A post-modern theological model for understanding the religious concept of ultimate reality and religious diversity

Mark Craig

Abstact: There has been a fundamental shift in theological models for understanding ultimate reality/God and religious diversity in the post-modern age. This shift is from modernism's monolithic view or model of ultimate reality to post-modernism's multilithic view or model of ultimate reality. This paradigm shift has profound implications for the way in which religious diversity is to be understood in the post-modern era. As a result, the language utilised by various theological frameworks particular to discrete religions articulate what ultimate reality is. This language is usually refracted through particular socio-cultural and religious contexts, and so may need to be reconsidered in a post-modern context.

Introduction

Theology as an academic discipline has undergone major changes in response to a shift from a modern to a post modern view of ultimate reality. Flood (1999) identifies a change in how 'theology' is understood within institutions of higher education today. Theology no longer strictly refers to an "insider" discourse that reflects a largely confessional understanding of a particular religion's doctrinal, ethical and ritual position regarding religious truth. Rather, it refers to "theological universalism" or that post-modern propensity to understand religious plurality without

giving pre-eminence to a particular group(s) articulation of religious truth (Flood, 1999; Hick, 1989).

Hick (1989, pp.252-253) defines theological universalism as follows: religions are different ways of responding to ultimate reality or "the Real". Therefore, the Moslem "Allah", the Christian "God", the Taoist "Tao" and the Hindu "Brahmin" are all terms for the same ultimate reality towards which various world religions believe they are moving, whether theistic or non-theistic. Flood (1999, p.55) elaborates on this notion by describing ultimate reality or the "Real" as that which appears within "...the various forms of human interpretative and linguistic systems and [that] it is only possible to respond to the Real within the different cultural ways of being human".

It is in this sense that theology is to be understood in the post-modern context. As a result, it is important to understand that a key theological shift has occurred. This shift is from modernism's monolithic view or model of ultimate reality to post-modernism's multilithic view or model of ultimate reality. This paradigm shift has profound implications for the way in which religious diversity is understood in the post-modern era. As a result, the way in which various theological frameworks articulate what ultimate reality is, via the filters of particular socio-cultural and religious contexts, may need to be reconsidered.

A review of the literature

Paradigmatic shifts in understanding ultimate reality

Phenomenology has been a significant paradigm for studying religion in the modern era (Smart, 1968; Flood, 1999). For the purposes of this paper phenomenology will be focussed on as a clear example of a methodology that expresses the basic characteristics of a modernist approach to the study of religion. This is because phenomenology attempts to rationalise religious diversity via the universalising concept of divine essence or *wesen*. This concept acknowledges on the one hand religious diversity while identifying a common thread running through each.

Phenomenological methodology has viewed religion as a social and cultural phenomenon., identifying that while religion manifests itself concretely in the world as diverse, there is present within each world religion an essence (*wesen*) that is common to each (Smart, 1968). Therefore, while the socio-cultural manifestation of religions may differ across contexts the essence of these same religions does not. Such thinking is reminiscent of Aristotelian metaphysics and the distinction between substance (the essence of a thing) and its accidents (the outward characteristics of a thing that gives it material shape and definition) (Aquinas, trans. 1947; Barnes, 1982). This distinction between the essence of religion and its socio-cultural and historical manifestation was later pursued by a number of continental philosophers including van der Leeuw (1938), Otto (1958) and Husserl (1983).

From Husserl to Habermas

Husserl, argued that in order to truly come to know the essence of something there must be a suspension of judgement (*epoche*) and a continuing openness to the object or

phenomenon under investigation. This is indicative of the dominant methodology of his day, which was empirical science. Habermas (1985) building on the insights of Husserl elaborated on the notion of the epistemic distance between a phenomenon and the observer. He argued that the critical knowing of the essence of phenomena comes through a lengthy process of observation and self-reflection (Habermas, 1985; Craig, 2008). Cultural conditioning and presuppositions regarding particular phenomena can then be identified by the observer prior to final conclusions being drawn (Lovat, 2001). The corollary is that final conclusions would arguably be free of prejudice and bias.

Barnes (2001) postulates that phenomenology when applied to a study of religion goes further than simply acknowledging religious difference. Barnes (2001, p.572) argues that phenomenology helps to reconcile differences by attempting to theologically reconcile the "great religions". Phenomenology achieves this by describing each religion as manifestations of the same essential spirit or *wesen*, though the outward characteristics of doctrine, ritual and ethics particular to various religions may differ. Essentially, this type of approach could be deemed a cultural lens' view of religion whereby images of the divine are understood to be the result of perceiving the same ultimate reality through various cultural lenses that are varying versions of belief in the same monolithic divine entity (Barnes, 2001; Hick, 1989, p.369).

Hebblethwaite (1997, pp.138, 146) supports this notion when stating that various religion's experience the same transcendent, ultimate reality "albeit under different guises" due to historical and cultural context. However, McTernan (2002) takes this idea a step further and explains that images of ultimate reality are constructed within the

boundaries of historicism established by culture and experience and that as a consequence there is no fixed foundational or normative location from which to develop truth claims about God (cf. Hartshorne, 2001; Whitehead, 1978). Consequently, McTernan (2002) rejects a cultural lens view of religious plurality and proposes a radically different approach. McTernan's approach signals a paradigmatic departure from classicism and modernism, which presupposes a monolithic view of ultimate reality to post-modernism and its postulation of a multilithic view of ultimate reality.

A multilithic view of ultimate reality

It can be argued that the multilithic approach espoused by McTernan (2002) has emerged out of a changed social and thought world whereby diversity has been acknowledged but without the compulsion to explain such diversity away with a universalising theory such as phenomenology. This has arguably been to some extent the practice of modernism, (Boucher, 2000; Jones, 2003). Furthermore, it can be argued that approaches to understanding religious diversity based on phenomenology have often been employed to explain diversity away by identifying a universal essence or *wesen* common to all religion types.

The post-enlightenment preoccupation with reason as the instrument for arriving at scientific certainty when confronted with a diversity of responses to the human question of origins, for example, has shown itself to be wanting in answers (Hall, 2003, p.3). Reason itself is now seen as a particular historical form, as parochial in its own way as the ancient explanations of the universe in terms of gods and demi-gods (Jones, 2003). However, phenomenological methods have not always registered this shift in thinking

and have had a propensity to endorse a modernist discourse of reason rather than critically evaluate such a discourse. Therefore, it is important that theological foundations underpinning any conceptual framework of ultimate reality and religious diversity be firmly set in the ground of post-modernism. This will ensure that meaning making occurs more naturally and fluidly within the changed socio-cultural and political context of the post-modern age.

A post-modern model for understanding ultimate reality and religious diversity

The paradigm shift from a monolithic view or model of ultimate reality to post-modernism's multilithic view or model of ultimate reality reflects a historical shift from the dominant metaphor of the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries to a more contemporary metaphor of the late twentieth and twenty first century. This shift has been from the metaphor of the machine to the organic model inherent within post-modernism (Hartwell, 1996). The former identified the universe and all within it as a closed system that followed a clear set of rules and ultimately was predictable. Hence, ultimate reality or God was understood to be a closed system, immutable and unchanging (monolithic model). However, the latter identifies ultimate reality as an open system that changes, adapts and even evolves according to varying socio-cultural and historical contexts (multilithic model). Ultimate reality like any living entity then is mutable and this has profound implications for the way in which we comprehend religious diversity.

According to Towne (2001), the post-modern religious term, multilithic falls between the idea of the existence of multiple gods (polytheism) and a cultural lens view of plural gods

as variations of one God (monotheism). This view does not propose multiple divine entities but rather emphasises and radicalises the incommensurability of different socio-cultural and historical constructions of ultimate reality in order to retain their distinctiveness. It needs to be noted, however, that Towne's explanation of the term multilithic reflects a privileging of the beliefs of Semitic religious traditions over Mystical religious traditions thereby silencing polytheistic and non-theistic beliefs surrounding ultimate reality.

This is evident in the lack of references to polytheism/non-theism and the emphasis upon monotheism in examples given (Towne, 2001). Bearing this in mind, Towne (2001) is suggesting that individuals and communities in different cultural settings and historical locations can be understood as living in intimate relationships with ultimate reality that are unique and qualitatively different. The most important word in this explanation is "qualitative", which denotes a significant shift in religious understanding in comparison to more traditional understandings of ultimate reality as espoused by phenomenological models.

Qualitative difference within Religion

Drawing upon the insights of McTernan (2002) and Towne (2001) in analysing several of the mainline world religions, it could be argued that each discrete religion is simply a concrete manifestation of a unique relationship with ultimate reality. It is a relationship whereby the ontological character, the "quality" or essence of this reality, is understood to be mutable. In other words not only do the socio-cultural expressions of ultimate

reality reflected in the institutional elements of religion change but the very nature of ultimate reality, believed to be at the heart of these socio-cultural expressions, also changes.

That is "God's intimacy with [all] humanity changes God" and not only the human community (McTernan, 2002, p.2). This view postulates that ultimate reality possesses ontology (*wesen*) that is shaped and changed while in relationship with a particular religious community and culture at a particular time. In other words, the way in which one religious community experiences ultimate reality is unique not only because of socio-cultural and historical differences (cultural lens/monolithic view) but because of differences in the very nature of encounter with ultimate reality itself (multilithic view).

Consequently, because religion often reflects the dominant culture in which it is rooted, this God/Ultimate reality who is changed and changes those with whom s/he is in relationship makes God/Ultimate reality radically transgressive of dominant culture (McTernan, 2002, p.2). As a result, dominant culture often resists those within it who reflect this transgressive God. Hence, mainstream religion can tend to privilege particular elements that appear immutable, such as male priesthood in the Roman Catholic Christian tradition and silence those groups who reflect this transgressive God – the feminist movement in the Roman Catholic tradition for example. This thinking has serious implications for religious diversity and how we understand it and approach it within the context of a study of religon.

The multilithic model of ultimate reality and the study of religion

Utilising the multilithic model of ultimate reality in a study of religion could potentially assist students to better understand the nature of religious plurality in a post-modern context. It must be kept in mind, however, that terms such as monolithic and multilithic always function as a model or extended metaphor for the God/Ultimate reality-World relationship. These models *per se* are limited and inadequate ways for imagining what is not observable empirically. They sit somewhere between literal pictures and useful fictions of the thing they are imagining. Consequently, the term multilithic makes a tentative ontological claim regarding the God/Ultimate reality-world relationship that there is a reality something like that postulated in the model (Bracken, 2002). What it does not intend to say is that the model is tantamount to ultimate reality.

If studies in religion employed the multilithic model as an assumption underpinning an analysis of religion it could then present world religions as doctrinal articulations of a group or community's unique relationship with ultimate reality. Differences in doctrine and ritual would be understood to reflect not only socio-cultural differences (monolithic view) but also actual differences in the essence of the divine/human encounter (multilithic view). Ultimate reality would be understood to be encountered variously and not only as a result of differences in time, place and culture. This is because ultimate reality is comprehended to be not only quantitatively different (socio-cultural difference) in each encounter but also qualitatively different (different in essence) in each encounter.

Evaluating the multilithic model

Disadvantages of the multilithic model

A criticism that could be levelled at a multilithic view of ultimate reality is that this view risks being inclusivist and so simply another permutation of a universalising theory for explaining away diversity (Boucher, 2000; Flood, 1999; Hobson & Edwards, 1999). Such universalising theories are typical of modernism and may signal an intellectual regression. Religious difference in the inclusivist model of teaching religion is accounted for by claiming that various religions, such as Islam and Buddhism, are simply partial versions of a particular religion that is deemed to be most correct in terms of religious truth, such as Christianity.

In response to such a criticism the following could be argued: A multilithic approach accommodates difference without attempting to explain it away, which is the tendency of phenomenological methods. Secondly, a multilithic approach does not privilege one cultural context over another but views each context as unique and distinct but equal in value. This is contrary to phenomenological methodologies, which tacitly account for religious difference by stating that while doctrines and rituals may differ across religions, the essence (*wesen*) of what is being experienced within each religion is the same (Smart, 1968). Therefore, it appeals to universalism by stating that all religions regardless of socio-cultural and historical context possess at their core the same essential substance that makes them 'religion'.

This thinking is arguably a product of a modernist world-view as it reflects a monolithic view of ultimate reality – that religions regardless of socio-cultural and historical context

have at their core the same divine *wesen*. By employing Smart's phenomenological approach, the essence of religion is universalised and does not allow for a multiplicity of different *wesen* co-existing. Nevertheless, phenomenology as a tool for teaching religion has been effective in that it attempts to suspend the need for value judgements hence avoiding or at least delaying such judgements (Barnes, 2001; Lovat, 2001).

This characteristic has been most helpful in the study of religion as it has assisted institutions of learning to provide a rationale for religious tolerance and to break down barriers of religious exclusivism. However, by relocating the question of religious plurality within the post-modern religious framework of Whitehead (1978), Hartshorne (2001), Towne (2001) and McTernan (2002) and away from the phenomenological approach of Smart (typical of modernity) the suspension of value judgements is not necessarily compromised. This is because each socio-cultural and historical manifestation of religion is deemed to be of equal value and significance regardless of differences.

Advantages of the multilithic model

Each socio-cultural and historical manifestation of religion is understood to be equally entitled to lay claim to particular religious truths when a multilithic model is employed for understanding religious plurality. This view may better promote religious tolerance than phenomenological methodologies as it maintains that "other" religious beliefs that conflict with those that are dominant within a particular cultural context are not simply variations on the traditional view of ultimate reality within that context. Rather, ultimate reality is real in particular and individualised ways that reject "sameness". Consequently,

the "otherness" of doctrines associated with a particular religious group that may lie outside of dominant culture are deemed to be no less true or meaningful than those within the dominant culture when a multilithic view is employed (McTernan, 2002, p.3).

Conclusion

This paper has clearly identified a fundamental shift in the theological landscape resulting in a profound change in our understanding of ultimate reality/God and religious diversity. This shift is from modernism's monolithic view or model of ultimate reality to post-modernism's multilithic view or model of ultimate reality. This paradigm shift has profound implications for the way in which religious diversity is to be understood in the post-modern era. As a result, the way in which various theological frameworks attempt to express what ultimate reality is, via the filters of particular socio-cultural and religious context, arguably need to be reconsidered.

Tolle (2003, p.17) suggests that every "dogma crumbles sooner or later, because reality will eventually disclose its falseness". Perhaps this insight can be applied partially to our models for understanding Ultimate reality and religious diversity. Particular models for understanding the nature of ultimate reality and religious diversity crumble sooner or later, because reality will disclose their inherent limitations to make meaning for people in a changed socio-cultural and historical context. The changed socio-cultural, religious and political landscape of the post-modern age is disclosing the limitations of a model that was pertinent in its age but which may now be struggling to create meaning for the post-modern mindset. Consequently, a multilithic model may better assist the child of the

post-modern age to grapple with those ubiquitous questions regarding Ultimate reality/God. This model may also assist in dealing with the implications of those questions for our own collective self understanding in the face of socio-cultural and religious diversity.

Finally, it is important to point out that while phenomenological models for understanding the nature of ultimate reality and religious diversity, due to their origin within modernism, have arguably been struggling to make meaning in a post-modern context is not to say that post-modern models, such as the one proposed in this paper, are superior to modern methodologies. Rather, by suggesting a change in theological model for understanding the nature of ultimate reality and religious diversity is simply to acknowledge that the construction of meaning is now occurring within a different social and cultural context and that other methodological frameworks for meaning-making could be more effective. This is not to dismiss the possible value of enriching current phenomenological approaches in order to render them more meaningful tools for studying religion in a post-modern context (Craig, 2008). Technology could provide some helpful options as to how this may be done.

References

Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa theologica*. Fathers of the English Dominican
    Province (Trans.). New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc.

Barnes, J. (1982). *Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barnes, P. (2001). Ideology, the phenomenological approach, and hermeneutics: A response to professor Lovat. *Religious Education*, *96*(4), 572-573.

Boucher, G. (2000). *Hegel and post-modern discourse theory*. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from Andy Blunden's Home Page http://home.mira.net/~andy /seminars/gb2000_2.htm

Craig, M. (2008). Religious education and methodology in the post-modern age. *Journal of Religious Education*, *56*(4) 53-62.

Flood, G. (1999). *Beyond phenomenology: Rethinking the study of religion*. London: Cassell.

Habermas, J. (1985). *The philosophical discourse of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hall, G. (2003). *Christian theological rhetoric for a pluralist age*. Retrieved July 29, 2004, from Australian Catholic University Website: http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/gehall/Hall_Rhetoric.htm

Hartshorne, C. (2001). Redefining God. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, *22*(2), 107-113.

Hartwell, A. (1996). *Scientific ideas and education in the 21st century*. Retrieved July 15, 2005, from http://www.21learn.org/arch/articles/ash_complexity.html

Hebblethwaite, B. (1997). *Ethics and religion in a pluralistic age.* Edinburgh: T& T Clark.

Hick, J. (1989). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent.* London: Macmillan.

Hobson, P. & Edwards, J. (1999*). Religious education in a pluralist society: The key philosophical issues.* London: Woburn Press.

Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy.* Boyce Gibson (Trans.). Lancaster: Nijhoff.

Jones, R. (2003). *Post structuralism.* Retrieved April 15, 2003, from http://www.philosopher.org.uk/poststr.htm

Leeuw, G., van der. (1938). *Religion in essence and manifestation: A study in phenomenology.* London: Allen & Unwin.

Lovat, T. (2001). In defence of phenomenology. *Religious Education, 96*(4), 564-572.

McTernan, V. (2002). Performing God: God, organicism, and postmodernism [Electronic version]. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy, 23*(3), 236-251.

Otto, R. (1958). *The idea of the holy.* London: Oxford University Press.

Smart, N. (1968). *Secular education and the logic of religion.* London: Faber & Faber.

Towne, E.A. (2001). The new physics and Hartshorne's dipolar theism. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy, 22*(2), 114-132.

Whitehead, A.N. (1978). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology.* New York: Free Press.

Author: Mark Craig teaches theology, religious studies and social science at Chisholm Catholic College in Brisbane. This work, in association with Professor Peta Goldberg in Religious Education, was a major component of his Masters in Education (Research) degree at Australian Catholic University.

Email: mcraig@bne.catholic.edu.au