineaments of the much dreaded partial fulfillment theory, and will wander: well, but this is also a meta-narrative. Of course it is. This one meta-narrative, however, is not a *Key to all Mythologies*; it certainly does not claim that it can explain

EVERYTHING. It helps to classify; to arrange; perhaps even to judge; it does not solve everything into all-encompassing Hegelian molasses. Fortunately, we are now much more comfortable with acknowledging the partiality of our viewpoint than was the case with learned gentlemen of the Victorian period. A theology of religions that operates with a more chastened awareness of its ontological reach might still be seen as hybristic by some, but it might afford space for more adventurous theologizing to others.