



# The role of the Christian community<sup>1</sup> in a plural society

T.C. Rabali

Basic Sciences (Theology)

Vaal Triangle Campus: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir CHO

VANDERBIJLPARK

E-mail: bybtcr@puknet.puk.ac.za

## Abstract

The role of the Christian community in a plural society

*This article identifies four ways in which our society is often referred to as being plural. It discusses four pluralisms and indicates several challenges associated with each one of them. It argues that the Christian community has to consider all four of these aspects of pluralism when seeking to understand its role.*

*It is argued that part of the role that the Christian community has to take seriously is that of maintaining and establishing institutions that will help in an open confession of Christ. This role includes that of having a vigorous and comprehensive apologetics, in the classical sense, of providing proofs for the central Christian positions, defending Christian positions by providing answers to questions that are raised, as well as offering an offensive that seeks to highlight the problems associated with non-Christian views.*

## Opsomming

Die rol van die Christelike gemeenskap in 'n plurale samelewing

*Hierdie artikel identifiseer vier betekenisvolle wat gewoonlike tersake is wanneer na ons samelewing verwys word as "pluraal". Hierdie vier betekenisvolle word bespreek en vestig die aandag op 'n paar uitdagings wat met elkeen van hulle saamhang. In die artikel word 'n pleidooi gelewer dat die Christelike gemeenskap al vier hierdie betekenisvolle van pluralisme in ag moet neem om sy rol te verstaan.*

---

1 "Christian community" in this article refers to Christians as a group of people who often relate to one another and to others as well as to things generally in terms of their faith. The Christian community usually expresses itself by various organizations and institutions that Christians establish and not only through the various institutional churches.

*Die outeur voer aan dat 'n deel van die rol wat die Christelike gemeenskap in hierdie verband ernstig moet beskou, is om instellings wat Christus openlik bely, te help stig en onderhou. Hierdie rol behels onder andere die volgende: die beoefen van 'n aktiewe en omvattende apologetiek, deur bewyse vir sentrale Christelike standpunte te voorsien. Ook moet Christelike standpunte verdedig word deur vrae wat daarvoor gestel word te beantwoord. Nie-Christelike beskouings en die benadruk van probleme wat hiermee saamhang, moet ook weerlê word.*

## 1. Introduction

Human beings have the ability to name things around them. In their ability to name things human beings not only manifest their God-given authority over creation, but also their being image of God. Poythress (1999:23) is therefore correct when he states: "As God gave names to created things, so Adam names the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). Human speech is possible because God made man in his image, in his likeness." Genesis 2:19-20 tells us about the exercise of this gift or ability even before the entrance of sin into the world. The passage indicates that on that occasion Adam executed the task of naming the animals that God brought to him correctly. Implicit in that activity was a proper understanding of the animals that Adam named. Aalders (1981:95) is accordingly to the point when he offers the following comment on this passage:

In this connection we read about the naming of the animals. This task, which God assigned to man, proved that man completely understood the natures of the animals. The closing statement of verse 19 must then also be read as indicating that the names man gave to the various animals expressed the true nature of the respective animals.

The coming of sin into this world did not take away this God-given ability. Of course sin affected it in various ways. It is now possible, for instance, that some of our descriptions of the things around us may be inappropriate. In other words, because of the fall into sin, our descriptions may at times fail to express the true nature of the things we describe. It is, however, essential to understand that the entrance of sin did not completely nullify the capacity of human beings to be God's image bearers. As human beings we are still able to understand what God has revealed. Human beings are, even after the fall, still able to express what God reveals about Himself and creation.

Our descriptions of society should likewise be viewed to be attempts at highlighting or capturing the nature of the world we live in. There are many such descriptions. Examples of such descriptions are evident in the use of the following terms: humanistic, capitalist, socialist, liberal,

collectivistic, and individualistic. One of the descriptions of society often used and employed at the beginning of the third millennium is “plural” or “pluralistic”.

Three matters must be noted about the descriptions we use of society. First, it is possible to describe the same society in various terms. Sometimes we do this in order to draw attention to various aspects of that society. So for example, we may use the concept “capitalist” to refer to the dominant trends inherent in the economic characteristics of the same society, which we at the same time could also describe as “democratic” when looking primarily at how that same society’s political life is organized. Second, some descriptions are more appropriate in particular regions. Indeed, such descriptions may acquire additional regional connotations due to the regional and historical circumstances specific to certain areas. It is possible, for example, to distinguish an American connotation of the concept “democracy” from a British understanding of the same phenomenon. Other descriptions may even be appropriate only to specific regions while others are more international or universal. In the third place, our descriptions of society may attempt to highlight or capture certain changes taking place in our societies. This is evident in descriptions such as “modern” and “post-modern”, “critical” and “post-critical”.

It is this third manner of describing society that is particularly relevant to issues regarding the role of already established communities such as the Christian community or of any other community having deep-rooted tradition(s). Society is dynamic and as it changes people are called upon to use new or additional descriptions to indicate the major trends associated with the changes taking place. In such circumstances those institutions and communities with established traditions might have to reflect upon their relevancy and role with respect to the new trends or directions in their society. It is therefore natural for any community seeking to be effective and in step with its society to constantly ask itself whether the old ways of doing things are still relevant in the light of changes taking place.

It is important to place the basic issues involved here in proper perspective, especially for those of us within the Christian community. We have a Bible that does not change. The Bible or God’s Word is our basic charter. We derive from the Bible, the inspired word of God, our directives, principles, norms, values and guidelines for all our activities. God’s Word always remains a lamp for our feet and a light for our path throughout the ages as God’s people (Ps. 119:105). The path we have to walk may change; otherwise we would be standing still or remain stationary and not walking the road. The lamp should even be used to

assist us in detecting new dangers, challenges, possibilities, and open doors that may not have been there in previous moments or stages along our path. In this regard, it may be helpful to remember what is said in 1 Chronicles 12:32 about the men of Issachar. In listing the names of leaders of the various tribes of Israel who were responsible to ensure the crowning of David as the king over the whole of Israel, this passage states that the 200 leaders from the tribe of Issachar were people “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do”. The law of God had not changed, but the circumstances were different. These men knew what was appropriate for Israel under the new circumstances.

We too must ascertain our role within our society today. The issues with which this paper is therefore concerned are: What is the basic nature of our society which people are seeking to highlight when they continually describe it by the use of the term “plural”? Does this usage signal new opportunities, responsibilities, challenges and dangers requiring an adjustment to our strategies, projects and institutions; or does it require new ones from us who are part of the Christian community?

To answer these questions is not an easy task at all. This article will therefore primarily adopt the stance of introducing some of the relevant issues with the hope of encouraging a communal discussion of them. The envisaged communal discussion will hopefully help in clarifying certain aspects of the role of the Christian community within a plural society. It is a basic assumption of this paper that the quest for understanding the unique role of the Christian community as well as of Christian institutions today requires that proper attention be also given to the character of our society that many are seeking to highlight by describing it as “pluralistic”. The bulk of the paper will therefore concern itself with attempting to draw attention to the nature of our society that we are required to consider whenever it is described as a plural one. An attempt will also be made to indicate some implications and challenges which certain aspects of pluralism pose to Christian institutions.

## 2. The nature of a plural society

The term “plural” or “pluralism” is used in many senses (McCarthy *et al.*, 1981:6, 18, 30). Among the many nuances in the meaning of the term “pluralism”, it is helpful to note and distinguish four such nuances in an effort to ascertain the nature of our “plural” society.

### 2.1 Empirical pluralism

There are many people who use the term “plural” merely to draw attention to the growing awareness of diversity in the world today

(Carson, 1996:13). We have various racial and ethnic groups whose cultures differ. Then there is a plurality of religions, viewpoints and of ideologies with which we are often confronted. The diversity in Christian denominations has also been growing. Most of the Christian groups came into being due to schisms in the long history of Christianity. It is this reality that has prompted some people to suggest that the history of Christianity itself can be considered a history of schisms (Losch, 2001: 75). In many towns and cities, the number of such Christian groups grows at a pace that outdates the statistics taken every previous year.

Some of these diversities have of course existed in previous centuries (Sweetman, 2000:13). People were just not aware of them to the extent that we are today. Some of the contemporary factors accounting for increased awareness of diversity in today's world have to do with an increase in our knowledge of the world and improvements in travelling from one area to another. The easy access to several modes of communication that many people have also helps to increase an awareness of diversity or of the varieties existing in society. In some countries the awareness of these diversities grows as a result of the migration of people (Carson, 1996:17; Badley, 2000:55). Some of these migrations take place due to factors such as wars over which the many individuals who are affected have no control.

Invention and general human creativity also play a great role in making our world more and more diverse. There are in all areas of life many evidences of increasing diversity as a result of inventions and creativity. For example, there are more things to prepare and cook for food and more ways of cooking than there were say fifty years ago. In the area of sport the number of sporting codes being part of the Olympic games grows every four years. In the whole area of entertainment there seems to be no limit to new forms, especially in times of relative peace and stability.

Empirical plurality poses several challenges to political systems as there is often a tendency to cater for the needs of the majority or the more financially powerful groups while those of the minorities are often overlooked. Some of the factors that contribute to the lack of stability in many African regions can be traced back to failures in finding lasting political formulas of attending to diversity. Attempts to respond to the challenge posed by diversity through strategies that aim to destroy variety often works only temporarily. Empirical plurality also poses serious challenges for church planters. For example, what is the most effective way of ministering to the many diverse ethnic groups within a city such as Johannesburg; or of serving the many Reformed people who speak Afrikaans but have since 1990 migrated to countries such as New

Zealand and Australia in large numbers? Should they be organized into separate Reformed churches using Afrikaans or should they be encouraged or forced to join reformed Churches already existing in those countries but which use English and have developed worship styles that differ from what they were familiar with in South Africa? Should contemporary missionaries targeting unreached groups learn those people's languages as was the custom with previous generations of missionaries?

It is clear that what is referred to as empirical pluralism is not a new phenomenon. It was something familiar to believers of ancient Bible times. The narrative in Genesis 11 about the Babel event demonstrates a familiarity with issues concerning language diversities. The Genesis narratives about the wanderings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob clearly indicate that they too were familiar with the phenomenon of empirical plurality. The New Testament books written during the Roman empire, and at a time when Christians were witnessing the planting and growing of many churches in many gentile towns and cities also show that there was familiarity with the phenomenon of empirical pluralism. Contrary to some contemporary theories, the Bible indicates familiarity even with practices such as homosexuality! "Plural" in the sense of empirical pluralism is therefore not a new phenomenon. The difference between those of the past and contemporary people in this regard should rather be sought on the levels of awareness, the extent of the phenomenon, as well as in new forms that have developed after the time of the Bible. Accordingly, it is not primarily this phenomenon of diversities in society that activates people to describe it as a plural society.

## 2.2 Structural pluralism

The second nuance of the term *plural* to be noted is apparent when people often refer to the concept of structural pluralism. This concept of structural pluralism is employed to remind us of the fact that God created the world with various structures that order life and coordinate human interaction. Used in this way, pluralism refers to one of the ways of looking at society. Structural pluralism is at times referred to as "principled pluralism" (Spykman, 1989:79) or even as the Christian pluralist view (Van der Walt, 1994:276). In their book, *Society, State & Schools*, McCarthy, Opperwal, Peterson and Spykman distinguish structural pluralism from Individualism and Collectivism and describe it in a useful way by stating that it is a viewpoint that "regards society as embracing a plurality of identities, a plurality of associations or institutions, each functioning in its own distinct sphere of influence" (McCarthy *et al.*, 1981:19).

We must distinguish structural pluralism from empirical pluralism. Even in a fairly homogeneous society, the kind of plurality embodied in the concept of structural pluralism would still be a reality. The plurality involved here is based in and would have naturally developed from the so-called creation ordinances. In his study on ethics, titled *Principles of conduct*, Murray (1978:27) identifies some of these ordinances when he wrote: "These creation ordinances ... are the procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing of the same, dominion over the creatures, labour, the weekly Sabbath, and marriage". These ordinances involved some structuring of Adam's life even before the fall. The fall had an effect on these original structures as well as on others that arose after the fall and as a consequence of that fall, but did not do away with these structures. In this connection Murray (1978:44) further correctly observes:

The fall did bring revolutionary changes into man's life; yet these ordinances are still in effect and they indicate that the interests and occupations which lay closest to man's heart in original integrity must still lie close to his heart in his fallen state. Conditions and circumstances have been revolutionized by sin, but the basic structure of this earth, and of man's life in it, has not been destroyed. There is identity and continuity.

Those aspects relating to the nature of society and which the concept of structural pluralism seeks to draw attention to are accordingly helpful when Christians are faced with the task of defining their role in all kinds of societies. For example, among other things, their role will have to be defined within such areas or contexts as worship, ecological concerns, marriage-related issues and those that have to do with work.

The Bible or God's Word gives direction for activities in all these structures, spheres and institutions. Life in totality, in its various aspects or institutions, must be to the glory of God by being a life of obedient service to Him. It is this understanding that was evidenced by faithful believers throughout history. David was guilty before God for taking Uriah's wife because although he was king he had used his authority in a manner that contradicted God's laws for the structure or institution of marriage. Daniel and his friends did the correct thing when they disobeyed king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon because his commands contradicted God's law or will for the area of worship. Similarly, the Christian slaves in Colosse are commanded to view their activities as service to God because the law that guides them as they go about their activities is God's law for the area of labour (Col. 3:22-25).

Every Christian community will accordingly always have the role of instructing its members about God's will for the various structures in

which they are called to serve him. This is not always an easy task. This instruction cannot only take place through the programmes of the institutional church, but also in the Christian community's other institutions. The question in this respect is which institutions do we need in order to grow in our understanding and responsibilities as servants of God in all the key structures along which society is organized? Which political system will for instance be sympathetic to the development of such institutions?

The historic reflections associated with the recognition of the notion of structural plurality have often also included the important issue of how the different spheres relate to one another. Two concepts that are helpful to clarify many of the problems involved are those of sphere sovereignty and sphere universality. Sphere sovereignty refers to the fact that the sinful tendency of certain spheres attempting to dominate others should be curbed as that can easily destroy society. On the other hand, there is also the need for interdependence of the various areas of life within society. Sphere universality therefore reminds us that the different spheres should cooperate and work together in harmony for the peace of society (Dooyeweerd, 1979:45, 46, 48; Spykman, 1989:79, 80). This view corresponds more or less to the need to respect and recognize both individuality and communality in our attempts to define and clarify the role that should be played by institutions associated with the Christian community. There is a need to affirm both diversity and unity.

It must be clear that the sense of plurality embodied in the concept of structural pluralism is not a new phenomenon either. Although very important, this kind of plurality is not the one with which many are concerned about when they describe our society as being plural today. It is therefore important that in trying to understand our role as contemporary Christians, including that of our institutions, the other two aspects of "pluralism" that are found when people describe our society, should be considered as well.

### 2.3 Confessional pluralism

The third sense in which the word *plural* is used is that embodied within the concept of confessional pluralism. Confessional pluralism is associated with structural pluralism in that it also is a viewpoint about the structuring of society. It is used to remind us that those who make up society are religious people who in their associations and institutions live out their faith. The reality of diverse religious views and doctrines is thereby admitted as part of the fallen world. Confessional pluralism therefore also refers to the freedom which people have to belong to different religious organizations and to establish religious institutions, as



well as to their rights of promoting their religious viewpoints (Van der Walt, 1994:281). Christ's parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) in which the weeds are allowed to develop and grow alongside the good seed until the time of harvest, can be and has been used to support the viewpoint of confessional pluralism (Spykman, 1989:85). The religious freedom advocated by confessional pluralism includes, among others, the right to convert and to encourage others to convert.

The reality of religious persecutions even in contemporary societies demonstrates the fact that many communities do experience difficulties in relating to and dealing with religious aliens. Marshall (1997:9) reminds us that there are many Christians today who suffer persecution simply because they are Christians. He observes that such assaults on Christians, or on other religious people for that matter, is actually an assault on human freedom itself (Marshall, 1997:9). This is an issue that has to be resolved if the peace, stability, and prosperity which African politicians are currently associating with their pursuit of Africa's renaissance are to become tangible realities. Religion is not something that can be relegated to the peripheral. Griffiths (2001:12) correctly describes religion as a "form of life that seems to those who belong to it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance to the ordering of their lives". It is because of this that most, if not all, contemporary democratic states have constitutional stipulations that attempt to indicate how religion is approached. Many of these stipulations are in the liberal tradition and accordingly attempt to reduce religion to only a so-called private domain along the lines suggested by Locke's ideas (Hart, 2000:38; Griffiths, 2001:103). Such constitutional stipulations often do not satisfy religious people because religion is not only considered by them as being comprehensive and relevant to all spheres of life, but also subject to the difficulties involved in defining the boundaries between private and public in real life. Griffiths (2001:100) identifies the three broad positions that are common in approaching those of a different religion as being toleration, separation and conversion. Confessional pluralism maintains that one of the best ways of dealing with religious diversity in the pursuit of peace and stability is to allow all the religions and their religious institutions the necessary political space to manifest themselves within certain boundaries.

The perspective of confessional pluralism on religion recognizes it as a fact that Christians and adherents of other faiths will form part of society until the final or last coming of Christ. Even the postmillennial eschatological viewpoint does not look forward to a period when everybody on earth will become a Christian on this side of the final coming of Christ (Adams, 1977:11). There are Bible passages that support the idea that from the point of view and situation or circumstances of the first century

Christians who were a tiny and often harshly persecuted minority, there would be a time when Christians would become more and even powerful in the shaping of their societies before the final coming of Christ. Parables such as those of the mustard seed and of the yeast in Matthew 13:31-33 also encourage such an expectation. In many countries Christians are already the majority today and do have the power to influence and shape developments within and around their countries. It is correct to believe that as the Gospel is spread – the Gospel being God’s power to save those who believe – Christians will become a significant number and power even in countries where they are presently a minority and a weak struggling community.

What should Christians do to non-Christians and their religions when they are a majority and powerful in particular countries? Should they seek to destroy the other religions by means of force? This appears to be one of the issues that the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13 addresses. This parable seems to teach that no matter how irritating the weeds are, it is wrong to employ coercion. The role of the Christian community in such circumstances is to “make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy” (Heb. 12:14). In Romans 12:9 the Bible bluntly says: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse”. Of course these injunctions were written at a time when Christians were weak and a minority everywhere within the Roman Empire. The principles involved in these injunctions, however, do appear to apply even more so in situations where Christians are a majority. In the parable of the weeds, it is also apparent that the tolerance demanded from Christians with respect to the weeds in this regard is for the sake of the good seed which may also be harmed when coercion is employed as a means of dealing with the problem of the continuing growth of the weeds together with the good seed. This certainly means that the employment of coercion is detrimental to true Christianity as well as to its spread. Barker correctly applies to this issue of coercing belief the distinction made by Christ in His injunction of “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matt. 22:21) when he observes that it corresponds to a division of the law of God

... concerning our obligation toward the Lord and our obligation toward fellow human beings. Clearly Jesus recognized Caesar’s prerogatives in the latter area of human relations, but Caesar was not to infringe on our liberty, nor was he expected to enforce the true faith and worship, in the former area of our relation to God (Barker, 1990:237).

The apostles of Christ and all first-century missionaries therefore expected the civil authorities to grant them the freedom to propagate the Gospel so that the people might be freely persuaded by the Word and by the Spirit (Barker, 1990:238). The subsequent history of the church

affords us many examples of the corruption of Christians themselves whenever they attempted to advance the course of God's kingdom by means of coercive weapons of human warfare. Such a course of action is also clearly not conducive to mutual peaceful coexistence and therefore harms relations with the adherents of other religions to the extent that it may close doors for the spread of the Gospel in many other areas. The reference to plurality associated with the notion of confessional pluralism encourages us to rather pursue legal and social tolerance with respect to adherents of other religions.

It is true that in the theocratic kingdoms of Old Testament times coercion was often employed to deal with the manifestation of false religions, especially within Israel itself (Deut. 18:9-13; 1 Sam. 28:9). The best way in which Christians can deal with this Old Testament reality today is to allow for both discontinuity and continuity. It is a fact that the Old Testament theocratic kingdoms of Israel were part of historically and culturally different moments when compared to both the contemporary states and Christian communities. Longman III (1990:46, 49) is accordingly correct to suggest that each law and penalty in the Old Testament needs to be studied also in the light of the changes between Israel and us and the differences between the old covenant and the new covenant. Much of the coercion evident during the Old Testament dispensation was part of the package of temporary special measures associated with those particular historical moments and were essentially aimed at ensuring the existence of Israel until the fullness of times when Christ was born at Bethlehem. Such steps are therefore not to be continued as paradigmatic for all states after the coming of Christ had ushered in a new dispensation in which believers are called to serve God under different terms and conditions. Waltke (1990:85) is therefore justified to express himself with regard to such Old Testament laws as follows: "These religious laws were appropriate for Israel's unique situation; they are not appropriate in a pluralistic society". The continuity lies, among others, therein that the relevant Old Testament laws help to clarify Christ's work, guide today's church to distinguish between true and false religious expressions in the task of admitting new church members or in excommunicating those members who become reprobate (McCartney, 1990:144-149); and may also be continued today in as far as they were given to the Old Testament church in view of aspects of religions which are detrimental to human existence and public peace. Examples of Old Testament coercion that should be viewed as paradigmatic for all times are those that aim to eradicate ritual human sacrifices, especially of babies; and those coercions that protect the powerless in society. Another good and relevant example in this regard can be the use of force that is necessary to deal with incidences of violence relating to beliefs

about witchcraft still prevailing in many African societies. Wright (1983:175) includes cultic temple prostitution among the religious practices that had to be curbed through the use of force in an effort to sustain society.

It must be clear that the sense of plurality embodied in the concept of confessional pluralism is not a new phenomenon either. Reflecting on the implications of confessional pluralism is important and very helpful in attempting to describe the role of Christian communities and institutions in today's society. Although it is important to explore confessional pluralism, such an effort will not take us far enough in our attempts to understand all the challenges that people often seek to draw attention to when many of them refer to our society as plural. We therefore also have to explore a fourth meaning and form of pluralism in order to have a more complete picture.

## 2.4 Philosophical or hermeneutical pluralism

The fourth sense in which the word plural is used is often found when reference is made to what Carson (1996:19) calls philosophical pluralism. This term refers to a way of life and attitude which views as wrong the notion that some ideological or religious claims are true while others are false. This sense of plurality has come more and more to the fore during the last three decades of the twentieth century. In hermeneutics it has become associated with post-modernism, while in morality it has taken the form of radical relativism (Groothuis, 2000:38, 53). This new viewpoint of looking at reality gained momentum as more and more people became disappointed with the historical-critical method that operated with unreal notions of neutrality and objectivity in hermeneutics. This method manifests itself in appeals for radical uncritical tolerance that avoids vigorous debate in the quest for truth. Lutzer (1994:29) aptly notes that

... this new tolerance insists that we have no right to disagree with a liberal social agenda, we should not defend our views of morality, and respect for human life. This tolerance respects absurd ideas but will castigate anyone who believes in absolutes or who claims to have found some truth.

The above implies a kind of plurality that is against all notions of absolutes.

In theology this new sense of plurality manifested itself strongly in the form of religious pluralism. The concept of religious pluralism refers not to the mere recognition of the existence of many religions. It is instead an outlook that considers the various religions as being primarily cultural

and equally capable of mediating salvation. Religious pluralism considers the various religions to be legitimate ways of responding to the same God. Religious pluralists like Hick speak of God as the Ultimate Reality (Hick, 1988:23). According to this kind of pluralism no religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others as being false or even inferior when comparing itself with the others. All religions are viewed as being historically conditioned, the product of a particular culture at a particular time, and are therefore to be accepted as being both true and relative (Pollitt, 1996:27,34). These notions of plurality received great impetus from the second Parliament of the World's Religions that met in Chicago in 1993 (Lutzer, 1994:11). Netland (2001: 118) correctly sums up the predominant mood during the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions when he writes:

Implicit in many of the presentations and activities at the 1993 parliament was the assumption that each religious tradition is in its own way legitimate and right for its adherents, that no one should attempt to persuade followers of other religious paths to change allegiances, and that what is needed today is for each tradition to accept all others as partners in our common search for truth and human well-being.

The Chicago gathering was followed by another such Parliament of World Religions that assembled in Cape Town during December 1999.

This kind of pluralism has serious consequences for ethics and morality as it pleads for the tolerance of many contradictory views that used to be considered unacceptable in the past (Gill, 2000:17). For example, in many democratic countries being progressive is becoming virtually synonymous with the trend to attempt being uncritical with respect to religious beliefs and corresponding moral values.

The notion of religious pluralism views the different religions not only as being equal; it also suggests that the different religions are compatible. This suggestion of religious pluralism raises many problems. One of these problems is what to do about their apparent differences. It is a fact that the different religions do manifest a variety of empirically verifiable incompatibilities in their claims. They are so incompatible that no one can be a faithful adherent of more than one religion at the same time (Griffiths, 2001:34). Netland (2001:182-186) illustrates some of these incompatibilities by comparing some of the religions. He correctly concludes that "it is evident, then, that Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Shinto provide quite different answers to the questions concerning the religious ultimate, the human predicament and the nature of salvation" (Netland, 2001:186). The kind of contradictions existing among the various religions is also comprehensive as it extends to aspects such as

their central teachings, the views they promote, the practices and conduct that they require.

Various solutions have been offered in an attempt to maintain the compatibility of the different religions amidst the apparent contradictions. Three of these solutions are now going to be mentioned here as these are also helpful in clarifying some aspects about religious pluralism as well as in highlighting some of the acute challenges that religious pluralism presents to Christians. The first solution is one that attempts to select some common ground among the religions and then to view whatever is perceived as the core element(s) thus selected as essential to religion. Incompatibility is then located in the non-essentials while maintaining that the different religions are compatible in that they have one or more essentially similar fundamental religious claim or function. Griffiths (2001:43) is correct to describe this kind of strategy as involving a reduction of all religious claims to a single fundamental claim. This suggested solution does not really work because it raises even more problems. One of these is the problem regarding how to select and define the common element (s).

The second solution is that which seeks to maintain the compatibility of the different religions by focusing on the nature of religious language or discourse as being essentially arbitrary (Groothuis, 2000:94). It is often maintained that religious discourse has to do with personal statements and expressions that should be viewed as having no general truth claims. The different religious claims are then viewed as being compatible in that they are all like different personal accounts that are true to those who make them (Netland, 2001:201), and cannot be reduced to propositional statements that can be either true or false. Incompatibility among the religious claims of the various religions is in this way explained away as being the result of a wrong approach to religious language. This attempt to resolve the problem of conflicting religious claims does also not succeed because the reality is that religious people are able to communicate with one another and even with those who are outside their religions in a meaningful way. It is possible for instance, to proclaim the Christian gospel to those who are not Christians and they are able to accept or reject it.

The third solution that is sometimes used in support of the assumption of compatibility among the various claims of the different religions is one that focuses on the incomprehensibility of God. This strategy involves taking all religious claims as attempts by people to point to the one God. None of the attempts should be viewed as complete, and as not being capable of fully capturing the essence of the divine Reality in its descriptions. One of the major problems with the manner in which the

incomprehensibility of God is used in support of maintaining the compatibility of conflicting religious claims of the various religions by religious pluralism, is that of the failure to grant the possibility of a genuine knowledge of God. Most religious people would agree that the transcendence of God is a reality; but so also would they maintain His immanence. Netland (2001:207, 208) also correctly points out that speaking about the transcendence of a god without also maintaining the possibility of genuinely knowing that god is self defeating because then there would be no way of knowing the truth of the claim about that divine transcendence.

### **3. Reviving apologetics within the Christian community**

How should we view our role within a society that is becoming more and more plural, especially in the fourth sense just noted in subsection 2.4 above? The Bible speaks of all Christians being able to give reasons in answer to questions raised by those who believe otherwise (eg. passages like 1 Pet. 3:15-16). Bible passages such as this one have correctly been understood to imply that Christians do have reasons for the faith that they hold (Helseth, 2000:100). The Christian faith is therefore to be considered as something that can be argued for in a world that can be hostile to it or that has many who adhere to other religious beliefs and views. This suggests that the Christian community today have to take seriously the task of presenting the Gospel in the form of an argument based on the acceptance of God and His revelation. Paul refers to this task in Philippians 1:7. In 2 Corinthians 5:11 he even speaks of the task of persuading people through the preaching of the Gospel. Obviously Paul, the other apostles and the Christians who were members of the early New Testament churches would view it as impossible that those who claim to adhere to the same faith as theirs accept the kind of tolerance that philosophical or hermeneutical pluralism, especially in its form of religious pluralism, asks of us today. Paul could therefore speak of himself as being involved in demolishing arguments of those who are in unbelief (2 Cor. 10:5). This kind of language demonstrates that the early Christians perceived of themselves as having been given the task of using persuasion in the propagation of their faith. The right to be able to use persuasion is all that the early Christians required to overcome the then powerful syncretistic societies forming part of the mighty Roman Empire. It was for this right that many of them even laid down their lives as martyrs (Cairns, 1981:89,91).

This task of defending and confirming the Christian faith has been considered as being the domain of apologetics. Contemporary society calls for a revival of apologetics to the extent that all Christian confessional activities should be viewed as having apologetic dimensions. It

is an important task that involves three primary aspects. First, apologetics involves the providing of evidence. Groothuis (2000:167) regards the presentation of arguments and evidence “for core Christian claims” as cardinal to what he refers to as being positive apologetics. Frame (1994:2, 67) views this role of giving evidence for the Christian faith as often necessary for both the unbeliever and the believer who doubts. The Bible has in many places already presented its message together with the necessary proofs for its acceptance. It is our responsibility to confess and share its message together with the reasons that the Bible has given as proofs. Frame (1994:59) is accordingly correct when he suggests that we strive to be able to proclaim the message of the Bible together with its authoritative reasoning process or the biblical rationale. The indicating of biblical reasons for the biblical truth is an important part of the apologetic task of supplying the proofs for the Christian faith in the context of religious pluralism (Carson, 1996:505). A major hurdle that makes this task difficult is the rising biblical illiteracy evident in many places – even among many regular church members (Carson, 1996:42). There is a need to encourage the basic reading of the Bible because it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the Christian faith when the Bible itself is neglected. It is as difficult as attempting to promote Christian scholarship without at the same time maintaining some basic knowledge of the Bible and its message. Pratt (1979:89, 90) has the viewpoint that proofs for the Christian faith may also come from the world and experience, but that these other sources as evidence of the Christian faith have to be related and controlled as well as informed by what the Bible teaches.

In the second place, the apologetic task involves the defence of the Gospel in the sense of providing answers to the objections and questions that people present regarding the Christian faith (Frame, 1994:2, 149). This is often viewed to be part of negative apologetics (Groothuis, 2000:167; Netland, 2001:259). One of the primary and ultimate sources for many of the objections to the Christian faith in today’s plural societies relates to the reality of religious diversity. This requires that effort be made to understand the objections themselves as well as the cultural context within which they arise. Netland (2001:282) accordingly offers sensible and helpful advice when he states: “... we must be careful to treat other religious traditions and worldviews with genuine respect and avoid simplistic caricatures that do not reflect other perspectives accurately”. The Bible’s message should form part of the answers to the objections that are raised.

The apologetic task also involves going on the offensive (Frame, 1994:2,192). This offensive aspect is also a form of negative apologetics in which the worldviews and religious beliefs of non-Christians are



criticized (Groothuis, 2000:167). Part of the objective of this aspect of negative apologetics is to help make apparent the contradictions and foolishness that is implied in non-Christian viewpoints and beliefs (Pratt, 1979:92, 93). The Bible itself contains many instances of highlighting the foolishness of what the unbeliever considers to be wisdom. Some Bible passages, such as the narrative of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27-29, even employ irony and sarcasm as they bring out the foolishness of idolatry. This is often essential because of the blinding effect of ideologies and unbelief.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

As indicated in the introduction the task of identifying the role of the Christian community in a plural society should be a communal one. Various suggestions have been made in this article while attempting to highlight some aspects relating to the nature of our plural society. The roles of affirming diversity, of maintaining Christian lifestyles and institutions appear to be cardinal if a visible and meaningful Christian presence is to be achieved. The tasks of evangelism and of properly instructing those who are and become part of the Christian community are perhaps also among the most important roles we have. To achieve this effectively today, we certainly need to complement such traditional roles with that of institutions of higher education that are committed to practise scholarship on the basis of faith as well as in commitment and obedience to the Lord. Other previous generations may have succeeded with fewer such institutions, but our days seem to demand more of them. In any event, the plural context call for a more aggressive, unashamed but humble confession of our Christian faith. The early Christians who had to serve the Lord during the time of the Roman Empire in the first till the third centuries were able to stand, also by being willing to suffer for their Lord and their faith. This kind of sacrifice may also be essential today if the Christian community wants to achieve the necessary impact. It should be comforting to do all our tasks knowing that God who has promised to be with His people by His Spirit is faithful. We must look to Him as we attempt to fulfil our responsibilities.

#### Bibliography

- AALDERS, G.C. 1981. Bible Student Commentary, Genesis. Volume 1. Grand Rapids : Zondervan.
- ADAMS, J.E. 1977. The time is at hand. Nutley, New Jersey : Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.
- BADLEY, K. 2000. Indoctrination and Assimilation in Plural settings. (*In* Olthuis, J.H., ed. *Towards an Ethics of Community*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada : Wilfrid Laurier University Press. p. 51-73.)

- BARKER, W.S. & GODFREY, W.R., eds. 1990. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan.
- BARKER, W.S. 1990. *Theonomy, Pluralism, and the Bible*. (In Barker, W.S. & Godfrey, W.R., eds. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan. p. 227-242.)
- CAIRNS, E.E. 1981. *Christianity through the Centuries*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan.
- CARSON, D.A. 1996. *The Gagging of God*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan.
- DOOYEWEERD, H. 1979. *Roots of Western Culture*. Toronto : Wedge Publishing Foundation.
- FRAME, J.M. 1994. *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. Phillipsburg : Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.
- GILL, D.W. 2000. *Becoming Good*. Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press.
- GRIFFITHS, P.J. 2001. *Problems of Religious Diversity*. Oxford : Blackwell.
- GROOTHUIS, D. 2000. *Truth Decay*. Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press.
- HART, H. 2000. *Consequences of Liberalism: Ideological Domination in Rorty's Public/Private Split*. (In Olthuis, J.H., ed. *Towards an Ethics of Community*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada : Wilfrid Laurier University Press. p. 37-50.)
- HELSETH, P.K. 2000. *B.B. Warfield on the Apologetic Nature of Christian Scholarship: An Analysis of His Solution to the Problem of the Relationship between Christianity and Culture*. *Westminster Theological Journal*, 62:89-111.
- HICK, J. 1988. *The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity*. (In Hick, J. & Knitter, P.F., eds. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. London : SCM. p. 16-36.)
- LONGMAN III, T. 1990. *God's Law and Mosaic Punishments Today*. (In Barker, W.S. & Godfrey, W.R., eds. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan. p. 41-54.)
- LOSCH, R.R. 2001. *The Many Faces of Faith*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.
- LUTZER, E.W. 1994. *Christ among the Gods*. Amersham-on-the Hill : Scripture Press.
- MARSHALL, P. 1997. *Their Blood Cries Out*. Dallas : Word Publishing.
- McCARTHY, R., OPPERWALI, D., PETERSON, W., & SPYKMAN, G.J. 1981. *Society, State, & Schools*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.
- McCARTNEY, D.C. 1990. *The New Testament Use of the Pentateuch: Implications for the Theonomic Movement*. (In Barker, W.S. & Godfrey, W.R., eds. 1990. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan. p. 129-149.)
- MURRAY, J. 1978. *Principles of Conduct*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.
- NETLAND, H. 2001. *Encountering Religious Pluralism*. Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press.
- POLLITT, H.J. 1996. *The Inter-Faith Movement*. Edinburgh : The Banner of Truth Trust.
- POYTHRESS, V.S. *God Centered Biblical Interpretation*. Phillipsburg : Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.
- PRATT, R.L. 1979. *Every Thought Captive*. Phillipsburg : Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.
- SPYKMAN, G.J. 1989. *The Principled Pluralist Position*. (In Smith, G.R., ed. *God and Politics*. Phillipsburg : Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing. p. 78-99.)
- SWEETMAN, R. 2000. *Plotting the Margins: A Historical Episode in the Management of Social Plurality*. (In Olthuis, J.H., ed. *Towards an Ethics of Community*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada : Wilfrid Laurier University Press. p. 13-36.)
- VAN DER WALT, B.J. 1994. *The Liberating Message*. Potchefstroom : The Institute for Reformational Studies.

WALTKE, B.K. 1990. Theonomy in Relation to Dispensational and Covenant Theologies. (In Barker, W.S. & Godfrey, W.R., eds. Theonomy: A Reformed Critique. Grand Rapids : Zondervan. p. 59-86.)

WRIGHT, J.H. 1983. Living as the People of God. Leicester : InterVarsity Press.

**Key concepts:**

apologetics

diversity

pluralism

**Kernbegrippe:**

apologetiek

diversiteit

pluralisme

