

Thinking God in a Global Multi-religious Context: Trends, Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

Contemporary religious and theological scholarship is acutely aware that different contexts result in different ways of thinking and speaking about God. This article situates God-talk intentionally in the present global and post-secular horizon and asks about the implications of this hermeneutical move. Mapping scholarly trends in this regard is a specific aim of the article, which is written from the perspective of Systematic Theology in conversation with the Study of Religion. The development of reflection on God in inter-religious theologies and in the so-called Trinitarian rediscovery is discussed. Two academic challenges are identified as part of a constructive proposal – a re-envisioning of the relationship between the Study of Religion on the one hand and Christian Theology and Systematic Theology respectively on the other at public universities. Possible future constructive avenues are suggested and the article proposes a minimalist way forward to engage the global and post-secular context, and highlighting an inter-subjective ethos, attention to discursive performances and the African context.

Keywords: globalised world, post-secular world, God, Trinity, Systematic Theology

Introduction

The return of God in scholarly reflection in the late twentieth century has come as a surprise to those awaiting the triumph of secularisation. Even more astonishing have been the innovative re-imaginings of the divine which crystallised in theologies of those who have been marginalised from dominant discourse – women, Black people, those who suffer, those who are from non-Western cultures, or even those who take science and new philosophies seriously. What has transpired is that the *context* of experience and of thinking about the divine eventually determines the grammar of such speech. One such context which is becoming increasingly important and which this article will address is the horizon of the world as globalised and post-secular. A great deal of energy has been consumed to come to terms with the processes of globalisation and the so-called de-secularisation of the world, but hardly any energy on what this might imply for God-talk as such.

In this reflection, the context of a globalised and post-secular world will be explicitly raised as a generative horizon for speech about the Ultimate. As an exploration, it will focus on what could be considered meta-questions, those issues that should be addressed first – the trends, the challenges and the future possibilities. It is important, as will become clear in the discussion, to be explicit about one's own theoretical orientation. I write from a Christian perspective and as a systematic theologian, and not as a scholar of religion.

The article is a modest attempt to honour the contribution Prof. Martin Prozesky has made to the world of academic reflection. The specific choice of theme will underline, in a small way, the intuitions which guided his quest: a search for intellectual openness, a sense of transcendence, an expression of the religious experience of mankind in the widest possible manner, and an acute awareness of the moral nature of the universe.

Two Descriptive Labels

The task of naming the present, discerning social and cultural changes with corresponding shifts in human consciousness remains a perennial intellectual responsibility of the theologian and scholar of religion. That our time has witnessed seismic transformations has become general knowledge, and numerous observers in various academic fields have employed different labels to capture the nature of these changes. 'Postmodern' and 'post-colonial' are

some of the well-known ones that endeavour to signal the reaction to the particular kind of (modernist) rationality and the myriad abuses of power. In this article, the interest lies in two other attempts at ‘naming the present’ – those which highlight the *globalised* and the *post-secular* character of our world. Both have been treated exhaustively in many publications, and the implications for religions, in general, have been intimated. Whether the ramifications for approaching God, the Divine, the Ultimate have been addressed satisfactorily is an open question. This could be identified as the ‘knowledge gap’ in existing scholarship.

A Globalised World

It is widely accepted that ‘globalisation’ is a contested concept; the nature, causes and implications are not uniformly viewed. Minimally, it could be understood as a set of social processes; it is about shifting forms of human contact and the reconfiguration of social space, according to Steger (2003:8f). His definition is worth quoting in full:

Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependence and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.

It is obvious that religion cannot escape from this and that the basic dynamics which crystallises is an increased awareness of *religious plurality*. It has become a truism to refer to the religiously ‘other’ in neighbourhoods. However, a deeper reality is being negotiated – religious *identities* cannot remain immunised and are also in flux (see Schreiter 1997: 73-81). What has not yet adequately been examined is how this has affected understandings of God.

A Post-secular World

One of the surprising developments of recent times is the new visibility of religion and the return of religion to the scholarly agenda (see Gorski *et al.*

2012). That our time can rightly be described as ‘post-secular’ is widely acknowledged, and renowned thinkers such as Peter Berger and Jürgen Habermas have registered this in their work. Traditional secularisation theories had to be re-visited; religion is not in the process of decline and it is not only a private matter. The interface with globalisation is an obvious avenue to suggest; most often, the new resurgence is simply a resistance strategy to all the changes. Basic to this trend is the conviction ‘that it is impossible to make sense of the world without taking into account religion’ (Gorski *et al.* 2012: 5). This new interest takes on diverse forms, and an observer such as Graham Ward (2009: 135-154) identifies three forms: fundamentalism, a return of religion to civil society, and a ‘commodification of religion’ in cultural life. Nowhere is an express attention to God or Ultimacy mentioned. The intention of this article is to raise the question about a scholarly response to these developments by referring explicitly to the Divine.

Two Scholarly Trends

An impression should not be created that the many social changes and their potential impact on religion have not yet been subjected to reflective scrutiny. Excellent examples of such endeavours are available and should be addressed. Two of these will be described.

God in Interreligious and Cross-cultural Theologies

Two specific recent projects deserve some attention. The Lund project, with papers published in the volume *The Concepts of God in Global Dialogue* (see Jeanrond & Lande 2005), explores contemporary models and paradigms of interreligious dialogue, developments in the Christian concept of God, and then various reflections on the notion of the divine in Japanese Buddhism. Worth mentioning in this volume are the contributions by Kuschel on the need for a ‘theology of the other’, and by Tracy on the notion of ‘fragment’ and the hiddenness and incomprehensibility of God. The second project – the so-called European Intensive Programmes – has been more comprehensive, and resulted in three volumes of essays, namely *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today* (Hintersteiner 2007), *Postcolonial Europe in the Crucible of Cultures* (Haers, Hintersteiner & Schrijver 2007), and *Thinking the Divine in Interreligious*

encounter (Hintersteiner 2012). This informative and wide-reaching project by twenty departments of theology and religion at universities across Europe is an intentional shift away from a traditional confessional concept of theology towards one which is open to interreligious encounter and engagement. It is not possible to summarise the large number of contributions and the rich scope of ideas generated; only a few references can be made.

Robert Schreiter (2012: 304), who participated in both projects, points out that the interreligious dialogue is often also an intercultural one. His proposal of the central place that *intercultural hermeneutics* should assume in the interreligious dialogue must be carefully heeded. Culture is a layered reality and in constant flux, especially with the advent of globalising forces. The dynamics of the impact of globalisation – homogenisation, hyperdifferentiation, deterritorialisation and hybridisation – form the cultural conditions under which the discourse on God takes place (Schreiter 2012: 306-314). Because of these complex processes, concepts of God are mutated; they can be narrowed as a resistance strategy or even expanded due to external influences. Interesting in the contribution by Schreiter (2012: 315-318) is the identification of four kinds of discourses about God in intercultural and interreligious dialogue: God of the horizon, God of life, God of the ancestors, and God of the religions. These refer, respectively, to recognition of limitations to understanding the religiously other, the resistance to resilience in suffering, senses of belonging, and mediation through tradition. These all come into play when considering the divine in a new global situation.

That the very idea of ‘God’ in religious traditions is problematic is discussed in Keith Ward’s (2007) contribution. For him, who has made significant contributions to the field of global theology in various publications, this refers to the study of ultimate realities and values, and to the ways of relating to these realities. The notion of a personal God is just one idea of ultimate reality, of which he identifies at least four such possible models: an idealist, dualist, monist or theistic one (Ward 2007: 380f). This approach gives expression to the relationship between the ultimate and the cosmos, whether it is identical, quite distinct or includes creation as part of itself, or is even personal as such. For Ward (2007: 382), the various religions cannot be reduced to a fundamental sameness, but ‘all religions are concerned with a supreme spiritual reality’. He is especially concerned with articulating simultaneously what is common and what is different in the religions. They share an ascription of wisdom, compassion and bliss to what they consider

‘ultimate’, but differ as to what this ultimacy could be and how we come to know and relate to it. The notion of a ‘God’ is the result of transposing personal relationship and a sense of otherness to the understanding of the divine. In his contribution, Robert Neville (2007) highlights similar sentiments as Ward. The enthusiasm for the category of ‘God’ is a typical Western scholarly reflex. He also prefers the notion of ‘ultimate’ and at stake for him is the referent of this or, in other words, in what respect do they interpret reality. He makes the useful observation that religions could be compared ‘only where they are found to have concepts interpreting the same object in the same respect’ (Neville 2007: 518). His working hypothesis for the dialogue between religions is formulated as ‘that in reality in respect of which human life is to be considered as having ultimate significance’ (Neville 2007: 523). A comparative project will then proceed by asking about what orients ultimate human significance. Neville is aware of how complex this task is, and of how radically religions do actually differ in this regard, especially when one moves beyond monotheistic beliefs, with, for example, Buddhism as typical point in case.

Trinitarian Approaches to Religious Plurality

The so-called ‘rediscovery’ of the Trinitarian confession is one of the most significant developments in Christian theology. Not only has the Trinity been re-affirmed as the distinctive marker of Christian identity, but it has been re-interpreted with relational categories and been employed as the key to address a variety of practical problems. Not only has the being of God been appreciated as communal, but this very identification has been understood, for example, as ‘model’ to solve the dilemmas of unity and diversity in society. One of the surprising applications of this doctrine has been to religious plurality. Whereas, in the past, the Trinity was viewed as an obstacle to interreligious dialogue, it has been re-appreciated as exceptional resource to open new avenues for approaching this difficult reality. Well-known scholars such as Panikkar, Dupuis, D’Costa and Heim have suggested creative and extensive Trinitarian proposals in this regard. Comprehensive and good overviews are available (see, e.g., Kärkkäinen 2004). These projects are by no means uniform; they are expressive of creative rhetorical attempts to explore the mystery of a God whose own being reveals plurality and whose engagement with the world manifests a corresponding richness.

One example of this significant trend can be described in greater detail, that by Mark Heim. His innovative work amounts to a corrective to older pluralist approaches which, according to him, do not recognise adequately the differences among religions. In two main works – *Salvations* (1995) and *The depth of the riches* (2001) – he argues for different religious ends, hence the plural form of salvation, and for a Trinitarian basis to this conviction. The underlying assumption of former pluralist models is a singular final end; a truly pluralist hypothesis should suggest an alternative, that is, a diversity of religious ends. The critical question for Heim (1995: 160) is: ‘What accounts as salvation?’. According to him, this refers to being in communion with the divine – ‘salvation is a relation of communion with God’ (Heim 2001: 59). The next move in the argument incorporates the Trinity: the diversity of religions is rooted in the diversity of the divine life itself – ‘The Trinity is a map that finds room for, indeed, requires concrete truth in other religions’ (Heim 2005: 198). Basic in his proposal is the notion of Trinitarian ‘plenitude’ as expressing the fullness of divine love; it refers explicitly to the range of fulfilments available to creation (Heim 1995: 165). Critical to understanding his proposal is the emphasis that distinctive religious ends are not based in the separate persons of the Trinity, ‘but in the various dimensions of the communion (of oneness) among the persons’ (Heim 2014: 123). The plenitude of relationality allows for a diversity of religious ends as communion in their distinctiveness. It is worth noting that, despite this express pluralist orientation, Heim (2014: 132) still maintains some ‘superiority’ for the Christian faith, as faith which ‘more truly’ posits an integrative vision.

Two Academic Challenges

Obviously, a responsible response to the drastic changes being experienced in our time requires a comprehensive one. An academic engagement, however, is a necessary, valid and appropriate one. In this instance, two possible responses will be briefly intimated.

Theology and Religious Studies at a Public University

The changes in the cultural horizon require an institutional response. This should be clearly appreciated. Idea and form-giving can never be separated;

this was persuasively argued by the French philosopher Foucault in his entire oeuvre. Two specific challenges can be identified, in this instance: how the study of religion is institutionalised at public universities and how it is addressed in terms of the various traditional theological disciplines, specifically Systematic Theology. In post-apartheid South Africa, with the numerous changes to undo the past and its myriad adverse effects, higher education itself has been in a process of drastic transformation. Often, the concern is voiced that the changes, for example enrolments statistics, avoid the deeper challenges of interrogating the nature of knowledge transmitted and generated. This insistence is usually captured in the notion of ‘epistemological transformation’. The validity of this critique is obvious from the present practice of the academic study of religion. Despite the wide range of approaches at universities, and with some commendable exceptions, several trends can be discerned¹. There is an unquestionable dominance of this study by Christian theology, and most often by a Reformed confessional orientation. Where Religious Studies is present, it is usually separated from Theology in terms of departmental configuration, and there is relatively little mutual interaction. This situation is particularly fertile ground for new thinking and reconceptualisation.

A great deal can be learned from practices in the UK and the emergence of a so-called ‘new paradigm’. *Two recent examples* can be briefly conveyed. In the volume of studies contributed in honour of Nicolas Lash – *Fields of faith* (Ford, Quash & Soskice 2005) – a general relative *new ethos* emerges (see, especially, the conclusion by Adams, Davies & Quash 2005: 207-221). The conversation with other religions is central in thinking about Christian identity, and a fine antenna exists to avoid hegemonic thinking and attitudes. The point of departure is the recognition of ‘pluralistic particularity’. Both Theology and Religious Studies are considered necessary with an own task, but mutual engagement is advocated. Key notions crystallising in the discourse are ‘hospitality’ and ‘conviviality’. Openness to one another and a willingness to enter into conversation and to learn from one another are part of this new paradigm. Two particular emphases highlighted in the volume of essays are worth mentioning: an awareness of the ‘sociality of thought’ and the

¹ In South Africa a great diversity is to be found and each academic institution has its own ‘ecology’. Generally one can claim that there is greater appreciation for the Study of Religion, and for a closer dialogue with Christian Theology.

importance of values (see Adams, Davies & Quash 2005: 219f). In distinction of the study of Humanities, in general, Theology and Religious Studies cannot escape the character of religious communities; these communities are constituted by values, and both these dynamics – communality and values – should be reflected in the academic study.

The second example commenting on this ‘new paradigm’ is by the Cambridge scholar David Ford (2011: 150ff) who played a major role in delineating a different approach in the UK which he labels ‘New Theology and Religious Studies’. The ‘newness’ is to be found in the combination of the two fields of study to form ‘one ecosystem’. There is still a sense of distinction – the one being descriptive, analytical and explanatory, and the other normative and practical – but the overwhelming thrust is one of complementarity. Both Theology and Religious Studies need each other. Ford is convinced that the new conceptualisation allows not only for better service to the university, society and religious communities, but also for a much more promising ability to address questions of meaning, truth, practice and beauty.

A great deal can be learned from this discourse, not only in terms of institutional arrangement, but also especially about the implications for thinking about the divine in a globalised world. The insistence on conversation could only result in stimulation of new thinking on the sacred.

Systematic Theology and Religious Studies

In the traditional theological encyclopaedia, the study of religion has been assigned to the ministerial disciplines such as Missiology. This was motivated by pragmatic reasons, and cannot escape the charge of some implicit imperialistic aim: What must be converted should be known. The question can be raised as to whether a discipline, which intentionally addresses the truth of the Christian faith – Systematic Theology – should not engage non-Christian religions and their expressions of meaning and truth. Conventionally, Systematic Theology has been marked by a narrow confessional orientation, but times are changing. Already two decades ago, a scholar such as D’Costa (see 1992) voiced the opinion that the task of this discipline must be re-envisioned, emphasising the demographical prominence of people from various religions. He explicitly advocates that the form and contents of Systematic Theology need to change; especially the Christian doctrine of God ‘comes under severe questioning in contact with the world religions’ (D’Costa

1992: 331). The pioneering work by Smart and Konstantine – *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (1991) – should also be mentioned. Although the study has been criticised for its a-historical approach to religion, their intuition that theology be situated in a global context and in the study of religion should be acknowledged.

One impressive project which is in process deserves careful attention – that of the Finnish scholar *Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen* who is teaching in the USA at Fuller Theological Seminary. His earlier textbook approach to various doctrines such as God, the Trinity, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church, which pursued a global approach honouring the diversity of Christian voices worldwide, has now come to fruition in his five-volume project titled *A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world* (2013-2017). No comparable project is currently available with such an openness to traditional theology, the diverse voices within Christianity and to non-Christian religions. Epistemologically, the project is placed in a postfoundationalist paradigm, acknowledging that human knowledge is provisional, historical, limited and perspectival, but asserting simultaneously that truth transcends one's own ghetto (Kärkkäinen 2013: 10f). This ambitious undertaking is marked by four features – theology should pursue *a coherent, inclusive, dialogical and hospitable vision*. A coherent approach to truth implies that Christian doctrine should also be related to external claims to meaning, that is, the claims of other religions to truth (Kärkkäinen 2013: 22, 24). The other three orientations are closely related; at stake is not only the traditionally marginalised voices of Christians, especially in the global South, but refers explicitly also to non-Christian religions. This vision is clearly given shape in his study on the Trinity (2014). In addition to the typical Christian systematic engagement with issues such as atheism, panentheism, and divine attributes, Kärkkäinen explores the notion of divine 'hospitality' and then proceeds to discuss at length a Trinitarian theology of religious plurality and enters into detailed conversation with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and their understanding of Allah, Brahman and Sunyata. This project is beyond doubt significant and should be carefully studied. But most crucial – this should inform the doing of Systematic Theology in future.

Two Future Possibilities

Against the background of the changing times, the trends in discourses on God,

and the academic institutionalised challenges, one cannot evade the question about the way forward. In this concluding section, a few remarks will be given about this. The promising project of Comparative Theology will be introduced and a personal constructive proposal will be made.

Comparative Theology

In recent years, the proposal for a *Comparative Theology* has received increasing attention, especially as advocated by Francis Clooney, the Harvard scholar of Hindu-Christian Studies, although one can also mention scholars such as Keith Ward, Robert Neville and James Fredericks. This should be appreciated as a response to 21st-century religious diversity (Clooney 2010: 8). The term itself has been used since the 18th century, but the orientations expressed in contemporary discourse are of fairly recent origin, rendering the discipline not yet settled. Clooney (2007: 654) defines it as ‘the practice of rethinking aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition’. A number of dimensions characterise this form of theological exchange: it is interreligious, dialogical and confessional. The overriding conviction is about the interreligious nature of theologising as such. Although the notion of ‘theology’ is applicable to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, there is an acknowledgement that it has a specific genealogy and connotations which resonate with Christianity. However, this still does not undo the reality of intellectual practices in religions. Central to Comparative Theology is a ‘dialogical accountability’ (Clooney 2007: 661) – mutual learning and attentiveness to particularities of other religious traditions should take place. Clooney (2010: 58ff) highlights the role of ‘religious reading’ of texts. In no way is a confessional stance bracketed off, that is, a neutral stance required. Most often, the encounter results in intensifying religious commitments. The possibility of new communities emerging should also not be excluded (Clooney 2010: 160f). Clooney is frank about the ramifications of such a project: as sophisticated knowledge emerges in the dialogue, answering the big questions becomes increasingly difficult, leading to a postponement of the resolutions.

A Minimalist Proposal

Before actual interreligious encounter can place (and this was not the focus of

this article), some critical *meta-issues* should be clarified. It is obvious that older paradigms cannot merely continue. Changes in terms of attitude have materialised; but also quite crucial – some new sensibilities have come to the fore. Situating such conversation in the context of the processes of globalisation and post-secularisation, prioritises new perspectives, for example, the public nature of God or the Ultimate, impacts of such beliefs on the ability to adjust, and to respect otherness. Precisely this insight – that a new set of questions confront the researcher – renders the endeavour relatively new. Intentional thinking takes place from the dynamics of a specific – globalised and post-secular – context. A minimalist proposal might entail a number of emphases.

A deliberate and explicit *intersubjective ethos* should direct the conversation. The twin sentiment – appreciation of one’s own tradition with respect and openness to the other – marks rightly, as Clayton (2014: 25) comments, ‘a new form of theological reflection’. Farewell has been bid to older mentalities which still harbour inclinations towards exclusion, superiority and the possible conversion of the other.

Without some form of *episteme* (in the Foucaultian sense), or some cognitive map, the journey would be without direction. Central concerns, especially under the conditions of the present horizon, should be identified. Doing so heightens the awareness of how one is conditioned by one’s own cultural, religious and academic background. However, the very interreligious episteme could be the focus of the conversation. Minimally four avenues, *four questions* could form the direction of the engagement: How to identify *intellectual practices* and traditions? How to *name the Ultimate*? How to map trajectories of change and *internal plurality* relative to the Ultimate? How to account for *performances*, in terms of sense-making of the world, ethical orientation, and personal transformation? These obviously call for some explanation. Without some clarity of the intellectual traditions of religions, serious encounter, especially in an institutional context, is hardly possible. Meaningful conversation is not possible without some identification of what is considered Ultimate. In this instance, the role of language, of human ability to name metaphorically, comes into play. To avoid a static and even a-historical understanding of the divine without particulars, some description of shifts and changes is required. This also creates possibilities for mutations in new social conditions. The crucial question is the final one about performances. Fruitful interreligious conversation should highlight how religious traditions and their

notions of the Ultimate assist human beings to make sense of the world, how they motivate them to honour alterity, and how they promise hope amidst a sea of affliction. How these have been formulated betrays an antenna for the challenges of a globalised world. In a recent study Volf (2015) discusses religion in a globalised world and explicitly highlights *flourishing* as central category. The element of contestation cannot be avoided. What connotations of truth, good and beauty do religions assign to their specific faiths in the Ultimate?

Although the focus is on the global context, a preference for *context* cannot be ignored. All thinking, also about the divine, display a definite contextuality, and in this case the reality of Africa should be attended to. Much has been written on the encounter between missionary Christianity and African Traditional Religion, and about the ‘threat of Islam’. A new discourse is needed; a discourse which accounts for the complex reality of religion in Africa and its multiple faces (see e.g. Bongmba 2012), and for the imperative to consider decolonisation (see e.g. Adamo 2011). The impact of globalisation on African religions is underestimated (see the correction by Van Binsbergen 2004:87ff). A new interreligious discourse on God in Africa should consider precisely the elements mentioned in the previous paragraph on episteme. Much of reflection on God in Africa is trapped in a missionary mode of thinking, and is clearly dated in terms of scholarship. A new mode of reflection should be undertaken in conversation among religions, with a recognition of global changes and impacts, and with an antenna for human flourishing.

The present historical moment with all its changes, threats and opportunities calls for discernment. The greater connection between human beings, with final religious convictions, opens the context for a new moment to think and speak about God, the Ultimate. Some encouraging projects can already be found, but academically a great deal of work needs to be done in reconfiguring how we study religions and do theology. Distilling a productive set of concerns may guide this conversation. And maybe, in this new context, new discoveries could be made about life, our life together, in the presence of the Ultimate.

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