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Hayama Missionary Seminar

# **How Wide is God's Mercy?**

*Christian Perspectives on  
Religious Pluralism*

Editor: Dale W. Little

34th Annual Report

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## **How Wide is God's Mercy? A Biblical Perspective on Religious Pluralism**

by  
Don N.  
Howell, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### **A. A Brief Overview of Religious Pluralism**

Historic Christianity has always faced a tension with the surrounding cultural and religious world in which it has energetically sought to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. It has been by its very nature an exclusivist message demanding repentance and a faith response toward the one true God who in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, accomplished man's redemption. This has been the faith of the apostles, the church fathers, the reformers, and is the heritage of modern evangelicals. Yet the majority of the world's peoples have remained outside the expressed parameters of the church. Within certain sections of the church, voices have been raised to tone down such dogmatic exclusiveness in order to achieve rapprochement with other religious traditions. These forces against an exclusivist message have gained strength as the world itself has become a global village. With the mass migration of peoples across national boundaries, the adherents of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have now become intimate neighbors to western 'Christians.' This social and racial pluralism has forced the church to rethink its relationship to other religious traditions, particularly the validity and significance of their belief system.

John Hick is one of the foremost of a growing group of articulate advocates for the theory of Religious Pluralism.<sup>2</sup> He is a prolific and persuading writer.<sup>3</sup> Briefly defined, R. P.

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<sup>2</sup>Other leading names are Stanley Samartha, Rosemary Ruether, Tom Driver, Raimundo Panikkar and Paul Knitter.

<sup>3</sup>Several of his recent works are: *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985); *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

states that no single religion, whether Christianity or another competing tradition, is to be regarded as the sole repository of truth, having a superiority over the rest. All of the competing religious models — Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism — are alternative soteriological paths which can lead men to salvation. The major world religions are different streams of accumulated tradition that flow from a common source — God at the center (see below). As such they share common features and together form a multifaceted religious complex which should be mutually respected. R. P. differs from traditional religious inclusivism which tends to make the Christian God the true God whom believers of other religions also worship, albeit unknowingly and in a somewhat distorted way.

Our purpose in this paper is not to critique the epistemological and philosophical presuppositions behind R. P.<sup>4</sup> Rather, our goal is to appraise one of its most fundamental structures in light of the teaching of Scripture. That structure of R. P. is its Theocentric Christology (built on a mythological interpretation of the incarnation; see below). Hick describes Theocentrism as the "paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered model to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths."<sup>5</sup> The shift from Christocentrism to Theocentrism is for Hick the "Copernican revolution" of modern religious understanding: as Copernicus recognized that the sun and not the earth was the center of the universe, so our ultimate attention must be shifted away from Jesus Christ to God, the "originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most impressive attempt at establishing such a Theocentric Christology is Paul Knitter's *No Other Name*?<sup>7</sup> In this work Knitter argues for a shift in focus from Christ as the indispensable guide to God, to God as the key for theological interpretation of Christ. What is particularly significant about Knitter's approach is his appeal to Scripture and Christian tradition in support of this theocentric model. He rightly concedes that the exclusivist character of Christian faith resides in its Christocentrism. This can be overcome by a theocentric model which makes God, not Christ, the essence of truth. Knitter's agenda is to negate the exclusivist character of Christianity without diminishing its authenticity or power.

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<sup>4</sup>That is accomplished in Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Hick, *Names*, 18.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (New York: Orbis, 1985).

S. Mark Heim has provided a compact but incisive critique of Knitter's logical and evidential argumentation.<sup>8</sup> As for Knitter's logical argumentation, Heim points out that in the repeated progressive jumps to a broader and more expansive center, the content of God — becomes practically indeterminate. By removing  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  from its Christocentric parameters so that it can incorporate anything and everything, Knitter in effect ends up with a centerless center, that is, a center without location. If  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  is everything, it is nothing!<sup>9</sup> But in the New Testament  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  is the term of signification for God, the Father ( $\pi\alpha\tau\eta\rho$ ) of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> If biblical parameters are to be brought into the equation at all — and this Knitter seeks to do — the term God must be given a clearly delimited reference point, namely, the planning, superintendance and consummation of the redemptive event focused exclusively in Jesus Christ. "The problem is that for there to be a theocentric Christology there must certainly first be a theocentric theology. In it, presumably,  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  will be the norm for defining . . .  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ . What does or can this mean?"<sup>11</sup> Knitter never really defines God and thus never provides any content to his center.

With regard to Knitter's evidential arguments, drawn from the Bible and Christian tradition, the result is even less satisfying.<sup>12</sup> Here Knitter, like Hick and the other proponents of R. P., appeals for a reopening of the Christological question, recognizing that the traditional incarnational model of the person of Christ brings with it exclusivist demands and destroys the substructure of the model he is seeking to build. For if Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God — God become man — then the uniqueness and singularity of the Christ event sets Christianity apart from all other religious traditions and demands conversion,

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<sup>8</sup>S. Mark Heim, "Thinking About Theocentric Christology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24:1 (1987): 1-16. A series of responses and counterarguments to Heim by Knitter and others is found in the same issue, pp. 17-52.

<sup>9</sup>Heim, "Theocentric Christology," 1-10.

<sup>10</sup>This is demonstrated with methodological precision in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Seabury, 1974) 1.125-48.

<sup>11</sup>Heim, "Theocentric Christology," 6.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 10-16.

not just respectful coexistence. Thus the battle lines of the exclusivist-inclusivist debate once again converge at the doctrine of the incarnation.<sup>13</sup> It is our goal, then, in the following section to examine the New Testament evidence for the incarnation in light of the objections raised against it by Religious Pluralists. The presupposition behind all the evidential argumentation to follow is that the Bible must be the authoritative norm undergirding all doctrine and practice that is to be labeled truly Christian. In other words, the uniqueness of the divine-human Christ and the singularity and exclusive nature of the Christ event is grounded on one's estimation of the revelatory value of the New Testament. Our problem with the Religious Pluralism of Hick and Knitter, then, is its attempt to retain certain forms and expressions of biblical Christianity, even appealing to its foundational document, the Bible, while at the same time denying its essence and core.

## **B. The New Testament Presentation of the Person of Jesus Christ**

### **(1) The Mythological Christology of R. P.**

J. Hick recognizes that both historic, exclusivist Christianity and his own theory of R. P. stand or fall with the New Testament doctrine of the incarnation. So he energetically appeals for its reinterpretation or demythologization. In place of the objective reality of a divine-human personality, as orthodox, historic Christianity has always insisted, "the idea of divine incarnation is to be understood metaphorically rather than literally, as an essentially poetic expression of the Christian's devotion to his Lord."<sup>14</sup>

Hick, Knitter and other proponents of R. P. maintain that there is an evolutionary development in the Christology of the New Testament from earlier functional coordinates through the higher Christologies of Paul and John and finally to the fully developed ontological Christology of the Nicean and Chalcedon Creeds. The gradual deification of Jesus by the early church arose out of the creativity and imagination of the first Christians.

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<sup>13</sup>The christological debate was captured in a series of works from both sides in the late 1970's: (1) From the liberal side, John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977); (2) The evangelical response came in Michael Green, ed., *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); (3) A series of articles by proponents of both viewpoints was published in Michael Goulder, ed., *The Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

<sup>14</sup>Hick, *Names*, 19.

Thus the eventual Christ of faith has only a vague resemblance to the actual Jesus of history, who never claimed to be God nor set himself forth as an object of faith. The same process can be seen in the deification of Gautama in Mahayana Buddhism. The illogical and contradictory nature of such a God-man synthesis has never been adequately explained and is painfully illustrated in the doctrinal controversies over the two natures of Christ that have plagued church history — Arianism, Apollinarianism, Monophysitism, Eutychianism, Nestorianism, Sabellianism, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*. The high Christology of the New Testament writers, especially that of Paul and John, is simply an intensification of earlier, more fundamental functional parameters; that is, a deepening and heightened way of expressing their commitment to him as Lord. In Hick's words: "The story of the Son of God coming down from heaven and being born as a human baby will be seen as a mythological expression of the immense significance of our encounter with one in whose presence we have found ourselves to be at the same time in the presence of God."<sup>15</sup> It is not who Jesus is — ontology — but what Jesus did — function — that is the consistent focus of attention in the primitive and pristine expressions of faith. Jesus thus was a human being who had an overwhelmingly deep consciousness of God and is thus able to reveal that God-consciousness to others. Such is the handling of New Testament Christology by the Religious Pluralists. In the following section we shall seek to look at the New Testament evidence as it stands, asking if the Christological reconstruction of R. P. fits with the data.

## **(2) The New Testament Evidence for the Divine-Human Jesus**

### **(a) The Self-understanding of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels**

In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus emerges as an authoritative personality who commands the allegiance of his people (Mk 1:14-18; 2:13-14). In the Sermon on the Mount he claims to have insight into the fuller and deeper intent of the Old Testament Law (Mt 5:21-48). In the synagogue at Nazareth he sets forth his own teaching and healing ministry as the eschatological fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2 (Lk 4:14-21). Similarly, his

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<sup>15</sup>Hick, "Jesus and World Religions," in *Myth of God Incarnate*, 184.

arrest in Gethsemane (Mt 26:54, 56) and his death and resurrection (Lk 24:44-46) are declared to be the fulfillment of Scripture. He acknowledges the divinely revealed truth of Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:13-20). In a major confrontation with the Pharisees over his healing of a paralytic, Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins, a prerogative reserved only for God (Mk 2:1-12). Jesus's favorite self-designation is "Son of man." While many of the Son of man references in the Synoptics refer to an earthly figure who was destined to suffer and die (e.g., Mk 8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41) other texts (with Dan 7:13-14 clearly in the background) denote a heavenly, pre-existent being who vanquishes all foes and establishes his reign over a universal kingdom (e.g., Mk 8:38; 14:26, 62).<sup>16</sup> With respect to the designation "Lord"

(Κυριος), the LXX translation of the Hebrew *yaweh*, God's covenant name, it is true that Κυριος is often in the Gospels simply a polite form of address properly rendered "Sir" (e.g., Mt 8:2; 9:28; 14:30; 15:22; 16:22). However, there are precedents for a deeper level of meaning than simply teacher or leader. O. Cullmann suggests Mt 7:21; Mk 11:3; Jn 13:13 and, above all, the treatment of Ps 110:1 in Mk 12:35-37 as texts which provide the Κυριος designation a sense far exceeding the dignity of a Jewish rabbi.<sup>17</sup> In debate with the Pharisees, Jesus proves from Ps 110:1 that Messiah is not only David's son but also his Lord. The heightened sense of Κυριος here is intensified by the context in Matthew (22:34-40) and Mark (12:28-34) where the debate occurs immediately after these same Pharisees are reminded that the ultimate duty of man is "to love the Lord your God" with one's entire being. "Thus in reply to the Jewish teachers' question about the great commandment, Jesus declares that this *kyrios* is to be given complete and undivided attention. But then Jesus puts to them the question of this other *kyrios* with its implied claims: "David himself calls him Lord; so how is he his son?"<sup>18</sup>

This representative glance at the portrait of Jesus we encounter in the Synoptic Gospels is interpreted by critical scholars through the lenses of form and redaction criticism. Rather than an objective record of the historical Jesus as he actually was, what we have in the

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<sup>16</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 145-58.

<sup>17</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 204-5.

<sup>18</sup>H. Bietenhard, "kuvrio", *NIDNTT*, 2:516.

Gospels is *Gemeindetheologie* — the theology of the primitive church; that is, the Gospels testify to the Christ of faith as seen through the eyes of imaginative and creative minds. The Gospel tradition is largely the creation of inspired minds with each successive layer of the tradition accumulating much like ancient folklore. Evangelical scholars have pointed out the flaws in such a radical approach to the Synoptic testimony: (1) the Gospels were produced within thirty to forty years of the original events; so there was not the time necessary for vast accretion of material as with the passing down of oral traditions over many centuries in ancient folklore; (2) the controlling factor of eyewitnesses is largely overlooked in critical scholarship (1 Cor 15:6); (3) the radical criterion of dissimilarity employed by form critics such as R. Bultmann and N. Perrin creates a Jesus who is able to innovate new concepts but unable to share anything in common with his Jewish tradition or pass on much if any spiritual inheritance to his disciples; (4) the Jewish character of the New Testament is underestimated, particularly the preservation of oral traditions through careful and retentive memorization; (5) secular historians are generally much more sympathetic to the historical reliability of the biblical material than are New Testament critics (particularly true with respect to Luke's accuracy as a historian). In summary, radical scholarship overlooks the dynamic of the person of Jesus himself whose unparalleled claims and deeds impacted the disciples and created their faith.

### **(b) The Johannine Testimony**

While critical scholars tend to discount the Johannine testimony as a late, unhistorical tradition, its high Christology at least demands a hearing. In the Prologue (1:1-18) Jesus Christ is described as the Logos who, while equal to God, is also a distinct personality (1:1), eternal (1:2), the Creator of the universe (1:3, 10), the source of spiritual life and light for all people (1:4-9), the object of faith (1:12), the fully incarnate and only begotten Son of God (1:14, 18), possessor with the Father of the divine attributes of glory, grace and truth (1:14-17) who is uniquely qualified to make the Father known (1:18).

John's Christological point of emphasis is the inseparable relationship of Jesus with God the Father both ontologically and in terms of special revelation. Jesus is only fulfilling the mission assigned to him by his Father (5:36). It is the Father who sent his Son into the world (10:36), who placed his seal of approval on him (6:27), who put all things under

his power (13:3) and gives to him an elect people (6:37). The Son and Father are bound together in an inseparable bond of love (5:20; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9). Whatever Jesus does or teaches originates not from himself but from the Father (5:19, 30; 6:57; 7:16; 8:28; 10:38; 12:49; 14:10-11). These sayings reveal both humble dependence and supreme authority. When Jesus called God his own Father the Jews rightly understood his language to be a claim to equality with God (5:18). He speaks of himself as the only mediator through whom one can come to the Father (14:6). Jesus predicates a person's relationship with himself as simultaneously a relationship with the Father (8:19; 14:7, 9). To summarize, "I and the Father are One" (10:30), an unparalleled claim which the Jews understood as blasphemy (10:31-33).

Evangelical scholarship has made a good case for both the independent character (from the Synoptic tradition) and the reliability of the Johannine tradition.<sup>19</sup> If John is to be respected as a serious, even if independent, historian, it is clear that Theocentrism should not be played off against Christocentrism. The Son's person and work originate from and move inexorably toward the Father. The Father's redemptive historical purposes are executed by his only begotten Son.

### **(c) The Centrality of the Resurrection of Christ in the κηρυγμα of Acts**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ as a historically verifiable space-time event is the heart of the early apostolic preaching. Here Acts builds on the fourfold Gospel record, setting forth the theological significance of the historic event. For the Apostles the resurrection meant the vindication of Jesus's redemptive work on the cross and his exaltation as **Κυριος** to the Father's right hand as supreme authority over the church and the world (1:22; 2:24-36; 3:21, 26; 4:2, 33; 10:39-43; 13:30-39; 17:3, 18, 31-32; 26:23).<sup>20</sup> The resurrection-ascension-exaltation of Christ signaled the inbreaking of the eschaton, not just the revival of a dead corpse (1 Cor 15). The resurrection sets Jesus and the faith he founded apart from all other religious traditions.

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<sup>19</sup>Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978); D. A. Carson, D. Moo, L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 151-66; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 287-300, 323-28.

<sup>20</sup>Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 315-41.

Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism (reincarnation is utterly alien to the biblical concept of life and death) never speak of the resurrection of their founder (Mohammed is claimed to have been translated to heaven above the dome of the rock). The resurrection event is attributed by critical scholars not to history but to the fertile, inspired minds of the early disciples — the climactic feature of Gemeindeftheologie. But as George Ladd asks, what happened to produce this faith in a risen Lord that transformed the early disciples from despair and frustration to confidence and certainty? "There is no adequate explanation to account for the rise of the resurrection except this: that Jesus rose from the dead."<sup>21</sup>

#### (d) The Application of $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ to Jesus in the New Testament

It is infrequent that Jesus is specified by the term  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  in the New Testament authors. This is because, with the exception of Luke, the authors were Jewish and were careful not to invite a misunderstanding that the Christian faith was polytheistic like many religions of the Greco-Roman world. Thus while clearly expounding the person and work of Christ in the categories of deity, they preserved separately the term  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  as the term of signification for God the Father and  $\text{Κυριος}$  as the term of signification for Jesus Christ (see footnote 9). Nevertheless, at times Christ is explicitly called God, particularly pronounced in the high Christology of John (Jn 1:1, 18; 20:28; 1 Jn 5:20; cf., Heb 1:8-9). What about in the epistles of Paul, which is perhaps the earliest testimony we have of the faith of the post-Easter church? Does Paul ever break his normal rule of usage ( $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  for the Father and  $\text{Κυριος}$  for Christ) and explicitly designate Christ as  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ? Though both passages are disputed, the natural reading of the Greek text of Rom 9:5 and Titus 2:13 indicate that Paul is capable of calling Christ God.<sup>22</sup>

It should not be overlooked, however, that the ascription of the term  $\text{Κυριος}$  to Jesus is itself impressive testimony to his deity. The LXX, Paul's Bible, translates the

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>22</sup>Two excellent articles that defend the application of  $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  to Christ in Rom 9:5 and Tit 2:13 respectively are: Bruce M. Metzger, "The Punctuation of Romans 9:5," in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, eds. B. Lindars and S. Smalley (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 95-108; Murray J. Harris, "Titus 2:13 and the Deity of Christ," in *Pauline Studies*, eds. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 262-77.

covenant name **hwhy** over 6000 times by the Greek term **Κυριος**. Paul repeatedly associates **hwhy** with the Lord Jesus Christ in his use of the Old Testament. One should compare such passages as Rom 10:13 (Joel 2:32); 1 Cor 1:31 and 2 Cor 10:17 (Jer 9:24); 1 Cor 2:16 (Isa 40:13; the same text is applied to God in Rom 11:34); 1 Cor 10:9 (Num 21:5-9); 1 Cor 10:26 (Ps 24:1); 2 Cor 3:16 (Ex 34:34); Eph 4:8 (Ps 68:18). Perhaps the most impressive application of the covenant name of Yahweh to Jesus is Phil 2:10-11. In describing Jesus's exaltation, the Apostle borrows his language from Isa 45:23, situated in a polemical context (45:1-25) where the singularity and uniqueness of the one true Lord God of Israel, sole Creator and Savior, is contrasted with the pagan gods of the surrounding nations.<sup>23</sup> In Rom 14:11 the same Old Testament text is applied to the worship of God the Father. As J. G. Gibbs comments, "Phil. 2:11 reflects (as does Rom. 14:11) Is. 45:23, just as 1 Cor. 8:6 applies to both God the Father and Jesus Christ the affirmation to which Deut. 6:4 gives expression."<sup>24</sup>

### (e) The Meaning of **Κυριος** in the New Testament Epistles

In explaining the high Christology of the New Testament authors, especially Paul and John, the proponents of R. P. often draw on the arguments of religionsgeschichtliche (history of religions or comparative religions) scholars. This school of thought — though it has lost much of its force in recent years with the increasing recognition of the Jewishness of New Testament teaching — strives to demonstrate the organic continuity of Christianity with the Hellenistic and/or oriental worldviews of the competing religious traditions of the first century. Gnosticism, the mystery religions, Greek mythology, oriental mysticism, Mithraism and many others are mined for parallels to New Testament teaching. Verbal similarities are quickly transformed into conceptual parallels and these in turn are said to be the sources of such foundational Christian doctrines as redemption, vicarious atonement, resurrection, baptism and the eucharist, Lordship and new birth. To take one leading example, W. Bousset in his famous work *Kyrios Christos* sought to explain Paul's exalted Lordship Christology

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<sup>23</sup>Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 238-34; Moises Silva, *Philippians* (WEC; Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 131.

<sup>24</sup>John G. Gibbs, "The Relation Between Creation and Redemption According to Philippians 2:5-11," *NovT* 12:3 (1970): 282.

as a product of his contact with the mystery cults of Hellenistic Antioch.<sup>25</sup> The simpler faith of the primitive Jerusalem church in Jesus as the coming apocalyptic Son of man suddenly made a quantum leap, when it entered the Greek world, into the category of venerated **Κυριος**. With consummate skill Bousset explored the Hermetic literature, Philo, Gnostic documents, the mystery cults of Isis, Osiris, and Orphis. In the process he discovered conceptual 'parallels' with Paul's Christ mysticism (**ἐφ' Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ**), doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Christ-Adam theology, cross and sacrament, and the dying-rising Redeemer. Bousset's theory was embraced by the representative par excellence of the religionsgeschichtliche approach, Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>26</sup>

The comparative religions school of thought has been extensively criticized in recent decades by such leading scholars as O. Cullmann, L. Goppelt, M. Hengel, E. Ellis, I. H. Marshall and has lost much of its persuasive power in New Testament scholarship.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Religious Pluralists now repeat the tired, worn arguments of a past generation in their zeal to establish a conceptual center (an undefined Theocentrism) which Christianity shares with other major religious traditions. With respect to the New Testament concept of Christ's Lordship, several decisive objections have rendered the Bousset-Bultmann hypothesis all but obsolete: (1) The deeper, ontological element resident in the **Κυριος** application to Jesus in several key Synoptic passages (discussed above) could easily extend, in the aftermath of his resurrection and exaltation, into the fuller, more developed Christology of Paul and John. There can be extension and expansion of Christological parameters along a line of organic continuity, much like a bud and flower.<sup>28</sup>

(2) There is evidence in the preservation of the Aramaic liturgical formula

**μαρανα θα** in 1 Corinthians 16:22 that the acclamation of Jesus as Lord reaches back to the Palestinian church. Cullmann calls the Maranatha confession the Achilles heel of the

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<sup>25</sup>Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970 [1913]).

<sup>26</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols. in one; New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955), 1.51-53, 121-33.

<sup>27</sup>Perhaps the most extensive critique of the history of religions school is: C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösmythus* (FRLANT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1961).

<sup>28</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 1-11, 22-24, 148-56.

Bousset-Bultmann reconstruction.<sup>29</sup> J. Fitzmyer's detailed Aramaic studies have demonstrated that the Aramaic term (א)ר;מ; was capable of being used in the New Testament period in the absolute sense, that is, as a divine designation like Κύριος.<sup>30</sup>

(3) It is highly unlikely, indeed unthinkable, that the Paul of the "no other gospel" of Gal 1:6-9 would have borrowed the essence of his message from the very people among whom he worked!<sup>31</sup> That Paul was aware of the pagan usage of Κύριος is clear from 1 Cor 8:5 where he refers to θεοι; πολλοι; και; κυριοι πολλοι of the contemporary world. Is it not self-evident that this Jewish-Christian missionary employed current terms in order to establish an area of commonality with his listeners, while confronting their deep rooted value systems and world view with a Christological reformulation and redefinition of these same terms (this is clearly the case with such terms as μυστηριον, τελειος, σοφια, γνωσις; see below). This is clearly the approach of the modern missionary to Japan who takes the current and available linguistic vehicle — *kami, tsumi, megumi* — and pours into it new semantic content, carefully redefining and explaining his terms as he expounds the gospel.

In summary, the New Testament acclamation of Jesus as Lord is in organic continuity with the Old Testament concept of God's Lordship. Christ shares in a community of nature and prerogative with God the Father, a full participant in the expanded, dynamic monotheism (trinitarianism) of the Old and New Testaments.

#### (f) God-Christ Interchange in the Pauline Epistles

By interchange we mean the overlapping of roles, functions, and prerogatives assigned to both God and Christ in the Pauline literature. There is in Paul a vast language of interchange where the Apostle describes the person and work of the Son in much the same terms as he

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<sup>29</sup>Cullmann, *Christology*, 213-15.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Semitic Background to the New Testament Kyrios-Title," in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, by J. A. Fitzmyer (Missoula, Montana: Scholars, 1979), 116-27; "New Testament Kyrios and Maranatha and Their Aramaic Background," in *To Advance the Gospel*, by J. A. Fitzmyer (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 223-29.

<sup>31</sup>Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the New Testament 1900-1950* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951), 70.

does the person and work of the Father. Space cannot be taken up here to list the numerous texts where Paul, across the entire horizon of this thought, ascribes to Christ in equal terms the attributes and functions of God the Father.<sup>32</sup> The extensive breadth of this interchange of God-Christ language — one that encompasses appellations, attributes, the goal of creation, execution of eschatological judgment, salvation and its corollaries, the object of faith and hope, source of spiritual benefits to believers including the Holy Spirit, reference point for the believer's accountability, possessor of church and kingdom, recipient of worship, prayer, blessing, glory and thanksgiving, and the source of the apostolic commission, its power, and the direction of its final accountability—is one that, we believe, undergirds and confirms the foundational truth of the incarnation. We conclude this section with a quote from the outstanding Pauline scholar C. E. B. Cranfield, who has extensively criticized J. D. G. Dunn and others for severely underestimating the ontological character of Pauline Christology. "In this epistle (Romans) — and the same could be said of the other Pauline letters — Paul again and again in a rich variety of ways associates Christ with God with an uninhibitedness, which, because it is so familiar, we are apt to pass over without noticing, but which, when once we begin to reflect on the implications of what we are reading, can scarcely fail to strike us as altogether extraordinary and astonishing."<sup>33</sup>

### **C. The Approach of the Biblical Authors to Religious Pluralism**

The consistent testimony of both Testaments is that there is a single line of divine revelation organically distinct from other religious traditions of mankind. God has established a covenant with Abraham from whom comes a redeemed nation, Israel, and ultimately the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to channel his salvific blessings to the world. The interaction of Israel and the New Testament church with the prevailing religious traditions of the ancient near east and the Greco-Roman world respectively demonstrates the tenuous character of

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<sup>32</sup>The details are provided in my article to be published: Don N. Howell, Jr., "God-Christ Interchange in Paul: Impressive Testimony to the Deity of Jesus," *JETS* 1994.

<sup>33</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 2.839.

Religious Pluralism's (e.g., P. Knitter) appeal to Scripture to establish its theory.<sup>34</sup>

### **(1) The Polemic Against Other Religions in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament is a record of the covenant people of God struggling to maintain their spiritual integrity in the seductive environment of religious pluralism. The initial command of the decalogue is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). The God of Israel is a jealous God demanding the exclusive allegiance of his people (Exod 20:4-6; Deut 4:24; 32:16, 21; Josh 24:19; Ps 78:58). Blessing or cursing depends upon Israel's exclusive loyalty to Yahweh and determined rejection of other religious traditions and practices (Deut 28-29). The Old Testament is a graphic portrait of Israel's alternative obedience and unfaithfulness to this foundational requirement, exclusive and undivided worship of their covenant Lord. The entire narrative of the golden calf incident in Exod 32 reveals the absolute dissimilarity of the truth revealed to Moses and the primitive pagan practice of representing deity through natural representations. Graven and molten images, pillars, the asherah (wooden images), teraphim (figurines of gods) and sacred pillars were strictly forbidden to Israel. The prophets and psalmists carried on a stinging polemic against idolatry, especially the Canaanite fertility cult of Baal, which constantly sought rapprochement and amalgamation with the faith of Israel (cf., Isa 40:18-31; Jer 10:1-16; Ezek 16:1-63). Hosea 13:4 captures the appeal of every true prophet from Moses to Malachi: "But I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me."

### **(2) Is the New Testament More Inclusivistic?**

Is there an evolution from this primitive, exclusivistic, Old Testament approach to competing religious traditions to a more inclusivistic or receptive viewpoint in the New Testament? The answer is a categorical negative. Both Testaments approach religious pluralism on the basis of two foundational principles: (1) an idol itself is nothing, simply being a lifeless, material creation of man; (2) yet behind the worship of other gods are demonic forces that

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<sup>34</sup>A helpful work here is A. C. Clarke and B. W. Winter, eds., *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991).

constitute a spiritual menace to believers. These principles guided Paul in his approach to meat that had been offered in idol worship on pagan altars in Corinth. The many gods of Corinth are only "so-called gods and lords" (λεγόμενοι θεοί; . . . κυριοί) which do not exist except in the minds of their devotees. Since an idol is nothing in the world, and there is in truth only one God and one Lord, the believer is free to eat that meat when sold in the marketplace (1 Cor 8:4-6). However, the ultimate forces behind pagan worship are demonic, so the believer is forbidden to eat meat as part of the feasts in their temples (1 Cor 10:14-22), for here we have not incidental contact with the pagan world, which is unavoidable, but conscious participation in pagan worship. Should not these same two principles guide Christians in Japan in terms of their attendance and participation in Buddhist funerals? We shall now look at some representative examples of the New Testament approach to the religious pluralism of the Greco-Roman world.

### **(a) Paul's Encounter with the Philosophers at Athens (Acts 17)**

The Apostle Paul's approach to the Athenian philosophers is a model of contextualizing the gospel message without compromising its essence (another excellent example is his sermon to the untutored pagans of Lystra, Acts 14:8-18). The Epicureans and Stoics were receptive toward the multitude of religious views prevalent in the first century Roman empire. In fact, Mars Hill was a gathering place for all types of religious enthusiasts to compare notes and satisfy their insatiable curiosity for the latest ideas (Acts 17:18-21). Paul began his address to the Areopagus by acknowledging their religious enthusiasm (17:22). He found a point of contact in an inscription "to an unknown God," written out of the Greek propensity to have all the areas covered and not leave out any religious tradition from their consideration. Paul establishes an area of commonality with his listeners by building on their shared recognition of the natural world and its universally perceived phenomena (17:24-28). But the focus soon narrows to the one and only line of special revelation through Jesus Christ, the demand for repentance, and the vindication of its authority in the resurrection (17:29-31). The philosophers quickly understood the significance of these exclusivist claims and laughed Paul out of the assembly (17:32). For Paul, the true God is perhaps vaguely echoed in the Greek traditions (the altar to the unknown God, v. 23a), but is distinctly outside of their

conscious religious conceptions and practices (I am proclaiming to you that which you all but admit is unknown to you, v. 23b). The redemptive analogies approach of Don Richardson (*Peace Child*, et al.) finds a biblical precedent here.

### (b) The Cosmic Christology of Ephesians-Colossians

Critical scholarship (and Religious Pluralists who borrow their arguments) generally rejects the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and Colossians on the ground that its pronounced Christology and its expansion into the metaphysical domain — Christ set forth not just as Lord of the church but as Lord over the entire universe — is qualitatively distinct from the functional, soteriological Christology of the authentic Pauline letters.<sup>35</sup> That the Christology of these two letters contains a pronounced protological dimension exceeding the other Paulines cannot be denied (cf., Eph 1:3, 10, 20-23; 2:63:10-11; 4:8-10, 15; 5:23; 6:12; Col 1:15-20; 2:2-3, 15, 19; 3:1, 3, 11). More conservative scholars have often pointed out, however, that such cosmic parameters are more than anticipated in the uncontested Pauline literature (e.g., Rom 8:18-25; 14:9; 1 Cor 3:21-23; 8:6; Phil 2:9-11). What is so significant here is that in the province of Asia heresies with a patently defective Christology threatened the church. Instead of pursuing commonality or seeking rapprochement with these pseudo-Christian cults the Apostle extends his earlier Christology to its logical and inevitable conclusion — the unchallenged dominion and supremacy of Jesus Christ over the entire universe! In Colossae the church was threatened by an alien doctrine which apparently conceived of Christ as part of the *πληρωμα* or mediatorial expanse between God and the material world that included angelic powers (Col 2:10a, 15, 18b). Therefore Paul identifies Christ as the mystery (2:2), the storehouse of wisdom and knowledge (2:3), the *πληρωμα* of deity (2:9), the reality (*σωμα*) over against the shadow (2:17), the head from whom these believers are in danger of losing connection (2:19a). The "Great Christology" of Col 1:15-20 — which sets Christ forth as agent, sustainer and goal of creation — is in response to such Christological aberrations. Heresy becomes not the opportunity to find lines of convergence and areas of overlap but the stimulus and catalyst

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<sup>35</sup>A recent example of this viewpoint is J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 160, 163, 214, 278, 303-4, 313-15, 335, 365.

for deeper reflection on the meaning of Christ's lordship, so that the dimensions of preeminence are expanded to the full horizon of the created universe. Religious Pluralists are hard pressed to find any sympathy at all from Paul in support of their theory.

### **(c) The Approach to Syncretism in the Churches of Asia (Rev 2-3)**

The careful preservation of the narrow boundaries of truth and forthright rejection of all forms of syncretism characterizes the divine admonitions to the seven churches of Asia minor.<sup>36</sup> Ephesus is commended for its hatred of the libertine sect of the Nicolaitans (2:6). In Smyrna, a center of emperor worship, the believers may have to face death for refusing to bow to the image of Caesar (2:10b). Pergamum held the official Asian center for the imperial cult, "where Satan has his throne" (2:13). The church in Pergamum is commanded to repent for compromise with the inclusivistic cults of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans (2:14-16). The church in Thyatira is enjoined to expel the woman Jezebel who was uttering false prophecies — which are "Satan's so-called deep secrets" (2:24) — and enticing the believers toward pagan practices (2:20-25). Most of the believers of Sardis have also soiled their clothes with compromise and impurity (3:4). Legalistic Jews in Philadelphia who denigrate the gospel of grace are the "synagogue of Satan" (3:9). Compromise had reduced the church of Laodicea to a lukewarm wretch (3:15-19). Like the prophets of the Old Testament the words of John to the angels of these churches are a severe indictment of compromise and amalgamation with the incorporative faiths of Asia minor.

### **(d) The Careful Employment of Pagan Religious Terminology in the New Testament**

In our earlier discussion of the history of religions approach (*Religionsgeschichte*), we observed that Paul and the other apostles employed current available terminology but with an entirely new meaning. In order to penetrate the hearts and minds of their pagan listeners the apostles used well known terms, redefining and explaining them in their proclamation of

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<sup>36</sup>The syncretistic, pluralistic religious environment of western Asia Minor is catalogued in Edwin M. Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

the gospel. Here we give one clear example. In the Hellenistic world **μυστηριον** denoted the secret customs and ceremonies of those mystery religions into which its devotees were initiated. The cults of Isis, Attis, Mithras, Cybele, Adonis, Demeter, Dionysus shared this in common. In later Gnosticism, which had primitive roots in the New Testament period, the **μυστηρια** were secret revelations granted only to the perfect (**τελειοι**) that issued in salvation.<sup>37</sup> The elitist and secluded character of the mystery is pronounced. For Paul, **μυστηριον** is a salvation historical term. Unlike the esoteric secrets of the mystery religions where only a privileged elite were initiated into their benefits, the Pauline **μυστηριον** is God's salvific plan formerly concealed but now revealed in Jesus Christ for all to know, understand and embrace (Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim 3:9, 16).<sup>38</sup> Here is the Christocentric reinterpretation and reformulation of pagan religious data, not its unaltered borrowing or acceptance. The same approach can be seen with other terms: **Κυριος** (1 Cor 8:5-6, already noted above); **σοφια** and **γνωσις** in 1 Cor 1:18-3:23; 8:1-11 where God's wisdom and knowledge grounded in love is contrasted with its pagan counterpart;<sup>39</sup> **τελειος** in 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Phil 3:15; Eph 4:13; Col 1:28 refers not to a spiritual elite who have attained moral perfection but to those in Christ who are gradually being conformed to his glorified image. The employment of pagan religious terminology by the apostles demonstrates their communicative skill in proclaiming a distinctively christocentric message. What we have here, in the words of David Hill, are "Greek words with Hebrew meanings."<sup>40</sup>

### **(e) The Promise-Fulfillment Theme and the Continuity of the Gospel with Judaism**

The New Testament opens with the words, "Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). Christianity is presented as the fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham (Gen 12:3) and channeled via the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:5-16).

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<sup>37</sup>G. Finkenrath, "μυστηριον," *NIDNTT*, 3.501-2.

<sup>38</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 46-49.

<sup>39</sup>See the exposition of the relevant passages in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

<sup>40</sup>This is the title of his excellent work in this area: David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967).

The New Testament authors interpret the Old Testament Christologically. Promise and shadow (OT) have given way to fulfillment and substance (NT). The people of the new creation in Christ are the true seed and children of Abraham (Gal 3:6-9), the true Jews (Rom 2:28-29), the true circumcision (Phil 3:3) in whom the covenant promises given to the nation of Israel find at least their partial and inaugural fulfillment. This line of continuity between Christianity and Judaism eliminates trajectories with other religious traditions. There is not an evolutionary progression and expansion from an exclusivist (OT) to an inclusivist (NT) model, but the preservation of the single line of truth with its exclusivist, christocentric fulfillment and climax. The bud has become a flower (i.e., progressive revelation: "perfect, yet it floweth fuller every day, perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way") with organic continuity between the two. Yet the fundamental distinction of this flower from the alien weeds and plants around is never doubted.

We conclude that the New Testament provides no encouragement for the theory of Religious Pluralism and its inclusivistic 'theocentrism.' The Biblical evidence from both Testaments substantiates the traditional, exclusivist character of the Christian gospel. Theocentrism is never set in opposition to Christocentrism. There are two perspectives from which the New Testament authors view the unfolding events of redemption, the close-up and the wide-angle. The close-up perspective has the Lord and Son of God, Jesus Christ, on center stage illuminated by a full spotlight as he mediates redemption. The wide-angle perspective takes in the full backdrop to the Christ event as God the Father plans and directs his Son's ministry on behalf of mankind. There is perfect cooperation between the director and main actor in this real-life drama: what the Father plans and directs the Son fulfills and projects. In this carefully defined sense, then, the Biblical testimony is theocentric. All the various parts of the drama find their basis and unity from the wide-angle perspective. The planner, director, and definitive goal is God (ΘΕΟΣ), who is none other than the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## D. A Related Issue: What About the Unevangelized?

### (1) Evangelicals and the Fate of Those Who Never Hear

Evangelical scholarship has consistently maintained that the exclusivist claims of Jesus Christ and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament precludes the theory of Religious Pluralism, which places variant religious traditions including Christianity on a level of equality and equivalency. Texts such as Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 10:43; Rom 10:9-15; 1 Tim 2:5 delineate Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God and man, salvation based on faith in him and him alone. If the Biblical witness can be described as theocentric, then the carefully specified content of theos is none other than God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Biblical theology combines a theocentric Christology and a christocentric soteriology into an inseparable union.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing tendency among evangelicals to leave open the possibility that some people can be saved apart from the direct instrumentality of faith in Christ in this life. The logic is as follows. Due to cultural conditioning and/or because they lack the opportunity to hear the gospel, many people never really receive the chance to respond freely and consciously to the truth claims of Christ. God in his infinite mercy will take into consideration all of these external factors in his final gracious and just judgment of mankind.<sup>41</sup> Among evangelicals four broad views emerge with respect to the fate of the unevangelized:

(1) Only those who explicitly respond in faith to Jesus Christ in this life will be saved. The majority of mankind will be lost. Representatives are R. McQuilkin, H. Lindsell.

(2) Although only those who explicitly respond to Christ in this life will be saved, the majority of mankind will enter God's kingdom. In the latter days there will be a tremendous outpouring of the Spirit resulting in worldwide missions advance and acceptance of Christ. Representatives are postmillennialists such as C. Hodge, B. B. Warfield.

(3) Although it is possible for those who have never heard the gospel to be saved (by God's mercy and on the basis of Christ's atonement), probably few if any are actually saved

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<sup>41</sup>Several works in this area have recently been published: William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); John Sanders, *No Other Name! A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

this way. Representatives are M. Erickson, J. I. Packer, J. Stott.<sup>42</sup>

(4) We should embrace the possibility that God will respond in mercy and grace to those who have never heard the gospel in this life. Either he will judge such persons according to their response to the amount of light they have received and/or he will provide a final opportunity to respond to Christ either at the point of death or immediately after death. We should hope and even expect that many will be saved in this way, even if apart from conscious faith in Christ in this life. Representatives are C. S. Lewis, D. Bloesch, C. Kraft, C. Pinnock, J. Sanders.<sup>43</sup>

Before considering the major texts debated in this regard, we draw from a few comments from Kenneth Kantzer in his Preface to *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*.<sup>44</sup> (1) Condemnation is always based in Scripture on a person's sinfulness, not on whether or not he or she has heard the gospel. All people are sinners who deserve God's punishment. All have to a greater or lesser degree failed to live up to the light they have received. (2) We as finite human beings cannot decide fully what is fair or unfair for the righteous Judge of all the earth. Our views of fairness and unfairness are themselves tainted by our sinful nature. We should recall the example of Job when he spoke too quickly: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3b). (3) Only the things revealed to us should be the focus of our attention. The doctrinal finalities of the New Testament and the great commission are crystal clear.

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<sup>42</sup>This viewpoint is argued in James I. Packer, "'Good Pagans' and God's Kingdom," *Christianity Today* 30:1 (Jan. 1986): 22-25. John Stott has, however, in recent years come to embrace the theory of annihilationism (or conditional immortality), that is, at the judgment God will terminate the existence of unbelievers rather than cast them into eternal torment. See John R. W. Stott, "Judgment and Hell," in *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, eds. David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 312-29.

<sup>43</sup>Clark Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, eds. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); *idem*, "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions," *JETS* 33:3 (1990): 359-68; John E. Sanders, "Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?" *EvQ* 60 (1988): 241-59. Pinnock holds that the unevangelized are given a further opportunity to respond to Christ at death, while Sanders bases their salvation on their response to the amount of light received.

<sup>44</sup>Kenneth Kantzer, Preface to *Through No Fault of Their Own?* 13-14.

Let us concentrate on proclaiming those to all people rather than consuming large amounts of paper and ink on speculative theories about 'what if. . .' (Deut 29:29). (4) In the end we can be confident in God's fair and gracious treatment of all people. When the final verdict is announced no one will be able to lay the charge of unjust or unfair to God's account. As Abraham cried out, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25).

## **(2) A Brief Look at Some Problem Texts**

The mysterious figures of Melchizedek, Job and Jethro are sometimes cited as representatives of 'noble pagans' upon whom God reveals himself apart from the ordinary channels of special revelation. On the basis of Christ's atoning work God extends his salvific mercy to such people who respond to the limited amount of light they receive in their respective cultural and geographic conditions. Texts often cited in support of this theory, one that leaves the window of opportunity open to those who never actually receive Jesus Christ as Savior in this life are Mt 27:52-53; Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:14-16; 1 Cor 15:29; 1 Pet 3:19-20a. We now take a brief look at these verses.

The enigmatic Mt 27:52-53 reports on the resurrection of "many holy people" who then entered Jerusalem and made visible appearances. This event seems in its context to be symbolic of the vindication of the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work and to anticipate his own resurrection. The identification of these people as "holy ones who had fallen asleep" (**ΤΩΝ ΚΕΚΟΙΜΗΜΕΝΩΝ ΑΓΙΩΝ**) points either to disciples of Jesus who had already died or perhaps more likely to believing Israelites who in their day looked forward to Messiah's coming and were raised as a special preview of the greater resurrection day to come. This passage really says nothing at all about the destiny of those who are outside the focus of God's special revelation.

Peter, led to Caesarea to speak to the centurion Cornelius and his household, begins his speech with these words: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). Primarily Peter is referring to the vision he had received earlier in the week of the sheet from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals (9:9-16). God had revealed to the orthodox Jewish Peter that in Jesus Christ the ritual and racial distinctions between Jew and Gentile were now abrogated. Both could be cleansed and justified on the basis of faith alone. However, does the expression "men who fear him and do what is right" not refer to noble pagans outside the

focus of special revelation whom God nevertheless accepts on the basis of their response to the limited revelation they have received? If isolated from its immediate context, perhaps such an extrapolation could be made. But here it can only mean that God reads the hearts of those who are truly seeking him, like Cornelius or other god-fearers throughout the Acts account, and brings to them a preacher of the gospel so that they can respond consciously and volitionally to his special revelation in Jesus Christ. Acts 10:34-35 is not an isolated statement but an integral part of the Peter-Cornelius exchange.

At Corinth some believers were being baptized in place of those who had already died (1 Cor 15:29). The reference is obscure, since Paul neither condemns nor condones the practice. Paul simply uses the practice to prove the illogic of denying a future resurrection (which denial sprang from an unbiblical, Greek view of the body) while at the same time undergoing baptism vicariously for the dead (ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν) in order to apparently secure their place in God's future kingdom. Whether or not this is a 'window of opportunity' text depends on who those are in whose place some are now being baptized. Were they new believers who had not yet received baptism when they died? Or non-Christian relatives of believers who had died before they had an opportunity to hear the gospel? We simply don't know. Gordon Fee's comments are appropriate: "It is difficult to imagine any circumstances under which Paul would think it permissible for living Christians to be baptized for the sake of unbelievers in general. Such a view, adopted in part by Mormons, lies totally outside the NT understanding both of salvation and of baptism."<sup>45</sup> In his first Epistle, Peter writes that Christ, probably between his death and resurrection, "went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built" (1 Pet 3:19-20a). A number of issues are unclear — when, to whom, where and what did Christ proclaim — and have given rise to a variety of interpretations. Contextually this event is related to the vindication of Christ's redemptive death, ultimately sealed by his resurrection and exaltation. The verb is κηρυσσω, to announce or proclaim (only here in Peter), not ευφραγγελιζω, to

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<sup>45</sup>Fee, *First Corinthians*, 767.

preach the good news (cf., 1 Pet 1:12, 25; 4:6, 17). Further, the term "spirits" (**ΠΝΕΥΜΑΣΙΝ**), when used alone and without qualification, never refers in the Bible to human beings but only to angelic beings. In our view, the best interpretation is that which sees Christ as descending to the prison where fallen angels are incarcerated (perhaps those who abandoned their natural state and intermarried with women in Noah's day; cf., Gen 6:1-4; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6-7) and announcing his victory over all evil powers and the certainty of judgment to come (cf., Col 2:13-15).<sup>46</sup> There is no support in the language here for a second chance offer of salvation to those who have already died.

In the Epistle to the Romans, we have Paul's most systematic and carefully organized doctrinal presentation. It is clear that 1:18-3:20 is a literary unit (3:21 once again takes up the theme of God's righteousness [**ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ ΘΕΟΥ**], introduced in 1:17). In these initial chapters Paul is determined to prove the universal guilt of sinful people before a holy God, and thus their absolute need for God's imputed righteousness (which is then set forth in 3:21-4:25). 1:18-32 is primarily, but not exclusively (Israel also engaged in idolatry), an indictment of the Gentile world. In 2:1-3:8 Paul indicts (primarily but not exclusively) the Jewish people: God's judgment is impartial — the hypocritical Jew as well as the immoral Gentile are to be judged according to their works (2:1-11); knowledge of the Mosaic Law does not exempt the Jew from God's judgment, nor does not possessing the Law exempt the Gentile (2:12-16); the typical Jew is rebuked for his contradictory condition — while boasting in the Law, he is an abrogator of it (2:17-24); neither can circumcision be a ground of confidence — it brings with it the demand for perfect obedience (2:25-29); yet Israel's salvation historical primacy is not thereby rejected (3:1-8). All of this leads to the conclusion in 3:9-20: all people, Jew and Gentile, are under sin's power and condemnation and thus stand in desperate need of God's righteousness.

Such is the context of Romans 2:14-15, which at first reading seems to leave a window of opportunity for the Gentile who has been the recipient of only natural revelation. Do these verses indicate that God will take into account the pagan's response to the light he has received by means of his conscience and deliver an acquittal on the day of judgment? Much depends on one's estimation of Paul's ability to sustain a coherent argument. For if this is

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<sup>46</sup>E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 197-201, 314-62.

Paul's point in 2:14-15, he has severely weakened his case for the guilt of all mankind, the conclusion in 3:9-20 to which he seems to be building. H. Räisänen is one who thinks that Paul flatly contradicts himself in 2:14-15, 26-27 when he asserts that Gentiles do actually keep the law which is written on their conscience, while at the same time trying to prove the universal guilt of all mankind, Jew and Gentile.<sup>47</sup> To the present writer, it would seem reasonable to give Paul the benefit of the doubt and to interpret 2:14-15 in such a way that it contributes to rather than subtracts from the intended conclusion of 3:9-20. One approach is that of C. E. B. Cranfield who sees Paul anticipating the later argument of Chapters 5-8 and thus setting forth works as the evidence or fruit of genuine faith and in that sense the basis of eschatological judgment. Thus 2:7, 10, 13-15, 25-29 refer to Gentile Christians.<sup>48</sup> In our view, a preferable interpretation is that which sees Paul as setting forth in Romans 2 a hypothetical, yet unrealizable condition of salvation by works. The demand for absolute and perfect obedience to the Law of God and the inability of people to fulfill it are two presuppositions that underlie the argument of Romans 2. The supporting arguments of D. Moo and S. Westerholm should be consulted.<sup>49</sup> In Rom 2:14-15, Paul is explaining and confirming the culpability of the Gentile in 2:12a (just as 2:13 explains and confirms the culpability of the Jew in 2:12b, thus a chiasmic arrangement): the accusatory work of their conscience shows the Gentiles that they fail to measure up even to the standards of the Law that they possess internally, and thus perish like the more explicitly disobedient Jews. 2:16 is a fitting summary: God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ as Paul's gospel teaches. This anticipates the fuller conclusion of 3:9-20: all men stand equally guilty before a holy God; only the righteousness of faith can deliver from condemnation.

In summary, none of the above texts individually or cumulatively provide a clear window of opportunity for the unbeliever, apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ, to receive

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<sup>47</sup>Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 101-9. See also E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 123-35.

<sup>48</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 1:136-76.

<sup>49</sup>Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8* (WEC; Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 139-51; Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 155-64.

God's approbation at the last judgment. Whether the logical appeals and arguments as to the 'unfairness' of condemning those who never hear deserve serious consideration is another matter. Our point is simply that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to appeal to Biblical teaching to establish the theory that God will look with mercy and favor on those who, because of cultural conditioning or lack of opportunity, never receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord in this life. In closing, we borrow an illustration from Robertson McQuilkin. If many people find themselves trapped on a small, burning island with only one clearly marked and specified bridge of escape they would do well to move with haste toward that which they know will lead to safety. They further must exhort others to follow without hesitation and delay before the fire consumes them. There might be some other unmarked or obscure paths to safety (we cannot categorically rule them out), but to unduly speculate under such circumstances would be fatal for themselves and for others. God has revealed the one true, trusted and sure way of deliverance, the redemptive death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Let us leave the secret things to him and use all the resources and energy at our disposal in leading others to the bridge that we know.

## **A Response to: A Biblical Perspective on Religious Pluralism**

by  
Tim  
Boyle<sup>50</sup>

First of all, I would like to congratulate Don Howell on a very fine, scholarly paper. Having been out of seminary for quite some time now, I found myself having to brush up on my theological vocabulary somewhat, but as a whole, I found the paper quite stimulating and thought provoking. I personally would have preferred him putting more emphasis on the specifics of how what he says concerning this issue applies to our mission activity here in Japan, but as that was not his stated purpose in this paper, I certainly can't fault him for that. His paper is an overview of and biblical response to the issue of religious pluralism, which has been developed basically by western thinkers trying to come to terms with the growing cultural pluralism in which most western societies find themselves. Thus, by definition, this paper deals in more general, theological terms. Hopefully, the other perspectives to be presented later on in this conference will deal more specifically with the practical implications this issue has for missionaries serving in Japan.

In his paper, Don did, however, briefly mention a couple of implications of how this biblical study can or should apply to missionary work in Japan, and I would like to expand on those a bit. Under the section C (2), "Is the New Testament More Inclusivistic?", he refers to two sections in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians concerning food offerings to idols and how the Christian should deal with that. In I Cor. 8, Paul teaches that since "an idol has no real existence," a Christian is under no moral compulsion to refrain from eating meat that has been offered to idols and then sold in the market. Nevertheless, he should still consider how others perceive this and in love refrain from becoming a stumbling block to them.

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Later on, in I Cor. 10:14-22, Paul strongly discourages his readers from participating in "the worship of idols," because he doesn't want them "to be partners with demons." Don refers to these two Scriptures by contrasting "incidental contact with the pagan world, which is unavoidable," with "conscious participation in pagan worship." And then he asks a rhetorical question: "Should not these same two principles guide Christians in Japan in terms of their attendance and participation in Buddhist funerals?"

This issue is of crucial importance to us as Christian missionaries working in Japan and even more so to the Japanese Christians with whom we work. And thus, I wish Don would have elaborated a bit more on that. I realize, of course, that this type of very practical issue was not the focus of his paper. But as a responder, I want to encourage further discussion of this subject in the discussion period to follow.

I gather from the context of Don's rhetorical question that he feels that Christians should not attend Buddhist funerals, since he would seem to define that as being "conscious participation in pagan worship."<sup>51</sup> Whether Paul would have made any distinction between eating pagan sacrifices in a pagan temple (which he clearly connects with idol worship and therefore being "partners with demons") and expressing solidarity with those grieving at a pagan funeral is important for us to think about.

It is my contention that he would have, based on other principles he expounds in his writings. Clearly, the two principles that Don mentions are ones that should be taken into consideration when prayerfully trying to decide what to do in specific situations. But other principles must also be kept in mind, the overriding one of which is that all that we say and do should help others to respond positively to the gospel of Jesus Christ and should never become a tool by which Satan can further drive persons away from God and bind them to himself.

This is why Paul would say, "Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall." (I Cor. 8:13) And then in the following chapter, he fleshes this out even more and concludes with "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel..."

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<sup>51</sup>In the discussion after Don's paper he said that he was simply raising the question and not meaning to imply that he would answer the question negatively.

That is Paul's supreme principle. He is concerned with communicating the gospel to those outside of Christ, and thus perception is paramount. The message that is communicated in any interaction we have with other people is not the meaning we have in our minds, but it is the perception they receive, after it is filtered through their world view and life experiences. The meaning of a message is determined by the receptor and not the sender.

Does this mean that Paul would "become a Buddhist in order to win the Buddhists?" Well, that depends on how one defines it. Certainly, he would do nothing that would likely be perceived as breaking the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me." And that's the key. When it comes to communicating a message, perception is everything. How is my participation or non-participation in any pagan ritual perceived by those to whom I'm trying to communicate the gospel? That is, of course, often difficult to gauge, but it should be something we always ask ourselves when considering whether or not to be present at something such as a Buddhist funeral.

Likewise, I am convinced we must do a better job of helping our Japanese brothers and sisters work out an appropriate response to this very practical aspect of religious pluralism here in Japan. Instead of working out strategies that attempt to make positive use of the inevitable interface between Buddhist (or other) understandings and the Christian understanding, Japanese Christians are often left to flounder with either little guidance at all or black and white blanket rules in a world of gray.

Let's look at a couple of specific examples to clarify the issue. One elder son, who had become an active Christian, was faced with a dilemma when his Buddhist parents died. It was his absolute duty, from the Buddhist perspective, to maintain a Buddhist altar in his home and allow regular Buddhist rituals to be performed. At first, he strongly resisted these expectations being forced upon him, but in the end, he felt that for the sake of maintaining family ties, he had to capitulate. He felt utterly defeated in his faith, and it is very obvious that no victory for the gospel was won that day.

The opposite tactic was taken by a young Christian who insisted on absolute non-participation in anything related to his grandmother's funeral or other Buddhist rites. When I was hospitalized a few years ago in the same room with a relative of this young man, I listened to him complain about the incomprehensibility of a faith that would require

its adherents to be so insulting and ungrateful. That certainly wasn't the message the young Christian wanted to communicate, but that is what his non-Christian relatives perceived. And again, the gospel had lost out — at least temporarily if not permanently. Perhaps God was later able to use this young man's uncompromising stand against any association with the false gods of Buddhism to later communicate the intended message and draw people to Himself, the only true God. I don't know. But I rather doubt that would be very likely.

To go into any detail about various strategies for dealing with this aspect of religious pluralism as it impinges on Christian mission in Japan would not only go well beyond my mandate as a responder but also my time limit. And while I have ideas about how such situations could be utilized to communicate the intended message, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ, quite frankly, I don't have absolute confidence that they would really work. I am groping around in the dark with respect to this, as I am sure many of you are as well. But I am convinced that this is a subject of vital importance to the mission of Christ in Japan, and I would be very interested in knowing how others deal with it.

Returning to Don's paper, one other related point is found under the section B (2) (e), "the meaning of *kurios* in the New Testament Epistles," where Don refers to how Paul and other New Testament writers infused new meanings into pagan Greek terms in order to communicate God's truth. Then he says, "This is clearly the approach of the modern missionary to Japan who takes the current and available linguistic vehicle — *kami*, *tsumi*, *megumi* — and pours into it new semantic content, carefully redefining and explaining his terms as he expounds the gospel."

That is, of course, the ideal. But I'm afraid both missionaries and Japanese Christians often forget that we glibly talk past the typical non-Christian, not scratching where he itches. And again I stress the point: No matter how correct our theology is, unless we can communicate it incarnationally — that is, within the framework of understanding of our hearers, the most relevant message in the world can be perceived as utterly irrelevant. Thus, we need to constantly keep in mind this task.

For instance, when it comes to the word *kami* for "God", we have a difficulty due to the limitations of the Japanese language. One can't make a lower case or capital *kanji*, and one can't simply add the equivalent of an "s" to make it plural. And with no articles equivalent to "a" or "the", *kami* is linguistically very vague by itself. Of course, *theos* in Greek was a word that originally referred to the Greek pantheon of gods and which was hijacked by the Christians to give it its biblical meaning. To a certain extent, that is happening with *kami* as well. While I can't document it, I have heard it said that Shinto priests have complained that the Christians are defiling their term in the minds of many Japanese, who now tend to think of *kami* in some sort of cosmic terms. But we still have a long way to go, and so we need to keep "pouring in that new semantic content, carefully redefining and explaining our terms as we expound the gospel."

One final comment on the final section of Don's paper, entitled, "What About the Unevangelized?" I really appreciated the emphasis Don gave to the fact that we can't make an air-tight case for the particular way God will handle those who haven't heard and that whatever way He does, it will be fair and just. Thus, we should get on with the Great Commission, which is crystal clear, and do our best to bring the gospel to all, leaving the results to God.

I have grave difficulties with the arguments he describes that are put forward by the proponents of religious pluralism, but I feel that there is room for a healthy theological pluralism based on the essentials of the Christian faith. So, I close with a quote from John Wesley, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; and in all things, charity."

## Christian Theologians on Religious Plurality

by  
Jan  
Van Bragt<sup>52</sup>

### By Way of Introduction

It could be maintained that, except maybe for the pre-Constantine Church Fathers, Christian theology has not directly or seriously tackled our present question, because the said plurality was not recognized. This may awaken us to the newness of our problematics and the theological creativity demanded from us.

Our overview cannot but start with a (short) evocation of the "theology of religions" present in the Bible.

Rather than a balanced historical overview, I shall try, in the light of our present problematics, to pick up a few relevant highlights, in the hope that from these there will appear a few parameters of our question and some dead ends to be avoided.

While the post-Constantine tradition can roughly be characterized as "exclusivistic" (Only Christianity is valid religion), the present theological debate is essentially between the *pluralists* who, in principle, put Christianity on the same line as the other religions (the "reasonable," plausible standpoint) and the *inclusivists* who maintain the uniqueness of Christ and the special vocation of Christianity (the standpoint of faith), while attributing some positive value to other religions.

### A Short Look at the Bible

The dominant tonality of the Bible (especially the O.T.) appears to be particularistic or ethnocentric (its central theme being the action of God toward his chosen and covenanted people) and exclusivistic (reducing the religious practices of the "nations" to idolatry).

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However, this particularist-exclusivist cloth is interwoven with more "universalist" strands, especially in the Wisdom Literature: awareness of the only God working in all parts of his creation, the "covenant with Noah," the meaning of election as a task toward the nations, pagan saints, an eschatological vision of all nations joining Israel in the worship of Yahweh.

### **Remarks**

- The balance is clearly on the exclusivist side — which may be the basic cause of the exclusivist attitude of most of the Christian tradition.
- We do not find in the Bible a synthesis of the two tendencies into one structured vision.
- What about the New Testament? Did the early Christians simply continue the Jewish tradition in this or did the change in perspective from the sole Jewish people to all peoples give rise to a genuinely new way of thinking about the nations and about the relationship between themselves and the nations? How did the apostles see their message as "Good News" for the Gentiles? What are the implications of St. Paul's "In Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Greek?" And is it necessary for us to share the negative view of the morality and happiness of the gentiles, which S. Paul shares with the Jewish tradition?

### **The Early Church Fathers**

Can we speak of these pre-Constantine Church Fathers as the only Christians before our time with a real awareness of the plurality of religions?

These Church Fathers appear to provide a basis for an inclusivist view of Christianity. They saw God at work in the whole of human history. "There is only one God, who from beginning to end and by various economies comes to the rescue of humankind." (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* III, 12-13). They tended to regard the totality of God's activity in humanity as the *Christian Dispensation*: "Christ is the firstborn of God and the divine Word in whom every race of man have shared; and those who lived according to the Logos are Christians..." (Justinus martyr, *Apologia*, I:46) Several of them saw all human wisdom (including "pagan wisdom") as inspired by God, and Clemens of Alexandria taught that "philosophy was given to the Greeks as their Testament and as a stepping-stone leading towards the philosophy of Christ" (*Stromata* V). On the other hand, however, they appear to make a definite distinction between pagan culture and wisdom (philosophy) and the religious practices of their contemporaries, which they saw as idolatry and "work of demons."

In how far were they influenced therein by the low quality and oppressivity of the Greco-Roman polytheism? Would they have considered Buddhism as idolatry or as wisdom coming from God? In how far has the Christian view of other religions been traditionally "bedeviled" by the fact that Christianity did not really meet a non-monotheist religion of the quality of Buddhism till very recently?

### **Western Christendom in the Middle Ages**

I like to call medieval Christianity a "porcupine," meaning that it was a beautifully rounded-off world, identified with a cultural-political community and encompassing all realms of human endeavor within itself and, at the same time, a world turned in on itself because threatened from the outside.

"[Western Christendom] was hemmed in by the encircling power and superior culture of Islam and confined to the Western corner of the vast Euro-Asian continent.... As a counter aggression the Church developed a crusading ethos that became a fundamental feature of its tradition."<sup>53</sup>

"During the age of the Crusades the other was Jew or Muslim; essentially infidels who refused to believe, and even revolted against, the manifest truth of the Gospel. With the Age of Discovery...Christianity came face to face with people who had never known anything of Christ. The other was simply non-Christian instead of anti-Christian."<sup>54</sup>

"When Christianity was made the established religion of the Roman Empire, however, the absence of rival religions made Christianity singularly oriented to its 'inner meaning',...misguided by the self-authenticating circularity common to [isolated] religious traditions."<sup>55</sup>

We might possibly conclude that the perception of the other religions by the medieval Christians was so warped by ignorance and fear that their theological judgment constructed thereon can scarcely be considered to be instructive, let alone valid.

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<sup>53</sup>J. V. Taylor, in J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*. (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 214.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Barnes, "Looking for the wisdom of the East," *The Month* (September/October 1992): 354.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, *The Quest for Human Unity — A Religious History*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 8, 4.

Still, this does not mean that medieval theology would not be important for our purposes. I believe medieval theology is important for us, not for their direct answers to our questions, but for the "width" of their theological vision, which lives on in the theology of the Orthodox Church but much of which was lost in modern Western Christianity:

- Medieval theology was Christocentric, but in the framework of the Trinity and with a greater regard for the working of the Holy Spirit.
- Medieval theology takes the doctrine of Creation seriously. Therein lies the original "natural" link of **all** human beings with God, which cannot be taken away without the human being falling into nothingness. This "link" is often discussed under the title of "imago Dei." S.Thomas Aquinas writes, for instance: "God's image in the human being can be considered in three ways. One is from the viewpoint of the human being having the natural capacity of knowing and loving God; and this capacity consists in the nature itself of the mind, which is common to all humans." (S. Th., Ia, qu.93, art.4) The starting point of theology is then "man and God."
- Medieval theology still carries the traces of an anthropology found in several of the Church Fathers whereby the human being consists of body, soul (directed to and limited to the body and the world), and spirit (directly directed to God).
- This anthropology (so different from the modern one, most clearly formulated by Kant) is strongly at work in the medieval mystics. Thus, Jan van Ruusbroec, for instance, writes the following: "...the spirit possesses God essentially in its bare nature; and God possesses the spirit, for it lives in God and God in it.... In its creatureliness, it [the spirit] ceaselessly receives the imprint of its eternal image.... This essential unity of our spirit with God does not subsist in itself but remains in God, flows forth from God, depends upon God, and turns back to God as to its eternal cause."<sup>56</sup>
- Religious plurality as such did not become an object of reflection in the Middle Ages, but it may be important to notice that these theologians stressed the positive evaluation of distinction-plurality in God's creation, which is basic for the Judaeo-Christian world view —

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<sup>56</sup>John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 117-118. In his last work, *Vanden XII Beghinen*, Ruusbroec writes: "From the beginning of the world all humans are divided in two factions: the good and the bad. The good are just and the glory of God lives in them.... Those who live or have lived in this way from the beginning of the world are disciples of Christ and are blessed with Him in eternity."

this in contradistinction with the Indian worldview, which sees all multiplicity as a defect and not ultimately real, and wherein it is held that a God who is one cannot be the cause of a multiple world, and the Buddhist (especially Mahayana) philosophy which rejects all multiplicity and distinction as illusion and cause of suffering. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, poses the question, "Does the plurality-distinction of things have its origin in God?" and in his answer has the following passage:

For God put things into being in order to communicate his goodness to the creatures, and so that his goodness would be represented by them. And since his goodness could not be sufficiently represented by any one creature, He produces many and diverse creatures, so that, what is lacking in the one for the representation of his divine goodness would be supplemented by the other. For the goodness, which is in God in a simple and uniform fashion, is in the creatures in a multiple and distinct way. Thus the whole universe participates in and represents the divine goodness more perfectly than whatever single creature. (S.Th., Ia, qu.47, a.1)

The question for us is whether we can apply this vision to the plurality of religions.

Another important question might be in how far these medieval views, which offer leeway for a recognition of God's working in other religions, can go together with the fundamental tenets of the Reformation, inspired as they are by the desire to return to the purity of God's historical word, which is to be found nowhere but in the Bible -- with the concomitant insistence on the discontinuity of that divine Word with the religiosity and natural (creational) strivings of the human being. Still, Paul Knitter, for instance can write: "Calvin, in basic agreement with Luther, spoke of a 'sense of God' instilled into human nature, so that 'the knowledge of God and of oneself is connected by a natural bond'."<sup>57</sup>

### **Modern Times: The Self-image of the Conqueror"**

For the ideas about other religions in this period, the following points may be of great importance:

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<sup>57</sup>Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 98.

- Through the voyages of discovery and colonial expansion Christendom, after a thousand years of isolation, came face to face with other civilizations and religions, with peoples who up to then had no tangible relationship with Christ. The reactions of the theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries to these new phenomena have probably not been sufficiently studied as yet. Did they see the religiosity of these peoples simply as an extension and exemplification of the notion of paganism, carried along from Roman days, or did some of them recognize "other religions" as in some sense comparable with, and therefore rivals of, Christianity?

- At this time the "extra ecclesiam nulla salus," originally meant for people who had rejected the Church ("heretics") came to be uncritically extrapolated and applied also to people who happened not to be within the Church. The universal possibility of salvation was then "safeguarded" by widening the concept of "belonging to the Church" — something which was maybe easier to do than stretching the requirement of faith.

- In the Modern Period, precisely in the midst of its strongest self-affirmation and expansion, the Christian tradition suffered inner earthquakes of a magnitude probably not experienced by any of the other great traditions: the humanism of the Renaissance (a first relativization), the rift of the Reformation, the rationalist ethos of the Enlightenment, and the challenge of the sciences. We must look for these tremors in the philosophers of the period who have registered them with more sensitivity than the theologians (although the distinction between the two was not so clear yet as it is today).

- As to the Reformation and Contra-reformation, the following two points may be most relevant for us here:

1. While Protestantism can be said to share many of its roots with modernity and, at least in several of its representatives, showed an openness to its trends, Catholicism, in reaction, turned in on itself from this moment on, with a marked nostalgia for the Middle Ages. Significant new developments in theology must therefore be sought in Protestant authors rather than in Catholic ones.
2. The sterile disputes and bloody wars between the two factions gradually estranged from Christianity the best minds and noblest feelings of the Western Intelligentsia, who saw themselves obliged to work for the betterment of humanity beyond, and often in opposition to, Christianity.

- Concerning the Enlightenment movement (which was partly triggered by that opposition within Christianity) it has been written that "it denotes the most revolutionary of all movements which the Occident has undergone in the course of its history;"<sup>58</sup> and that "the ideas and values of the Enlightenment have had a prominent place in European thought down to the present day."<sup>59</sup> For one thing, the trend toward "universalization" of religion, traceable in several "pluralistic" theologians, clearly harks back to the Enlightenment.

The English theologians of the 17th C. invented the idea of "religion" and of "the religions." They worked with the idea of a "natural, rational religion" common to all people: a "pure" religion going back to the beginning of history, but which became deformed and multiform in the course of the human history of decay (the idea of progress took root only in the later 18th C.). Religion for them was primarily propositional doctrine. In their love affair with the universally rational, they came face to face with the "scandal of the particularity" of the revealed religion. "Combined with a growing awareness of the global insignificance of Christianity (in numerical terms) was an ever increasing gulf between the universal religion of reason and the exclusive religion of revelation."<sup>60</sup> "For all the deists, and for many rationalistic divines as well, the fundamental theological question of the age of reason was how revealed religion was related to natural religion;"<sup>61</sup> and many concluded that revealed religion in its uncorrupted state (which contemporary Christianity evidently was not) was identical with natural religion.

As for individual authors of the Modern Period, the following, a.o., merit our attention:

*Nicholas of Cusa* (1401-1464), in his irenic work, *De Pace Fidei* (On the Peace of Faith), while maintaining the superiority of Christianity over other religions, tried to reconcile their differences in a rational way. He speaks of a man to whom it was revealed "that it would be possible, with a few wise men, well versed in the practices of the different religions, to find a happy concordance among all these diversities, and through this to

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<sup>58</sup>Karl Rahner ed., *The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 427-428.

<sup>59</sup>Mircea Eliade ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 5. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 110.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 133. The book leads us to the cradle of our contemporary problematics.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 164.

inaugurate eternal peace among the religions." It is clear, however, that he knew only the "Abrahamic religions," although he makes an Indian, a Tartar, etc. speak up. In other works, he strongly stressed the finite mind's incapability of comprehending the infinite God, and insisted that there is a *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) in reality, especially in the infinite God. He thus placed the whole discussion of religious plurality within the wider context of epistemology. He prays God to show his face, so that "all shall know that there is but one religion in the diversity of rites," and thus poses the (Platonic) idea of true "religion" of which all existing belief systems (including Christianity) are but shadowy reflections.

*Gotfried W. Leibniz* (1646-1716) was indefatigable in his efforts to bring together Christians of all sects by presenting a body of doctrine containing everything essential for Christian faith, on which all could agree. He was also one of the first European intellectuals ready to recognize high wisdom in other cultures. He showed a keen interest in the data, sent to Europe by the Jesuit missionaries, on Confucianism, from which he expected a great contribution toward a "natural ethics."

Of the Enlightenment movement in the narrow sense, represented, for example, by John Locke in England and the Encyclopedists in France, rather than the individual authors and theses, its general ethos may be important for us. This has been characterized as follows: "It [the Enlightenment movement] promoted...toleration and critical reason as opposed to authority and tradition in matters of politics and religion."<sup>62</sup> These thinkers therefore rejected all "positive" (non-rational, historical) elements of religion. Most of them were not atheists but, in their endeavors to rationalize religion, opted for a rational, ethical theism or deism. Of Voltaire, e.g., it is written: "His writings bear witness to a lifelong struggle to achieve a rational piety that might sustain a person of moral disposition in a world full of monstrous human crimes and terrible human suffering."<sup>63</sup>

*Immanuel Kant* (1724-1804) most clearly systematized this religious rationalism, which considers a universal rational faith beyond the different religions as the measure and criterion of all elements in the religions. He did not want anything to do with Christian institutions but

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<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

believed that the germ of pure rational faith is contained in Christianity.

While in France the Enlightenment movement developed more and more into an atheistic positivism, in Germany it produced a humanist idealism by way of the Romantic movement and the discovery of human historicity.

*Gotthold E. Lessing* (1729-1781)<sup>64</sup> was, in a sense, a pure Enlightenment thinker. Promoter of a rational or "natural" religion, he considered all positive elements of the religions as illusion, from which humanity was now called to free itself, and believed that humankind was on the point of transcending the positive Christian religion. He maintained, however, that in the past the positive religions had a positive role in the "education of humanity." In the same historical view, he held that the truly human does not lie in the possession of a ready truth but in the infinite striving for truth in the course of history." Of special interest is his parable of "the three rings" in *Nathan der Weise*.

In *J. W. Goethe* (1749-1832) the "detachment" from Christianity reaches a peak. He considers himself to be a "decided non-Christian," and opts for a "religiously polyphonic humanity." He recognizes in Christianity one of the most remarkable phenomena of world history, but its exclusivity, its will to impose itself on everybody as the only truth makes him experience it as "insufferable" for anyone who wants to safeguard the whole range and freedom of human experience.

*J. G. Herder* (1744-1803) reacts against the narrow rationalism of the Enlightenment. He is enthusiastic about everything "positive" and historical. According to him, "in the relationship of abstraction and history, the former is always the later-born, lacks its own original life, and has but little capacity to influence people."<sup>65</sup>

*G. W. Hegel* (1770-1831) endeavors to reconcile reason and history (with its "positive," non-rational elements) by presenting truth as coming to itself in history. All his life he was an avid student of the new findings about the other religions, and ordered the different religions with Christianity at the top as their truth (Absolute Religion). Thereby, however, the truth of Christianity becomes something distinct from and lying beyond the representations of the Christian doctrines. Thus, for example, the truth of the incarnation is the immediate unity of the divine and the human, while the tie-up with an historical individual is considered to be mythical objectification.

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<sup>64</sup>For Lessing and the following authors, cf. Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie*, Vol. IV. (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1952).

<sup>65</sup>E. Hirsch, 231.

The *German Romanticists*, in general, react against the "Greek rationalism" of the Enlightenment and look for their ideal of the human to the Middle Ages or to India. In fact, however, their interpretation of Christianity builds on the freedom from the Christian tradition introduced by the Enlightenment. A representative figure is the poet, *Novalis* (1772-1801 — a Catholic soloist in a Protestant chorus!). He sees Christianity as "the religion that is open to the truth of all religion" (an idea promoted today by John Cobb), and the Christian dogmas as "at the same time revealed by God and product of human poetic imagination (*Menschengedicht*)."

All these influences can be traced in the man who clearly appears as a Protestant theologian by the fact that he is at the same time a preacher, *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (1768-1834). He reacted strongly against the rationalists, who tended to reduce religion to the propositional and the moral. He saw the essence of religion in an inner feeling (the "sense and taste for the infinite" or, later, "the consciousness of absolute dependence"). He also rejects the idea of a unitary, natural, purely rational religion as a powerless abstraction. All real religions are positive and each embodies in its particular way the essence of the "eternal and infinite religion." Religions are therefore essentially plural. "As nothing is more irreligious than to demand uniformity in humanity as such, so too there is nothing more un-Christian than to seek uniformity in religion."<sup>66</sup> He sees Christianity as the most perfect and most highly developed form of religion.

One could say however, that Schleiermacher stayed within the paradigm of the Enlightenment with his idea of a common essence of all religion and by "enshrining the centrality of 'religion' in accounts of what Christianity was supposed to be about."<sup>67</sup>

### **The Contemporary Period**

N.B.: In accordance with most treatments of the question, I skip about hundred years, practically the whole 19th C., that period of great (especially Protestant) missionary expansion. Would it really be true that no significant theological developments can be found

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<sup>66</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Reden über die Religion*, Rede 5.

<sup>67</sup>Peter Harrison, *op. cit.*, 173.

in this period?

I can only submit that the *Zeitgeist* of that whole period, wherein Western civilization, thanks to its technological superiority, conquered the world, made it nearly impossible for Christians (and very difficult for the others) to see Christianity, this inspiration and crown of the "higher civilization," in any way together with the other religions, and to evaluate the others positively.

Before coming to the participants in the present debate, we must pay attention to three "giants" who have set the stage for much of this debate.

*Ernst Troeltsch* (1865-1923) still shows most of the characteristics of the liberal Protestant theology since Schleiermacher and shows his Enlightenment heritage in his problematics: "absoluteness" and "superiority" of Christianity. His insistence that Christianity should be open to what is happening in history and the world brought him face to face with the new element of his age, which developed in the 19th C.: historical consciousness, the awareness that "everything humans are and produce is limited by their historical [and cultural] context"<sup>68</sup> and thus relative. Historical humans (and religions), thus, have no access to universal absolute truth. Troeltsch struggled all his life to reconcile this awareness with his conviction of the truth of Christianity and, as a result, reluctantly became the first "Christian relativist." To the idea already found in Schleiermacher, "Although the Absolute is present to and manifest in all of history, no historical manifestation of the Absolute can be absolute! That would contradict the nature of the Absolute (which is always more than the finite)," was now added: it would also contradict "the nature of the historical (which is always limited and changing)."<sup>69</sup> In his earlier works, Troeltsch, in line with his liberal predecessors, still defended the superiority of Christianity over all other religions. "Thus Christianity must be understood not only as the culmination point but also the convergence point of all the developmental tendencies that can be discerned in religion."<sup>70</sup> But in his last days he drew the conclusion that one could not speak of the superiority of

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<sup>68</sup>Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 24.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>70</sup>E. Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*. (Richmond: John Knox, 1971), 114.

any religion over others, since there is no universal norm of comparison.

For us, this also raises the question: What good is dialogue, if it cannot be a search for a common truth?

*Karl Barth* (1886-1969) and Karl Rahner are "antipodes" in the sense that Barth, as the founder of Protestant Neo-orthodoxy, represents (and possibly overdraws) the pure principles of the Reformation, and Rahner embodies fully the tendencies of the Roman-Catholic theological tradition. Furthermore, the two theologians found themselves in opposite swings of the theological pendulum: Barth at the moment of a necessary reaffirmation of the Christian identity over against an excessive openness to the world, to the point of being absorbed by it; Rahner in the movement of a necessary opening up of a Catholicism that for centuries had stuck to its medieval identity by closing itself off from the world.

Both theologies have this in common, however, that they are rooted existentially in the problems of the modern Western world (secularization, atheism, etc.) and the theological currents of their period, and come to the problem of the other religions only in a secondary and derivative way. When it comes to the evaluation of the other religions, Barth's general theology leads him to take a stand on the negative pole, while Rahner is led by his theological principles to come down on a middle ground in this question. It is a moot question which of the two will contribute most to the solution of our theological question.

Barth, whose *Römerbrief* (1919) was thrown as "a bombshell in the playground of the (Enlightenment-inspired, liberal) theologians," "stands as a prophetic voice..., calling the Christian Church back to the Bible and to its foundation in Jesus Christ,"<sup>71</sup> from its meanderings in the fields of the natural, the rational, the human, whereby God and his Word had been subsumed under prior generic concepts and ideologies, and the Christ image had become "more the product of modern bourgeois liberal idealism and Kantian philosophy than of sound New Testament scholarship."<sup>72</sup>

He championed the "infinite qualitative difference between God and the human" and God's "no" to the sin and pride present in all human endeavors, especially the religions (including Christianity). He thereby rejected the inner continuity which liberal thought had presupposed "between the divine and the 'highest' and best in human culture, positing that

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<sup>71</sup>M. Eliade ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.2, 68.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

knowledge of God is given in the depths of the human spirit, in human self-understanding and in inward religious experience."<sup>73</sup> Only God can make God known by his revelation in Scripture; "of ourselves we are not in a position to apprehend the truth, to let God be God and our Lord."<sup>74</sup>

At this point, it is extremely important to note that Barth's absolutely transcendent God precognized, instead of the abstract divinity aloof in his intelligible world of Enlightenment theism (and, we could add, of some "theocentrists" of today), the living trinitarian God who, from himself out, wants to be Immanuel (God with us) — a God who comes and surprises. By stressing the divine transcendence, Barth certainly did not intend to cut Christianity off from the world; he was convinced that Christianity could best serve the world by a critical, dialectical stance. When it comes to the view of Christianity and the other religions, however, it cannot be denied that Barth radically cut Christianity off from all the others, by denying all the links which liberal theology had forged between them and positing Christianity as the only religion "justified and made true by God."<sup>75</sup> Every search of points of contact with other religions and every concession to them is therefore infidelity to God's revelation in Christ. Barth thus joins Troeltsch in the depreciation of the interreligious dialogue, albeit in a very different spirit.

Personally, I tend to conclude: Barth brilliantly represents one horn of the dilemma we are faced with. We can forget or emasculate his message only at the price of becoming un-Christian. By itself, however, Barth's theology can never be a sufficient underpinning of a contemporary and really Christian theology of religions. It can only serve as one panel of a diptych or, better, one (abstract) image of a "double exposure."

*Karl Rahner* (1904-1984) laid the groundwork for the positive evaluation of the other religions in Vatican II and in most Catholic theologians since then. "His work as a whole may be summarized as theological anthropology, correlating human experience and God's self-communication."<sup>76</sup> He speaks of a "supernatural existential:" God's grace does not stay extrinsic to nature, but God communicates himself to humanity, as it were ontologically by

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<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>74</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol.1/2, 302.

<sup>75</sup>Paul Knitter, *op. cit.*, 85.

<sup>76</sup>M. Eliade ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.12, 199.

his image in the human (creation) and through human history pervaded by the Incarnation. Building on this "incarnational" view, he defends the "validity for salvation" of the other religions on two principles: God's universal salvific Will and the social nature of man.

Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that the individual ought to and must have the possibility in his life of partaking in a genuine saving relationship to God, and this at all times and in all situations of the history of the human race. Otherwise there could be no question of serious and also actually effective salvific design of God for all men, in all ages and places. In view of the social nature of man..., however, it is quite unthinkable that man, being what he is, could actually achieve this relationship to God...in an absolutely private interior reality and this outside of the actual religious bodies which offer themselves to him in the environment in which he lives.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, "a natural religion ...does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God... It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ."<sup>78</sup> In so far as Christ is at work in them, the religions are innerly directed toward Christianity as the implicit to the explicit; and all sincere believers are "anonymous Christians."<sup>79</sup> The other religions are valid, and plurality of religions is God-willed, only until the moment that "the Christian religion [becomes] really present in this pagan society and in the history of the people concerned."<sup>80</sup>

The doctrine of Vatican II (and of most Catholic theologians since then) is basically consistent with Rahner's theology (although Vatican II does not call the other religions explicitly "instruments of salvation"). It is inclusivist: all grace comes from and is directed towards Christ; the other religions are "preparation evangelii:" what they contain implicitly must be made explicit through Christianity.

Two objections can immediately be raised:

1. Is there reason to put the time limit of the other religions anywhere but in the parousia?

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<sup>77</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 128 (a text of 1961).

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

2. The relationship of the other religions to Christianity does not really show that kind of continuity; it is much more "dialectical."<sup>81</sup>

### **The Present Theological Scene**

As suggested, right at the beginning, the present theological battle is waged in terms of "inclusivism" versus "pluralism." The latter is most clearly represented in the works of John Hick and in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987); and the latter in, e.g., Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Orbis Books, 1991) and, in a controversial vein, Gavin D'Costa ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Orbis Books, 1990).

In this debate the traditional lines between Protestant and Catholic theology become rather secondary (although not unimportant). In a cavalier fashion we could say that pluralism seeks for the universal of all religions in a God beyond the God of Jesus, in Christ beyond Jesus, or in the task of human liberation; and inclusivism looks for widening of a narrow image of Jesus Christ in the Trinity and of Christ's action in the action of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>81</sup>On this point, I must agree with Leslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*. (London, 1969), 39-44. "The other religions are not to be understood and measured by their proximity to or remoteness from Christianity. They are not beginnings which are completed in the Gospel. They face in different directions, ask fundamentally different questions and look for other kinds of fulfillment than that which is given in the Gospel." (44)

## **A Response to: "Christian Theologians on Religious Plurality"**

by  
Leroy  
Seat<sup>82</sup>

Dr. Van Bragt was asked to provide an overview of what major Christian theologians down through the centuries have said and taught about the issue of religious pluralism. For the most part, he did an admirable job in summarizing the theological thought on this subject in the major periods of the twenty centuries of Christian history, and we all have surely profited from this broad outline of the history of the theological thinking about religious pluralism. My main criticism of the paper is directed not at what was written but rather at problems of terminology and at what was excluded from serious consideration in the paper.

### **I.**

The sub-theme of this 1993 Hayama Seminar is "Christian Perspectives on Religious Pluralism," but Dr. Van Bragt titled his paper "Christian Theologians on Religious Plurality." Thus, it seems that from the outset there is a problem of definition, for in the introduction and in the conclusion the word "pluralism" is used. But these two words, "plurality" and "pluralism," do not necessarily mean the same thing, and confusion results if the difference between them is not adequately recognized.

Let me suggest that "plurality" refers to nothing more than the state of there being more than one of something. We who are gathered here this evening represent a plurality of nationalities or a plurality of Christian denominations. However, while, according to the dictionary, "pluralism," can mean, "the quality or condition of being plural," this term can, and in theological writings increasingly does, refer to the belief that the plural entities under consideration have roughly equal validity and are roughly of equivalent value.

All of you here this evening, no doubt, are pluralistic in your view that all the nations represented here are valid countries and are basically equal in their intrinsic value, even if

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<sup>82</sup>Leroy Seat is a theological educator with the Southern Baptist Convention. He arrived in Japan in 1966 and teaches at Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka.

they are not equal in their global significance. Similarly, although there are probably some exceptions, most of you believe that, in spite of some differences, some of which are quite important, all the Christian denominations represented here are valid and all have roughly the same value, although each of us prefers the denomination we belong to for one reason or another. Plurality of nations, of denominations — or of religions — is a fact; pluralism refers to a certain belief about the fact of plurality.

If my distinction between the terms "plurality" and "pluralism" is correct, then there is a problem from the first paragraph of Dr. Van Bragt's paper, for he writes that for much of Christian theology through the centuries "plurality was not recognized." But surely we are not to think that the theologians of old did not recognize the existence of religions or faith-systems other than Christianity; there was always a keen awareness of Judaism and later there came to be a painful awareness of Islam. No, what was not recognized, for the most part, was the validity or the value of other religions or faith-systems. Some plurality was acknowledged, but in most Christian theology of the past there was little inclination to adopt the position of religious pluralism, which is the belief that all, or at least most, religions are basically valid, of positive value, and roughly equivalent to the Christian faith.

## II.

Dr. Van Bragt is correct in saying that "the present theological debate is essentially between the *pluralists* who, in principle, put Christianity on the same line as the other religions... and the *inclusivists*, who maintain the uniqueness of Christ and the special vocation of Christianity..." At least, that is the main debate within most so-called mainline Protestantism and present-day Catholicism. The bulk of his paper deals with issues related to this debate, and the last paragraph of the paper, which seems to end a bit too abruptly, differentiates between the position of pluralism and that of inclusivism. That being the case, perhaps a more fitting title for the paper would be "Christian Theologians on Religious Pluralism and/or Christian Inclusivism," for that seems to be the main issue that is pursued.

It can be argued, however, that the position of Christian exclusivism is too hastily dismissed. The writer defines that position as the one which believes that only Christianity is valid religion — but perhaps here is another problem of definition.

The Christian exclusivist asserts that Christ is the only way that the full truth about God, human beings, and the world is known and that this truth cannot be compromised or relativized. But this does not necessarily absolutize the Christian religion or say there is no value in non-Christian religions as sociological or cultural entities.

Certainly there is a type of Christian exclusivism which is confrontational, arrogant, and judgmental, to mention just a few of its objectional characteristics. This kind of exclusivism should be, and for the most part has been, rejected by the majority of the Christians in a majority of the countries of the world. But there is another kind of exclusivism which is irenic, humble, and dialogical — and yet at the same time committed to the belief that Jesus Christ is *the* way to a proper relationship to God, to other human beings, and to the world of nature. It seems that in considering "Christian perspectives on religious pluralism," this latter position should have been given far more consideration than the writer did in his paper.

Dr. Van Bragt does, in fact, make a positive reference to a theologian who holds a rather exclusivistic position when he quotes with favor the statement of Leslie Newbigin in footnote #30. Newbigin, who, as most of you know, was a long-time missionary to India and has served as one of the main administrators in the World Council of Churches, has consistently maintained a broad (as opposed to a strict or narrow) exclusivistic position, a position which has been quite irenic, humble, and dialogical and at the same time firmly committed to what he believes is the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It would have enhanced his paper if Dr. Van Bragt had made some reference to Newbigin's book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, which was published by Eerdmans in 1989. In that book Newbigin defines religious pluralism as "the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but a matter of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible."<sup>83</sup> Newbigin, however, asserts that the Christian faith has to do with objective facts, not just subjective values; Christianity is about news, not just views. Accordingly, he rejects the pluralist position.

However, Newbigin also rejects what he calls a "strict" exclusivism as well as the position of inclusivism. Perhaps Newbigin's position could best be designated as inclusivistic

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<sup>83</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 14.

exclusivism or maybe even exclusivistic inclusivism; but I think it is not incorrect to call it a broad exclusivism. In fact, Gavin D'Costa refers to Newbigin as a "neo-Kraemerian."<sup>84</sup> Newbigin sketches his position in "The Gospel and the Religions," chapter fourteen of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. At the conclusion of that chapter he writes:

The position which I have outlined is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.<sup>85</sup>

A position similar to Newbigin's is found in Clark Pinnock's new book, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Zondervan, 1992). And then, of course, Harold Netland, whose paper we will hear tomorrow, admirably defends an irenic, humble, and dialogical exclusivism in his book *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Eerdmans, 1991). With such fine books as Newbigin's, Pinnock's, and Netland's, it is rather unfortunate that Dr. Van Bragt so quickly dismisses Christian exclusivism, in spite of recognizing that the balance of the Biblical witness "is clearly on the exclusivist side," and focuses almost entirely on Christian inclusivism and religious pluralism.

### III.

Let me now make a few brief comments and raise a few questions on some of the specific sections of Dr. Van Bragt's paper. What he presents in his "short look at the Bible" is basically true, I believe, but I would say that there are few implications for our seminar theme in Paul's statement that "in Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Greek."

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<sup>84</sup>Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 15.

<sup>85</sup>Newbigin, *op. cit.*, 182-183.

The problem is what is the situation of those who are not "in Christ."

Regarding the early church fathers, I would say that they were not "the only Christians before our time with a real awareness of the plurality of religions," but rather that some of them had a quite good understanding of the universality of God's dealing with the world and forwarded ideas that are appropriate for serious consideration by contemporary theologians. Rather than being the only Christians before our time aware of the plurality of religions, they were living in a time when Christianity was not the dominant religious tradition, so they were forced to think more seriously how the Christian faith relates to other religious traditions, much like we are today.

With a changed situation, Western Christendom in the Middle Ages no longer seriously had to consider the validity of other religious traditions, for in Christendom there were no rival religions. What Dr. Van Bragt wrote about the importance of this period in relation to religious pluralism, in spite of there being scarcely any theological reflection on the subject during that time, was quite instructive.

Maybe it is because I am a Protestant from the United States, but I am a little confused by the writer starting "modern times" so far back in history. It was the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that "uncritically extrapolated" the formula of Cyprian that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and this was reaffirmed by the papal bull *Unam Sanctam* promulgated in 1302. Nicolas of Cusa is presented as the first individual author of the modern period, and he died in 1464. However, while there may well be roots in an earlier period, it seems that modernity should not be considered to begin until late in the 15th century at the earliest.

The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation began soon after the start of the modern period, so the conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant movement precluded little theological work being done on the issue of religious plurality, as Dr. Van Bragt recognizes. However, most of the individual thinkers whose ideas are succinctly summarized in this section of his paper are much more Enlightenment philosophers than they are Christian theologians.

Similarly, I feel some problem with the writer including the 19th century in "the contemporary period," even though since the position of exclusivism was not seriously considered there is, correctly, little to be said about the theology of this period in relation to the theme of religious pluralism. I would say the contemporary period does not

go back further than about 1920, and preferably dated no earlier than 1945.

As with Schleiermacher at the beginning of the 19th century, Troeltsch at the beginning of the 20th century moved away from much of what had been traditional theology and toward a position that has developed into the religious pluralism held by an increasing number of present-day theologians.

One of the most stimulating parts of the paper is Dr. Van Bragt's exposition of the theological position of the two important Karls: the Protestant Karl Barth and the Catholic Karl Rahner. In connection with Barth, however, it seems that some reference should also have been made to Hendrik Kraemer, a Barthian (and Brunnerian) who had much to say about the relation of the Christian faith to the religions of the world. And a word about Paul Tillich would certainly have been in order also.

The section on "the present theological scene" is very brief and, as I mentioned, seems to end too abruptly. Also, as mentioned earlier, the debate is considered to be only between "inclusivism" and "pluralism," with no recognition of those who hold or propound any form of exclusivism. Dr. Van Bragt writes that in this debate "the traditional lines between Protestant and Catholic theology become rather secondary (although not unimportant)" — although he does not say why these lines are not unimportant in regard to the present debate about inclusivism/pluralism. There seems to be far more difference between, say, Catholics Paul Knitter and Gavin D'Costa than between, say, Protestant John Hick and Knitter.

Finally, it seems that some reference should have been made to Asian theologians (in addition to the one reference to D'Costa). Here in Japan, for example, theologians like Takizawa Katsumi, Doi Masatoshi, and Yagi Seiichi, among others, have dealt at some length with the issue of religious pluralism. One of the most important theologians in the area of the theology of religions is Raimundo Panikkar, the Catholic theologian from India. Further, another Catholic theologian, Aloysius Pieris from Sri Lanka, and the Protestant Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song have also grappled extensively with the problem of religious pluralism. Granted, there is a limit to what one can do in one short paper, but at least the listing of a few more names and books in describing the present theological scene could have been instructive to those who read the published paper.

## The Fall of Christian Imperialism

by  
Hiromasa  
Mase<sup>86</sup>

### An "Ethnic" Conflict

You know the word "ethnic." Of course you do. When you say you have enjoyed an ethnic dish, you mean you have enjoyed colorfully rich food such as Thai or Indonesian or Polynesian dishes. In recent years ethnic music, which is quite different from western music, has been taken up as an additional music lecture in universities in Japan.

However, an ethnic "conflict" is a serious problem. In Australia, they discriminated against colored people under the White Australian Policy and it brought about a lot of conflicts in many places around the country. Japanese, Chinese and/or Indians, were made to work at low wages and even the low wage labors were unduly taken away. This was the real picture of the White Australian Policy. But a great change has been made in Australia in the past twenty years. Education for international understanding has been emphasized in schools, and Australians are eager to learn the languages, cultures, and religions of their neighboring countries in the Pacific basin area. I was once involved in a teacher's exchange program and taught Japanese and Japanese Culture at a college in Sydney for two years.

Right now in England, which is a relative of Australia, great suffering from serious ethnic conflicts is occurring in major cities. Second and third generations of Indian, Pakistani and Africans have settled down as English citizens in the country. But in the midst of a hard economic situation, problems of unemployment, housing and education are heavily weighing on these people. In addition, there is racial discrimination against the black English by

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the white English. I was once astounded to find in the subway a poster saying "Restore our good old white England!" This is an agitation by a right-wing political organization, preoccupied with white English policy. In major cities labor conflicts with ethnic groups are reported to have taken place from time to time. White English policemen on horses sometime violently attack the black English people when they organize a moderate protest movement such as a demonstration or a sit-in. "Kuroyaro" or "the Black" is said to be an ordinary word for them in the police station. This is the real picture of the ethnic conflict in England.

### **A False Vision**

Where was the Christian Church in England in this situation? Had she given up her love for neighbors? No! The Church remains as sound as ever. Facing this problem of racial discrimination, the Church was not a silent observer but issued a social statement. In the statement, she made it clear that racial discrimination goes against the truth of the Gospel. The Church in England recognized the black English, and frankly admitted that English society is now a pluralistic society embracing ethnic groups, together with their cultures and religions.

In other words, the Church in England began to show a positive attitude toward guaranteeing the freedom to believe, as well as the right to live. The vision which was embraced by the reactionary white English people was Christian imperialism. But the Church thoroughly denied it by saying that the vision was a false one and it could not be anything but a phantom.

This recognition is followed by a momentous task to grapple with. I say "momentous" because I believe that the task involves a reflection of the Christian Church of not having properly related to the other great world religions. Not only the Church in England, but also other churches in Europe hold this reflection.

In the past six years I have had opportunities to attend seminars on religious pluralism sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva. The first seminar was held in Geneva, the second one in Munchen and the third one in Minnesota. Each time, the Lutherans from Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark unanimously said that their countries are no longer Christian-centered as a result of having accepted immigrants and refugees. "Our countries are now multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious. So we are in need of a proper relationship of Christianity with other religions." They find the

situation a greater challenge and an opportunity for their fundamental change, because Christianity had reiterated to the non-Christian religions her insistence, "No other name!" "No salvation other than by this name!" This is a strong expression of Christian exclusivism.

Karl Barth, a contemporary German theologian, once acknowledged Jodo-Buddhism as a form of grace-religion similar to Japanese Protestantism. But he said that something was wanting. Something that was most important was wanting. What was it? It was "the name of Jesus Christ." The decisive point which distinguishes Christianity from other religions is, according to him, "the name of Jesus Christ," and without this name religions are all unfaithful. He thought that there is no salvation in Buddhism, only because it does not have the name of Jesus Christ. This is obviously a form of Christian imperialism.

You may also find a similar, although a slightly more moderate, idea in the thought of an "anonymous Christian" which was expressed by a Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner. He said: Any pious believers of other religions are anonymous Christians because they are truth-seekers, and therefore they can be acknowledged as having been accepted by God and to have been on the way to salvation. By saying this, he proposes the doctrine of inclusivism, a doctrine in which even those who are unaware of the name of Jesus Christ will be saved. However, it seems to me that his proposal is only a little more moderate form of exclusivism, in which he says that, for instance, a pious Buddhist is a Christian in his/her heart. If you take this stance, what will be your evangelical mission? It will not be to lead non-Christians to Christianity, but only to try to change "anonymous Christians" into non-anonymous Christians, and unconscious Christians into conscious Christians.

But is this your mission work? Are you expected to regard non-Christians, say, Buddhists, as "anonymous Christians?" Just imagine what you would think if you were thought to be an anonymous Buddhist by a Buddhist who says that the faithful Christians are, even if they don't know what the Truth is, "anonymous Buddhists" by virtue of their sincere wishes for the Truth. Wouldn't you think that the Buddhist is arrogant? And you would surely reproach him. Therefore, neither exclusivism nor inclusivism can be said to be a proper attitude toward other religions. Each of the two regards itself to be the center of the world and all other religions move around it.

## Message of Acceptance

Instead of exclusivism and inclusivism, what will be our choice concerning our proper attitude toward other religions? I want to say that our alternative should be "pluralism" which is God-centered or Reality-centered.

However different our religions may be, and no matter how different our worship may be, we do have something essential in common. What is it all about? It is the fact that we are opening our minds and hearts toward a higher reality. Surely we gather together in worship to open our hearts to a higher reality.

When a group of Zen Buddhists, who took part in the East-West Spirituality Exchange paid a visit to the Pope in the Vatican, the Pope is said to have welcomed the group with the words, "my dear friends of faith." The leader of the Buddhist group was annoyed and said, "We are Buddhists." The Pope replied, however, that since we are totally opening our minds toward the Being who is above the human, we are surely friends of faith. Though his words were simple, they were important in the sense that they came out of spirituality. I still remember this story told to me by a Zen priest who was very sympathetic with the idea expressed by the Pope.

In other words, this is a sign of "the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness," occurring in all the great world religions. This phrase, "the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness," is a phrase used by John Hick meaning salvation/liberation or *satori/kensho*. In affirmation of this salvific transformation occurring in the great world religions, we are reassured that the believers of all faiths are opening their minds and hearts toward the Being greater than themselves.

Human beings are born in self-centeredness. Zen-Buddhism, for instance, calls the liberation from such self-centeredness "the overthrow of self." They say: I find my true self through the I-lessness. In Christianity you say: I die to the old self and now I live in the new self. In other words, I am found in the I-less I, namely in Christ. That is why St. Paul says, "It is not I, but Christ lives in me." Thus the salvific transformation involves the overthrow of the proud "I" in humility and self-abasement in both Buddhism and Christianity. In short, religious pluralism, therefore, negates the idea of the only way of salvation but it affirms the plural ways of salvation/liberation, or *satori/kensho*. Namely, there is a

plurality of divine revelation and accordingly a plurality of human responses to the divine.

Does this affirmation go against the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith? The answer is simply and clearly, "No." The basis of religious pluralism is "the universal salvific will of God." And the Christian God is a God of universal love. Therefore the way of Christian salvation should not be confined to the limited group of Christian people. God expects all people to come to His way of salvation. So you should not presuppose that the only way of salvation is through Jesus Christ. The message of the Gospel is a message of acceptance and certainly not a message of rejection. Jesus taught a message of acceptance and made it clear that God had accepted all the people before they turned to him. Thus repentance is not a prerequisite to acceptance. On the contrary, repentance is a human response to the acceptance God has offered in advance.

It was Jesus that had accepted us human beings who could not be accepted. The message he left for us was that "love is the essence of God." Therefore, if you say that God will not love you unless you repent, or that you will not be saved unless you believe all that Jesus has done for you, you turn the message of the Gospel upside down.

The love of God is unconditioned, and the grace of God takes precedence. I believe that God's already present love has made me repent and has transformed me from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

### **Wesley Ariarajah's Invitation to Dialogue with People of Other Faiths**

I would like to refer to a clergyman who is from a Buddhist country, Sri Lanka, and who is in charge of the dialogue sub-unit of the WCC in Geneva. His name is Wesley Ariarajah and he wrote an excellent introductory book concerning the dialogue between the Bible and other faiths. The title of the book is *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, and in the last chapter of the book, "Toward a Theology of Dialogue," Ariarajah discusses very important issues.

A critical voice has been raised on the Christ-centered monism in Protestant theology. Christ-centeredness is regarded as one of the reasons why Protestantism cannot properly respond to religious pluralism. Apostles confessed their faith that God had revealed himself through Jesus in a special way. A certain school of theology has focused attention on this faith and developed it into the doctrine that Christ is a perfect, ultimate, final and decisive revelation of God.

In foreign missions, an emphasis has been "no other revelation" and if there were, it would be only partial. A complete knowledge of God comes only through Christ. To this truth-claim are added these exclusive passages from the Bible: "No one can come to the Father but by me." and, "There is no one else in all the world, whose name God has given to men, by whom we can be saved."

This brings forth an undesirable situation in which God is completely put aside and as a result Christianity, particularly its Protestant mission activities, shows no basis of relating to people of other faiths. The only thing you can do within this understanding is to urge people of other faiths to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. The context of relation here is just a missiology of conversion by verbal force alone.

Taking this into consideration, you may find this attitude contradictory to the total teaching of the Bible in many respects. In the center of the message of the Bible lies God, who is the Creator of all things, and in whom all things have their being. The story of Israel is the story of their experiences of the loving and salvific God.

Turning your eyes to the story of Jesus, you may be surprised to know that Jesus lived a thoroughly God-centered life. He never claimed that he was a perfect, ultimate, and decisive revelation of God. Though you read in John, "He who saw me, saw my Father," is it fair to take an exclusive attitude toward other faiths?

Just remember! The whole life of Jesus was lived only in relation to God. In the very moment of his death, he placed his spirit in God's hands. After he was raised from the dead, he was going to his Father. His whole teaching was based on the Kingdom of God.

A recovery of God-centered theology does not mean the negation of Christians bearing witness to Jesus Christ, but it helps them to stand as children of one God together with people of other faith.

An approach of God-centeredness does not mean a deviation from the central message of the Bible. On the contrary, it helps Christians to correct their attitudes toward other religions so that they may live in religiously pluralistic societies, finding theological meanings in the life of people of other religions without, at the same time, denying their own call and mission.

Judging from his discussion, Wesley Ariarajah is in good accord with John Hick in his understanding of religious pluralism.

### **Christianity in a Pluralistic Society**

When a Christian meets people of other faiths, he/she makes efforts to make them understand Christianity. What is his/her motivation to do so? He/she wants to make them Christians and meets people with only this one exclusive aim, that of evangelization. For all his/her efforts, this will only amount to giving people wrong impressions that a church is a terrible place because once they come in a church they are urged to convert to the Christian faith. But in a church we talk about our own Christian community as one of love and forgiveness. In a church we talk about our own weakness and find joy in God's salvific act by Jesus Christ. We always put emphasis on the practice of Christian love. However, love, Christian love, is regarded as something fearful by people outside the church. They take it to be the disguise of love. Given access to it, they feel a fear that they are being pushed to become Christians. In other words, they misunderstand Christianity as a religion which takes over other religions. It is a pity, indeed, that the Christian history of love has made people feel nervous in this way.

Religious pluralism is not a hindrance to Christian mission. In a pluralistic society, our confession of faith should be made out of humility, love and sacrifice which we have truly experienced through the cross of Jesus. I believe that the center of vision in God's mission should be found in this spirit. People of other living faiths are to be found in God's love and grace. We, too, are on the way of traveling, together with them as our companions of faith. We are making a pilgrimage to the Truth, giving testimony of faith, listening to and sharing with each other. Is it incompatible with the teaching of the Bible that a religion can be reinterpreted as God-centered or Reality-centered?

When I go to the Kansai area, I sometimes extend my trip to Okayama. I visit the grand shrine of Konko-kyo in Konko-cho, a neighboring town of Kurashiki. I go there because the memory of my mother, who lived out her faith in Konko-kyo, is most tightly bounded up with the place. I sometimes visit "Oziba" of Tenri-kyo, so that I may have inter-faith religious dialogue with my Tenri-kyo friends. And on my way home, I visit Ise-Shrine, because I like the woods of the Shrine.

When I visit those places of other faiths, I always discover something new. I discover the fact that people are there to open their minds and hearts toward a higher reality. I discover the fact that I am among them. I discover the fact that this is also "the Father's world."

If you say that your God does not reside in the places of other faiths, your God is too small. You put your God on your own palm. Do not make such a mistake. You are, instead, on the palm of God. "In Him we live, move and have our being," as St. Paul says. Understanding Christianity as Reality-centered is for me, therefore, of great importance.

### **God Beyond God**

How, then, should we try to understand religious pluralism in Japan? We Japanese are so accustomed to religious-pluralism that we have become insensitive to it. When I refer to religious pluralism as a model of understanding of religion, many Japanese say that we need not consider it, because we have already lived long in this situation. So my proposal can rarely be understood in the contemporary Japanese situation.

However, Christianity for example, asks very serious questions about the meaning of its faith, about the significance of its being, about divine reality to which Christians open their hearts and minds in a contemporary religious pluralistic situation. Thus, Ariarajah says in his book that a God-centered approach does not provide a framework for a dialogue with people of other faiths because Buddhists, for example, have their own concept of reality which is quite different from that of the Christian. But I should say that we must think out a proper way of understanding God or a God-centered approach in a new way. If you say that you have already grasped God by your own hands, this is not the kind of God I mean. What I mean is that we should go as far as possible to see "God beyond God," so that we may grasp the reality of God.

Paul Tillich, a contemporary Protestant theologian, came to Japan to encounter the Buddhists. When he returned to the United States he began to preach "God beyond the theistic God." By this he meant that in the God beyond the Christian God, the Buddhist concept of reality would be equivalent in meaning to the Christian concept of reality. This idea was first revealed in his sermon "Courage To Be."

In Buddhism it is said that "when you meet Buddha, kill the Buddha." To put it into the context of Christianity, it means if you say you have met God, your God is too small a God

to lie on your own palm. You should go beyond that God in order to attain a true God. The true God is "God of Gods," "God above the theistic God." And in this conception of God, you will possibly meet with the Buddhist's conception of reality.

It is also in this conception of God that one and the same ultimate divine reality will come to have its true meaning. And a hypothesis of religious pluralism that God and Buddha are the same divine reality in the dimension of "God beyond God" and "Buddha beyond Buddha," also comes to have its own vivid meaning. In fact, it is this idea that "God beyond God and Buddha beyond Buddha are ultimately one and the same divine reality" that is the major hypothesis in the framework of our religious pluralism.

## **Response to: The Fall of Christian Imperialism**

by  
David M.  
Moore<sup>87</sup>

With this paper Dr. Mase has challenged all of us who are serving in Japan as Christian missionaries, to rethink our attitude toward the major religions of the world, especially Buddhism, historically the major thought system of the country we serve in. And for the opportunity to take this challenge seriously we must thank him, and not just dismiss what he says lightly.

It is true that the Western world, by which we mean the world of the white race with its European background, is undergoing ethnic, cultural and religious change. It is said that WASPs, the group to which most of us belong, will become a minority in the USA by the end of the 20th century. So it is true not only that 19th century concepts of Christian imperialism have gone by the board, where the great missionary movement was closely affiliated with colonialism, but also that in our generation large numbers of adherents of the prophet Mohammed and the teacher Gautama Buddha have moved into what used to be the bastions of Christianity. In this situation Dr. Mase suggests that we need to re-examine our thinking about these other religions and indeed about our own, to see if Truth and Reality do not lie somewhere above and beyond the separate and seemingly contradictory human expressions of faith.

How do we respond to this invitation? More specifically, how do I respond to the presentation of this paper at Hayama Seminar? There are several possibilities, I think, and I've been struggling with the most appropriate route to take since receiving a copy of Dr. Mase's paper several weeks ago. I do not want to get into problems of semantics, to quibble about words, to nit-pick, so to speak, but I'd like to emphasize some major points which, it seems to me, get to the heart of the gospel itself. I should confess here that I have not had the opportunity to read some of the main thinkers whom Dr. Mase mentions as pertinent to this

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<sup>87</sup> David Moore has been a missionary in Japan since 1968 with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Japan Mission.

discussion, namely John Hick and Wesley Ariarajah. But I don't think that in and of itself disqualifies me from being able to raise some significant questions.

Let's look at some of the spoken and unspoken presuppositions which lie behind Dr. Mase's presentation. The first of these is that all religions share the common ground of a human search for Reality. That is, "we gather together in worship to open our hearts to a higher reality," and this is what all religions have in common. Believers are "opening their minds and hearts toward the Being greater than themselves." So the essence of all religion is found in man's search for Ultimate Reality, by whatever Name that Reality may be called.

A second presupposition is that a common ground for the meeting place of all religions is in a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, whether this be called "salvation/redemption" as in Christianity, or "satori/kensho" as in Zen Buddhism. To us who are born thinking of ourselves at the center of the universe, all religions call on us to become other-oriented and other-directed.

A third presupposition is that the essence of the Biblical message is one of the universal love of God who accepts all men unconditionally. Therefore God's way of salvation cannot be limited only to those who accept the Christian gospel message which focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, repentance and faith in Christ cannot be made a prerequisite to God's acceptance of people, but are, rather, a response to God's prior acceptance. Since God's salvific will is directed toward all men, there are plural ways of this Higher Being's revealing Himself towards men, and likewise plural ways of responding to Him. Presumably then, the Bible would be just one such method of revelation, and acceptance of the Christian gospel would be just one such way of response. In fact, Dr. Mase tells us specifically that if we insist on repentance and faith in Christ as conditions of salvation, we have turned the Christian gospel on its head. Rather, while we bear witness to Jesus Christ ourselves, we find theological meaning in the faith traditions of other religions, that we may "stand as children of one God together with believers of other faiths."

A fourth presupposition, which probably governs all the others, and seems to form the underlying basis for this entire approach, is that God (or Reality or Truth) is ultimately unknowable in Himself to the human mind. So if one ever comes to say, "I have found God" or "I know God," then he has not found God but only a figment of his imagination, for the

true God lies beyond that God. Here is a basic denial that a true knowledge of God is ever attainable, at least in this life. The true essence of God, if we may use such terminology, lies ever beyond the realm of human knowledge, somewhere out there in the unattainable and the unknowable, beyond and "above the theistic God." And so it is that with "this conception of God, you will possibly meet with the Buddhist's conception of reality."

Now I have spent this much time summarizing what the paper has given us, in an effort to grasp and present Dr. Mase's thought fairly and accurately. I am attempting to follow the course, for example, of Tucker Callaway, in his fine little book, *Zen Way, Jesus Way*, where he endeavors to present Zen on its own terms, after achieving the experience of *satori* and thus being able to relate to the Zen masters. Let me recommend that book to you, if you believe that Buddhism on its own terms and Christianity are ultimately compatible or seek the same ultimate Reality.

For myself, while I hesitate to take on the giants here at Hayama, once in a while one is given an inescapable opportunity to proclaim the honor and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. I would be remiss in my duty were I to try to avoid that right now. I would like you to note that what I have tried to summarize is very different from what has historically been understood to be of the essence of Christianity and the Christian gospel.

1. First of all, Christianity affirms that God has indeed spoken to us through the prophets and apostles, and preeminently in His only begotten Son, the infallible expression of His mind and will for His people. Jesus Christ is God's Logos, through Whom He made the worlds, and Who is the heir of all things and the express image of His Person. To say less is to detract from the uniqueness and glory of the Savior (Proverbs 8, Hebrews 1, John 1, Colossians 1, Revelation 1).

2. The purpose of this revelation is that men might hear, believe, and know the truth about Ultimate Reality, i.e., to know God as He has revealed Himself, Whom to know is life eternal (John 17). Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way man can ever attain to knowledge of God. Knowledge of the true God is not somewhere out there, ever unattainable to us, but vouchsafed to us through our great Prophet Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 18). Even in the Old Testament we are told, "if with all your hearts ye truly seek me, ye shall ever surely find me." The wise man must glory not in his own wisdom, but in "this, that he understands and knows

me, the Lord who exercises lovingkindness and judgment in the earth." Indeed the very heart of the covenant relationship is that "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God," so that under the New Covenant they no longer have to say "'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me from the least to the greatest" (Jeremiah 9, 24, 29, and 31). To hold that God Himself is unknowable is to deny that Jesus Christ is a worthy successor of and superior to Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah (Hebrews 3, II Corinthians 3).

3. Christianity finds man's predicament, i.e., what he needs to be saved from, in *that* self-centeredness which results from his rebellion against, and consequent alienation from God his Creator. He is lost and dead in sin because he wilfully refuses to live the kind of life in God's service he was created for. The only remedy for this is an atoning sacrifice of an unblemished Lamb, offered up to the Father by a perfect High Priest who is also the perfect Lamb. The cross is the means chosen by God so that He might be at the same time both just and the Justifier of those who believe in Jesus. To hold that there might be other ways of salvation, other approaches to God by whatever name, is to take away from the uniqueness and perfection of our great High Priest and His atoning work on the hill of Calvary, where the great mystery came to pass, that in history God's wrath was taken away and sinners reconciled to One who loved them from all eternity (Romans 5, 8, Hebrews 8, 9, II Corinthians 5). Scripture is clear that those who belong in faith to His Son are those God accepts as His adopted children (Romans 8, Ephesians 1).

4. And then Christianity affirms that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is our great King — King of kings and Lord of lords, and He shall reign forever and ever. The early Christians proclaimed, against those of Rome who demanded submission to Caesar as Lord, "No, thank you, Jesus is Lord." Here is a claim equivalent and more to the OT claim of God, "I am Jahweh: that is my name, and my glory I will not give to another, nor my praise to graven images;" "I am the first, and I am the last, and beside me there is no God" (Isaiah 42, 43, 44). Yes, Jesus is "the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty Lord" (Revelation 1, 21, 22). The day is coming when "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue

confess that He indeed is Lord, to the glory of the Father," and kings and emperors shall cast their crowns before Him and acknowledge His sovereignty. He is the Witness who is called Faithful and True, the Word of God who goes forth conquering and to conquer, who shall smite the nations and rule them with a rod of iron (Philippians 2, Revelation 19). And those who are priests of God and of Christ shall reign with Him, in that celestial city whose light is the Lamb and whose temple are the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. Is this Christian imperialism? Yes, it certainly is, and we need not be ashamed of it, for our King of kings will not yield one *shaku*, not one "sun" of His crown rights as Lord of all creation, Lord of the Universe, Lord of life and death. To Him alone be all praise and glory throughout all ages, forever and ever. Amen.

## **Why Jesus Instead of the Buddha? Christian Mission in a Religiously Pluralistic World**

by  
Harold A.  
Netland<sup>88</sup>

### **I. Christian Perspectives on Other Religions: An Overview**

There is no question that one of the major issues in Christian theology and missiology today is the relation of Christian faith to other religions. The past three decades have produced an enormous amount of literature on religious pluralism by Christian thinkers. The significance of the issues raised should not be minimized. The British missiologist and theologian Max Warren stated in 1958 that the impact of agnostic science upon Christian faith will seem to have been nothing more than child's play when compared to the challenge to Christian theology posed by other religions.<sup>89</sup> Missiologist Gerald Anderson asserts that central to the task of forging a viable theology of mission today is the need to address the "Christian attitude toward religious pluralism and the approach to people of other faiths."<sup>90</sup> And Canadian evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock claims that in his view the issue of religious pluralism is second to none in importance for Christian theology today.<sup>91</sup> I am inclined to agree with these assessments.

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A bewildering variety of perspectives on other religions have been offered in recent years, but in very broad terms it is possible to group these views into three categories: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>92</sup> As we shall see, the boundaries between the categories are not always clear-cut, and it is sometimes difficult to know into which category to place a particular thinker. Perhaps it is better to think of these as three distinct stages on a theological continuum rather than as three clearly defined separate categories.

I will use the term *exclusivism* to refer to a theological position which is based upon the following five principles: (1) Jesus Christ is the unique Incarnation of God, fully God and fully man; (2) Only through the person and work of Jesus Christ is there the possibility of

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<sup>89</sup>As quoted in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World", in *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 7.

<sup>90</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, "American Protestants in Pursuit of Mission: 1886-1986," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 12, (July 1988): 114.

<sup>91</sup> Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 7.

<sup>92</sup> For introductory discussion of the three positions see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); and Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices, Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) chapter one.

salvation; (3) The Bible is God's unique revelation written, and thus is true and fully authoritative; (4) Where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false; and (5) There is no possibility of salvation through the teachings and practices of non-Christian religions. Exclusivism, as defined here, is the perspective of the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, widely accepted as a representative statement of evangelical identity.

Several points of clarification are in order here. First, although all exclusivists would accept the above five principles, there is considerable variety among exclusivists on other issues. Some see nothing of truth and value in other religions — non-Christian religions are dismissed as nothing more than Satanic deception and evil. Others, on the other hand, are quite willing to recognize elements of significant truth and value in other religions. There is nothing in exclusivism as defined above which entails that all the beliefs of other religions are false. Exclusivism simply maintains that where the beliefs of other religions and Christian faith conflict, the teachings of other religions are to be rejected.

Second, we must distinguish here between what we might call "social exclusivism" and "theological exclusivism." Exclusivism, as defined here, should be understood in terms of *theological* not *social exclusivism*. That is, this position is exclusive regarding the beliefs

and practices of other religions, but not exclusive regarding social relationships with followers of other religions. Exclusivism should not be understood as restricting association with adherents of other faiths, nor as encouraging intolerance or disrespectful behavior toward those of other faiths. Although it cannot be denied that historically exclusivists have sometimes acted in highly intolerant ways toward those of other faiths, most exclusivists would emphatically insist that followers of other religions should be respected and accepted as fellow creatures made in the image of God. Exclusivists, however, would insist that it is possible to be tolerant and to treat Buddhists or Muslims, for example, with genuine respect while simultaneously maintaining that some of their religious beliefs are false.

Third, although all exclusivists insist that salvation is only through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that salvation is not available through the teachings and practices of other religions, there is considerable debate today on the question of the fate of those who have heard never of Jesus Christ. Specifically, must one actually know about Jesus Christ and His work on the cross, and respond explicitly to Him in faith, in order to be saved? Or is it in principle possible for someone to be saved on the basis of Christ's atoning work even though he or she never hears of the name of Jesus? In recent years this has become an increasingly controversial question among evangelicals. Some clearly state that there is no hope for those who have yet to hear of the gospel of Jesus. Others take a more agnostic stance, choosing to leave the question unresolved and trusting God to be just and fair. And yet others argue that on the basis of Scripture itself we can affirm that many will be saved even though they never explicitly hear of the gospel of Jesus.<sup>93</sup>

During the past hundred years or so exclusivism has come under increasingly vigorous attack, not only from those outside the church but from those within the church as well. Especially since the dramatic changes ushered in by Vatican II (1962-65), a kind of paradigm shift has taken place within the Roman Catholic Church's view of other religions. And Protestant Christianity associated with the World Council of Churches has similarly seen a substantial shift in its perception of other faiths.

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<sup>93</sup> See *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, William Crockett & James Sigountos, eds., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) and John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

Although there is tremendous variety among contemporary Roman Catholic and non-Evangelical Protestant theologians, something of a loose consensus can be seen to be emerging concerning the question of other religions. This perspective is often referred to as *inclusivism*, and can be defined in terms of the following three propositions: (1) There is a sense in which Jesus Christ is unique, normative, or superior to other religious figures, and it is through Jesus Christ that salvation is made available to humankind; (2) God's grace and salvation, which are somehow rooted in Jesus Christ, are also available through non-Christian religions; and (3) In general, other religions are to be regarded positively and not negatively. Inclusivism, then, attempts to combine the emphasis upon the uniqueness and normativity of Jesus Christ as God's medium of salvation with a recognition that this salvation is also available to followers of other religions right where they are.

Inclusivism is generally identified with the great Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, and his notion of "anonymous Christian," according to which an adherent of another religion, a Hindu for example, can respond appropriately to God's grace within the context of Hinduism, and thus be regarded as an anonymous Christian, even without ever actually being confronted explicitly with the gospel of Jesus Christ or coming into contact with the Church.<sup>94</sup> But inclusivism is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church and in one form or another it is today widely accepted by Protestant theologians as well.

Although all inclusivists would accept the three defining propositions mentioned above, there is considerable diversity among inclusivists on other issues. For example, some inclusivists accept a high Christology, maintaining that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God in the flesh, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Others explicitly reject such a high Christology, preferring to think of Jesus as a most remarkable man through whom God has revealed Himself and made salvation available — but in no sense literally God incarnate. Similarly, differences arise concerning soteriology. Some interpret salvation in orthodox terms as regeneration and reconciliation with God through Christ's atoning work on the cross. Others tend to interpret salvation more existentially as moral transformation or the

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<sup>94</sup> See Karl Rahner's "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 115-134; and "Anonymous Christians" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969) 390-398.

realization of justice and righteousness in this world. Among those who interpret salvation as including eternal life with God after death, there are differences between those who accept universalism (those who hold that ultimately all persons, regardless of religious affiliation, will be saved) and those who maintain that some at least will not be saved.

In the past several decades there have been increasing numbers of Christian thinkers who reject both exclusivism and inclusivism as untenable and who explicitly call for a pluralist understanding of the various religions. *Pluralism* rejects a major premise which is common to both exclusivism and inclusivism — viz. that there is anything normative, significantly unique, or decisive about Jesus Christ. Each religion is said to be "unique" and "normative" in its own way, and there are legitimate "saviors" in each religion. The most vigorous and influential apologist for pluralism today is John Hick.<sup>95</sup> Hick's thesis is that

The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" along which, men and women find salvation/liberation/fulfilment.<sup>96</sup>

According to Hick, then, the various religions constitute different culturally and historically conditioned human responses to the one divine reality — the Real. Religions are the product of a complex interplay between divine and human initiatives — the Real revealing itself to humankind and humankind responding in historically and culturally conditioned ways to the Real.

For our purposes the key point in pluralism is the contention that salvation/liberation/enlightenment is more or less equally available in all the major religious traditions and thus that no single religion can legitimately claim to be the one true religion, binding for all humankind. Neither is there just one Savior who is objectively superior to all

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<sup>95</sup> See especially Hick's *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); and *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>96</sup> *An Interpretation of Religion*, 240.

other religious figures. Now Hick is not saying that Christians should stop speaking of Jesus as Lord and Savior. To the contrary, he insists that as Christians we must continue to speak of Jesus as Lord and Savior and we must insist on complete loyalty to Christ — so long as in so doing we recognize that there are other equally legitimate "lords" and "saviors" for followers of other religions. What Hick does reject is the idea that Jesus is somehow superior to all other religious figures and that followers of other faiths must shift their allegiance from, say, the Amida Buddha or Krishna to Jesus in order to be "saved."

Hick draws a basic distinction between "the Real as it is in itself" and the historically and culturally conditioned "images" of the Real. The Real as it is in itself is never the direct object of religious experience or awareness; it transcends human experience and conceptual categories. What we as humans experience in religion is said to be the "divine phenomena," or the various historically and culturally conditioned "images" of the Real. These "images" in turn can be divided into two categories — those which reflect the Real as being personal and those which reflect the Real as non-personal. Thus, religions such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, for example, regard the Real in personal categories as Yahweh, or God the Holy Trinity, or Allah; whereas certain forms of Hinduism or Buddhism conceive of the religious ultimate in non-personal categories as Nirguna Brahman, or Nirvana, or Emptiness. In both cases, however, conceptions of the religious ultimate in the respective religions are not to be taken as truly ultimate, or as depicting the Real as it is in itself; rather they are penultimate reflections of the Real, which itself transcends both personal and non-personal categorizations. Thus images of the Real as either personal or non-personal are to be accepted as equally legitimate.

## **II. Theology of Religions and Apologetics**

We have seen that there is within Christian theology today a variety of views on the relation of Christian faith to other religions. Our purpose here is not to settle the question which of the three alternatives mentioned is most appropriate. I have argued elsewhere that if we are to have a perspective on other religions which is epistemologically sound, accurately reflects the phenomena of the other religious traditions, and is faithful to the clear teaching of

Scripture, then something very much like exclusivism, as defined above, is unavoidable.<sup>97</sup> As an evangelical, I accept the five defining tenets of exclusivism mentioned above, and thus I would identify myself with a broadly exclusivist perspective.

But I would hasten to add that there is nothing in exclusivism so defined which requires us to conclude that there is no truth or value in other religions or which demands that we act in intolerant ways toward those of other faiths. One can maintain that some of the central tenets of, say, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism are false and still respect and admire Vedantin Hindus and even work cooperatively together on certain joint projects. In other words, one can disagree sharply with others over fundamental religious beliefs but still live peaceably with them and even develop strong interpersonal ties with them. To deny this is to imply that we can only get along with and respect those with whom we happen to agree — something which makes a mockery of the notion of religious tolerance.

For those of us engaged in Christian mission in Japan, the cluster of problems stemming from religious pluralism is of more than merely academic interest. The current debate strikes at the very heart of our identity and our purpose for being here. After all, if pluralists such as John Hick are correct, then most of us are wasting our time doing what we are doing in Japan.

I would like to look very briefly at the need for a theology of religions, and then to focus upon the question of the place of apologetics in Christian mission. The latter issue will involve us in the problem of establishing criteria for assessing alternative religious worldviews. Given my own theological stance, I will address both issues from an evangelical Protestant perspective.

An evangelical theology of religions. The critical need for developing a comprehensive Biblical theology of religion is widely acknowledged. Just what is the source of our knowledge of God? Why are there so many different religions? Why is it that virtually every culture throughout history has included a religious dimension? Are religions nothing more than Satanic deception, and thus thoroughly evil? Or are they to be understood merely as sincere but misguided human attempts to reach God? Do they reflect a genuine knowledge of God? Can they be regarded as "fore-runners" or "precursors" of Christianity, so that Christian faith is the fulfillment of non-Christian religions? What is the nature of idolatry and

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<sup>97</sup> Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices*.

why is it so strongly condemned throughout Scripture? Just what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation? How should we go about even trying to answer these questions? Answers to these and other related questions will provide the framework through which we can properly understand other religions and then attempt to answer the more specific questions which might arise.

Developing an evangelical theology of religions will be an enormous task requiring the collaborative efforts of not only Biblical scholars but also systematic theologians, church historians, anthropologists, and specialists in various religions. Obviously an evangelical perspective on other religions must be firmly grounded upon the clear teachings of Scripture, for it is what Scripture teaches, and not the whims of popular culture, which is ultimately determinative.

One evangelical who has already begun working on the task is the Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock. In his controversial recent book *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, Pinnock argues vigorously that evangelicals can remain firmly committed to the final authority of Scripture and the supremacy of Jesus Christ while also adopting a much more positive, open attitude toward other religions. Pinnock is calling for a "paradigm shift" among evangelicals which rejects what he calls the "fewness doctrine" (the view that only a small minority of the human race, those who explicitly respond to Christ, will be saved) and which sees God's revelatory and saving activity on a much broader scale than has been customary. Pinnock proposes a theology of religions which rests upon two basic axioms: (1) God is a God of limitless love and mercy who has acted redemptively in Jesus Christ for all humankind; and (2) Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the only Savior for all humankind. Pinnock argues that, on the basis of Scripture itself, a high Christology is perfectly compatible with "an optimism of salvation." Pinnock is certainly not a universalist (he emphasizes that not everyone will ultimately be saved) and he does not say that non-Christian religions are vehicles of salvation. But he does suggest that God is "at work" among all nations and religions bringing people to Christ.

I personally do not think Scripture allows us to be as optimistic or positive toward other religions as Pinnock is, although I welcome his attempt to construct an evangelical theology of religions which is firmly grounded in the Bible. I have no quarrel with either of his two basic axioms, but the question is whether the two by themselves are sufficient. I would

suggest that Pinnock's two axioms need to be supplemented by further axioms clarifying the epistemological priority of God's special revelation (Scripture); God's absolute righteousness, holiness, and justice; the terrible reality of human sin and its consequences; and the fact that salvation — wherever it occurs — is always a gift of God's grace alone and is always appropriated through faith.

When this is done, and the comprehensive perspective of Scripture is taken into account, I suggest that what will emerge is a perspective on other religions which includes a fundamental tension between two opposing themes: First, other religions can be regarded as expressions of a genuine, although more or less misguided, search and longing for the one true God. The *sensus divinitatis*, the inherent awareness of God's reality, however distorted or incomplete, can be said to be reflected in the seemingly ubiquitous religious dimension of humankind. But second, religions must also be seen as expressions of human suppression of God's truth and of rebellion against God. Here, then, is the paradox of human religiosity: On the one hand, man is created in the image of God and thus longs for a proper relationship with God his Creator. But on the other hand, man is also a rebel, a sinner, and thus tries desperately to hide from God. Old Testament scholar Chris Wright puts it well: "The fallen duplicity of humanity is that we simultaneously seek after God our Maker and flee from God our Judge. Human religions, therefore, simultaneously manifest both these human tendencies."<sup>98</sup>

Apologetics and Christian Mission. Most missiologists, and certainly the overwhelming majority of those currently engaged in interreligious dialogue, would readily dismiss any suggestion that apologetics, traditionally understood, has a positive contribution to make to Christian mission today. Mention of the very term 'apologetics' conjures up images of medieval scholastics meticulously splitting logical hairs which are irrelevant to actual Christian faith. Many today would regard apologetics as part of the problem in Christian mission, certainly not part of the solution!

I believe this perspective is deeply flawed and reflects a serious misunderstanding both of the nature of apologetics and of Christian mission. Thus it is most refreshing to see Paul Griffiths' very significant new book which argues vigorously for the place of apologetics within interreligious dialogue itself.<sup>99</sup> Griffiths can hardly be accused of being an

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<sup>98</sup> Chris Wright, *What's So Unique About Jesus?* (E. Sussex: Monarch Publications, 1990), 85.

<sup>99</sup> *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

obscurantist fundamentalist — although within the mainstream Protestant tradition, he has a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies and teaches at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Griffiths vigorously challenges what he calls "an underlying orthodoxy" in current discussions of interreligious dialogue, an orthodoxy which maintains that "mutual understanding between religious traditions" is the only legitimate goal of dialogue; that judgement and criticism of religious practices or beliefs of other religious traditions is always inappropriate; and that an aggressive defense of the truth of the beliefs of one's own tradition should be avoided.<sup>100</sup> Griffiths very convincingly shows this pervasive assumption to be false. He correctly holds that it is often not only appropriate but also incumbent upon representatives of a given tradition (e.g. Christianity) to engage in apologetics in defense of central truth claims of their own religious community.

In fact, the reality of religious pluralism — the fact that there are many different religious worldviews competing aggressively for the souls of humanity — makes the need for apologetics more, not less, urgent. This can be illustrated by looking briefly at what is often called the "Great Commission", Christ's command in Matthew 28:18-20a:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Those of us engaged in Christian mission find our "marching orders" here. But in the contemporary context, this simple command implies some propositions which are widely regarded as problematic at best. Among them are the beliefs that Jesus Christ is the unique Lord and Savior of all humankind and that Christians are obligated to "make disciples of Jesus Christ," that is, to persuade followers of other religions to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. There is here an undeniable universality and normativity to the person and teachings of Jesus.

But the contemporary *zeitgeist*, increasingly influenced by the realities of religious pluralism, raises two serious challenges to this Biblical position. First, the notion that

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., xi.

one particular religious figure and one religious perspective can be normative and binding upon all peoples in all cultures and at all times — an assumption central to the Great Commission and to traditional understandings of mission — is today increasingly being dismissed as obscurantist and simply out of touch with the realities of our pluralistic world. That no single religion or religious figure can be binding on everyone is the explicit conclusion of John Hick's pluralism. And second, even if in principle it is granted that one religion might be superior to others, and that one religious figure might be universally normative, why should we assume that Christianity is in this privileged position? After all, why Jesus and not the Buddha?

This is not merely an academic or hypothetical question. Anyone involved in evangelism in Japan for any length of time will recognize its relevance. Perhaps nothing strikes the Japanese as more difficult to accept in the Christian message than the emphasis upon the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, why should one accept Jesus and not Shinran or Nichiren?

In the past Christian apologetics has been conducted largely in the West within the context of a post-Enlightenment secularism. The agenda for apologetics was defined by the challenge of agnosticism and atheism. But the legacy of the Enlightenment presents just one, and by no means the greatest, among many challenges to Christian faith today. Perhaps the most daunting task of the Christian apologist today arises from the fact of competing religious and secular worldviews and the accompanying problem of determining acceptable criteria for assessing alternative worldviews. The question in Asia today is not simply that of a choice between theism and atheism, or between Christian faith and secular humanism. The central issue for Christians in Asia (and increasingly in the West as well) is, Given the many alternative worldviews available today, both religious and secular, why should one become a Christian?

Well, why should one be a Christian instead of a Buddhist or a follower of Tenri-Kyo? Now there is an important sense in which we might answer this question from *within* the Christian worldview. Orthodox Christians hold that God has revealed Himself definitively in the Incarnation and the written Scriptures. And if indeed the Bible is the very Word of God, true and fully authoritative, then clearly anything that is incompatible with the teachings of Scripture must be rejected. Thus there is a significant sense in which the Christian, as a Christian, is entitled to reject any teachings which are incompatible with the claims of Scripture.

But this response, legitimate as far as it goes, hardly settles the matter. For although from within the Christian perspective one can evaluate competing alternatives on the basis of principles and values internal to the Christian faith, there is a logically more basic question which must be addressed: On what basis do we accept the Christian worldview as the true one? How are we to determine which among competing religious perspectives is true?

We must not forget that each of the major religions claims to be true (or to be the closest to the truth) and to provide acceptable criteria by which to evaluate other perspectives. The Christian appeals to the Bible as the supreme authority for religious questions; the Muslim rejects the Bible in favor of the Qur'an, Allah's definitive self-revelation dictated through the angel Gabriel; the Zen Buddhist claims to have direct access to the ultimate nature of reality through *satori* and *kensho*; the Advaita Vedanta Hindu appeals to the authority of the Upanishads and the experience of *samadhi* to validate his claims to truth; and Shirley MacLaine has her own direct channel to religious truth. Obviously, merely appealing to divine authority in and of itself settles nothing, for each tradition has its own authoritative structure. The question is, Which "authority" is in fact ultimately authoritative?

If we are to answer this question satisfactorily then clearly we must have access to some principles or criteria which can legitimately be applied to the evaluation of alternative worldviews. Now it has traditionally been accepted that there is such a thing as objective truth, that fundamental epistemological questions have answers, and that we can ascertain answers to at least some of these questions. Furthermore, it has been generally accepted that there are procedures and principles which can legitimately be used in the assessment of competing perspectives. That is, it has been recognized that there are at least some criteria which are "neutral" in the sense that they are not simply the product of, and thus restricted to, particular contexts or worldviews. They are context-independent and normative and thus can be applied in critically evaluating various worldviews. It seems to me that this approach, although not without its problems, is in the main correct.

However, the suggestion that there are any such context-independent criteria is today vigorously challenged from a variety of quarters. Postmodernism, and deconstruction in particular, vehemently denies this. Even more influential is the pervasive presence of

relativism in modern society. Relativism comes in many forms and degrees of sophistication, but at the heart of a thoroughgoing relativism is the denial of any universal truth or normative principles or criteria which transcend particular contexts and thus are valid at all times and in all places. All criteria for evaluating various perspectives are said to be the product of particular contexts, whether linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, historical, or whatever. Thus, it is said, although such criteria can be employed for evaluation *from within* a given context, they cannot legitimately be used for making critical evaluations of competing worldviews *from the outside*.

Although we cannot here explore in detail the difficulties with relativism, we should note that ever since the time of Plato the problem of the incoherence of relativism has been repeatedly pointed out.<sup>101</sup> It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to state the thesis of relativism — whether historical, cultural, linguistic, or conceptual relativism — without thereby engaging in self-refutation. Any attempt to formulate the thesis of relativism and to have it accepted as true will implicitly appeal to certain logical principles and rationality norms which cannot be restricted to particular contexts. For example, if cultural relativism is true, then the statement of cultural relativism itself must be true only within the context of the person making the statement. But then, why should anyone who is not a member of *that* particular context bother accepting it as true? And if the advocate of relativism offers reasons for the supposed truth of relativism, these reasons in turn will only be valid within the context of the one offering them. Why should anyone else accept them? In other words, the assertion of the truth of relativism is self-defeating.

I have always found it a fascinating irony that some of the most vigorous opponents of relativism themselves embrace a view which faces precisely the same difficulties as does relativism. I speak here of what are called theological fideists or presuppositionists. Fideism comes in many forms, but central to this perspective is the idea that each person's worldview is ultimately based upon certain faith postulates and that there are no "neutral" or

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<sup>101</sup> See *Dissonant Voices*, 166-180. Helpful discussions of relativism can be found in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, Jack Meiland & Michael Krausz, eds., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970); and *Rationality and Relativism*, Martin Hollis & Steven Lukes, eds., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

"autonomous" rationality norms by which to evaluate competing perspectives.<sup>102</sup> The Christian believer has a set of fundamental assumptions which must be accepted on faith, but so do the atheistic materialist and the Buddhist. Appeal to rational considerations alone cannot settle the question of the relative adequacy of alternative worldviews. Nevertheless, while holding that one's most basic assumptions are ultimately the product of a faith commitment theological fideists maintain that, based upon those commitments, Christians are to judge every other worldview on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus and the Scriptures.

But fideism faces precisely the same logical and epistemological difficulties as does relativism: any attempt to assert the truth of presuppositionism will implicitly appeal to certain logical, semantic, and rationality principles which cannot be mere presuppositions and which are logically prior to the act of presupposing anything at all. Furthermore, as in the case of relativism, the price of accepting fideism is forfeiture of the right to make any judgments at all about the truth of various worldviews. Neither relativists nor fideists have a basis for making claims to universal truth. For if there are no criteria which are context-independent — if all principles and criteria are simply the products of fundamental presuppositions within a given worldview — then it hardly makes sense for a Christian theist to claim to have *the truth* which is universally binding upon all persons irrespective of worldview and to be able to dismiss other perspectives as false. For given the fideist's premises, even the Christian's claim to truth is ultimately dependent upon the Christian presupposition.

I maintain that both relativism and theological fideism, in their various forms, are untenable and that we must recognize that there are some criteria which are context-independent in the sense that their validity is not limited to particular contexts. These principles can legitimately be used to evaluate various alternative religious perspectives. I have elsewhere suggested ten such principles.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> For a vigorous recent statement of theological presuppositionism see John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1987). For an epistemological critique of Frame's presuppositionism see my "Apologetics, Worldviews, and the Problem of Neutral Criteria," *Trinity Journal*, 12, (1991): 39-58.

<sup>103</sup> See *Dissonant Voices*, 180-195. The ten principles are as follows:

- P1: If a defining belief *p* of a religion *R* is self-contradictory then *p* is false.
- P2: If two or more defining beliefs of *R* are mutually contradictory at least one of them must be false.
- P3: If a defining belief *p* of *R* is self-defeating it cannot reasonably be accepted as true.
- P4: If the defining beliefs of *R* are not coherent in the sense of providing a unified perspective on the world, then *R* cannot plausibly be regarded as true.
- P5: Any religious worldview which is unable to account for fundamental phenomena associated with a religious orientation, or which cannot provide adequate answers to central questions in religion, should not be accepted as true.
- P6: If a defining belief *p* of *R* contradicts well established conclusions in other domains, and if *R* cannot justify doing so, then *p* should be rejected as probably false.
- P7: If a defining belief *p* of *R* depends upon a belief in another domain (e.g. history) which there is good reason to reject as false, then there is good reason to reject *p* as probably false.
- P8: If one or more defining beliefs of *R* are incompatible with widely accepted and well established moral values and principles; or if *R* includes among its essential practices or rites activities which are incompatible with basic moral values and practices, then there is good reason for rejecting *R* as false.
- P9: If the defining beliefs of *R* entail the denial of the objectivity of basic moral values and principles; or if they entail the denial of the objective distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, then there is good reason for rejecting *R* as false.
- P10: If *R* is unable to provide adequate answers to basic questions about the phenomena of moral awareness this provides good reason for rejecting *R* as false.

Recognizing that there are such principles is one thing; actually applying them responsibly to concrete cases is quite another matter. However, difficult as it might be, I suggest it is in principle possible to do so, and that a central element in apologetics in the coming decades should include such assessment of competing religious worldviews. Paul Griffiths provides a sketch of what such apologetics might look like by examining briefly conflicting Buddhist and Christian perspectives on the notion of "the self" and showing significant difficulties in some common Buddhist views on the self.<sup>104</sup>

I contend, then, that an essential element of Christian mission in religiously pluralistic contexts is properly conducted apologetics which defends and demonstrates the acceptability of the Christian worldview as opposed to alternative religious perspectives. In closing, let me mention four points which should guide the use of apologetics in Christian mission.

First, we must recognize that apologetics in and of itself will not result in the salvation of anyone. Apologetics, just like the simple proclamation of the gospel itself, is ineffective apart from the power and work of the Holy Spirit. But this does not make apologetics unnecessary any more than it renders evangelism unnecessary. Apologetics should never take the place of evangelism. In our witness to an unbelieving world primacy of place must always be given to the simple, Spirit-anointed proclamation of the good news in Jesus Christ. But in a world with a bewildering variety of religious worldviews there is a real need for informed and culturally sensitive apologetics which will show a skeptical world why Jesus alone should be accepted as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Second, one must always make use of morally acceptable means of engaging in apologetics. For example, any apologetic activity which is manipulative or coercive, or which in some way infringes upon the dignity of the other party is to be rejected. Similarly, there is no place in properly conducted apologetics for ridicule of other religious figures or teachings. To be sure, where appropriate, it is important to ask pointed questions of followers of other traditions, raising what are perceived to be significant inconsistencies or difficulties in their religious worldviews. But this can be done in a gracious and non-threatening manner. The emphasis throughout should not be on winning an intellectual game but rather challenging the other party to consider seriously the claims of Jesus Christ.

Third, great sensitivity must be applied in the use of apologetics in cross-cultural contexts.<sup>105</sup> One must be sensitive to and must make use of acceptable means of argumentation and persuasion. What is acceptable or convincing in London or Paris might actually be counterproductive in Kyoto or Nairobi. In Japan, for example, heavy emphasis upon rational argumentation alone will probably not be effective; rational argument here needs to be supplemented by careful cultivation of a personal relationship of trust with the other person and appeal to other social and emotional factors. Sensitivity to one's target audience is essential.

And fourth, Paul Griffiths rightly reminds us that the social and historical context must also be considered when doing apologetics.<sup>106</sup> It is one thing to argue for the truth of Christian faith in a context in which Christians are a minority in a society dominated by another religious worldview (e.g. Hinduism). It is something else again to do so where the dominant perspective is nominal Christianity, and where there is a long history of adherents of other religions being persecuted by so-called Christians. In the latter case it will be very difficult for the target audience to distinguish between the arguments for Christian faith themselves and the oppressive role Christendom has played in their own religious and cultural history. One must be very careful about how one tries to demonstrate the acceptability of Christian faith in such a context.

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Griffiths, *op. cit.*, 85-108.

<sup>105</sup> For more on culture-specific apologetics see my "Toward Contextualized Apologetics," *Missiology*, XVI, (July 1988): 289-303.

<sup>106</sup> Griffiths, *op. cit.*, 77-80.

Where does this leave us? Am I suggesting that effective missionaries in the future must all be philosophers? Not at all. But I am arguing that as we engage in Christian mission in a world increasingly sensitive to the issues of religious pluralism we must not only proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with boldness, but we must also be prepared to demonstrate why others too should accept Him as the one Lord and Savior. May we do so with wisdom and grace.

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## A Response to:

### Why Jesus Instead of the Buddha?

by  
Robert  
Lee<sup>107</sup>

I find it very difficult to evaluate Harold A. Netland's paper without hearing it in the context of the other papers presented in the seminar. Without hearing that context, I am tempted to conclude that I agree with his major contention, namely, "that an essential element of Christian mission in religiously pluralistic contexts is properly conducted apologetics which defends and demonstrates the acceptability of the Christian world view as opposed to alternative religious perspectives." The importance of Christian apologetics was brought home to me in a story related by Professor Masatoshi Nagatomi, a Buddhist scholar, about his colleague, Professor Gordon D. Kaufman, a Christian theologian whom Netland cites in his book. When the two professors presented papers at the three-hundred-year-anniversary celebration of Ryukoku University, Professor Kaufman asked the Ryukoku professors to explain in modern terms the meaning of the claim of the exclusive path of Jodoshinshu and the meaning of the term (symbol) Amida Buddha to modern people. The Ryukoku University professors were shocked and divided. They had expected a Christian professor to defend a western view of monotheism as opposed to a Buddhist view of the ultimate and were unprepared for the questioning of the intelligibility of the teaching of the exclusive path of salvation in Jodoshinshu itself. Some responded with traditional Shinshu theology that in the age of *mappo*, Christianity and other religions represent other paths which were no longer viable, that only the *nenbutsu* was salvific according to Shinran. Others were so impressed by Professor Kaufman's line of questioning the universality of

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Amida in modern terms that they later decided to translate into Japanese Professor Kaufman's classic booklet, *An Essay on Theological Method*<sup>108</sup>.

In the ten minutes allotted to me, I will not rehearse Netland's arguments for a Christian apologetics, which I am in basic agreement with, especially since he has expanded upon these in his recent book, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Faith*<sup>109</sup>. Rather, I want to comment upon my uneasiness about the direction of his project as a whole from three perspectives:

- 1) Epistemology — I am confused by the limits of his epistemology.
- 2) Biblical theology — I find his claim to a dependence upon a biblically based theology unfulfilled.
- 3) Missiology — In spite of his appropriate title for this paper, "Why Jesus instead of the Buddha?" or later "Indeed why should one accept Jesus and not Shinran or Nichiren?" I find his missiological concern misplaced.

### **Epistemology**

Although in his paper Netland does not propose a particular theory of epistemology, he does attempt to steer between the horns of what he describes as "relativism" and "theological fideism" by asserting "that there are some criteria which are context-independent in the sense that their validity is not limited to particular contexts." He lists ten principles in a footnote, which are developed more fully in his book (pp.180-195). If I understand him correctly, these principles are neutral or transcultural and independent of the faith presuppositions of the religious person, and, I assume, can be used equally by non-Christians or Christians.

However, my major concern is that the knowledge of God is neither neutral or transcultural nor independent of faith presuppositions. Knowledge of God in the Bible is given in the cultural history of ancient Israel and later Judaism and is received as we participate in that continuing history. In other words, religious belief and practice, especially faith in Jesus Christ, is inseparable from its historical particularity. According to the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, in his now classic essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," in a passage preceding the one which Netland cites in his book:

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<sup>108</sup>Scholars Press (AAR Studies in Religion 11), revised edition, 1979.

<sup>109</sup>Eerdmans, 1991.

In religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes, while the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life. This confrontation and mutual confirmation has two fundamental effects. On the one hand, it objectifies moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality. On the other, it supports these received beliefs about the world's body by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth. Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.<sup>110</sup>

That is to say, religious symbols become authoritative by integrating both meaning and motivations (and/or moods).

In short, Netland ignores both the circular nature of religious knowledge and its holistic character, or stated more simply in the opening statement of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God." In other words, from both the anthropological and theological perspectives "The knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected."<sup>111</sup> Human knowledge is inseparable from the human conditions of space and time. This not to say that we do not know, but that we know only in part [I Cor. 13:9-10]. Here, I am not disputing that systemic thinking may offer propositions reflecting religious knowledge. If Netland wants to argue that all religious knowledge or belief systems have a cognitive component which, within human limitations, can be stated in propositional form, and that these forms then can be compared with similar propositions

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<sup>110</sup>Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 89f. Parenthesis is the author's.

<sup>111</sup>*Institutes* I.1.1.

from other world views, then I have no problem.<sup>112</sup> But his suggestion that falsifying religious world views by his context-independent criteria would be religiously convincing ignores the nature of authority in religious knowledge.

### **Biblical Theology or Systematic/Apologetic Theology?**

As intimated above, biblical knowledge of God is prior to abstract or reflexive knowledge; that is, biblical theology is prior to systematic theology. Systematic theology is a synchronic understanding of reality and is derivative from the union of both biblical theology (which is diachronic) and contemporary apologetical needs. In his essay, "Toward Contextualized Apologetics" in the journal, *Missiology*, Netland distinguishes between a transcultural and a culture-specific apologetics, a distinction that I think is misplaced. I am not rejecting that in principle a distinction between "pure" and an "applied" apologetics is possible but rather that the priorities — that "pure" is prior and "applied" is derived — should be reversed.<sup>113</sup>

Differentiating what "it meant" (biblical theology) and what "it means" today (systematic theology) is important.<sup>114</sup> The priority of the Bible means that each people will have the task of doing reflexive thinking, systematic or apologetic theology, in their own context.<sup>115</sup> As shown by the late David J. Bosch in his book, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, theology has taken on different forms in different ages. In his description of that first historic paradigm shift from primitive Christianity to Greek theology, Bosch states:

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<sup>112</sup>The anthropological analogy here is language. Although all human beings have the capacity to speak language, each individual learns and speaks a particular language that is historically conditioned. In Netland's case, a group of individuals may even learn a "context-independent" language, which may be in fact more inclusive religiously than the respective religious languages of the individuals.

<sup>113</sup>Harold Netland, "Toward Contextualized Apologetics" in *Missiology* (Vol. 16, July 1988): 294f.

<sup>114</sup>For a discussion of the hermeneutical significance of this distinction between "what it meant" and "what it means," see Krister Stendahl, "BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, CONTEMPORARY" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962).

<sup>115</sup>Crucial here is that the Bible as Holy Scripture can be translated, whereas the Quran cannot. Cf. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact of Culture*. Orbis Books (1989).

The Christian tradition was reworked from the bottom up, and the end result was a way of theologizing that made sense to the Greek mind. In a very real sense this paradigm shift was inevitable. The fledgling Christian movement could either remain within the confines of the small Jewish world or branch out into the *ecumene*. And Hellenism was the cultural form of the world into which Christianity was first introduced. Therefore Hellenization was equivalent to universalization. There was no real alternative to it...<sup>116</sup>

In theoretical terms systematic theology is an attempt to grasp reality in its most comprehensive and universal form. But as humans we know only in part; therefore, there is that continuing task of reformulating the truth in terms of the historical and cultural contexts of each society. This is not a denial that religious truth is available, but a denial that it can be reified in a particular theology, even in the one that has served the West so well as the universal expression of the truth. In a sense in every age and place people must return to the biblical record, which itself is a historical and culturally conditioned document and hence, of course, the need for systematic theology. But that theology must arise afresh from the study of the Scriptures and may entail a rewriting of the creeds or even new forms of expression.

### **Religious Pluralism: The Missiological Issue**

"Why Jesus instead of Shinran or Nichiren?" is the right question but the missiological issue is lost in Netland's project because of the structure or the frame he sets up in his paper. In his zeal to define and later to defend exclusivistic "evangelical theology" over against other more inclusive or pluralistic theologies, he distinguishes three different types of *theological* responses to other religions, exclusive, inclusive and pluralistic responses. In the process two errors occur. First, he confuses theological and epistemic issues by assuming that a given type of theology is correlated with a particular type of epistemology. The major examples he cites in his book seem to affirm his contentions, but not all theologies of religion can be so easily correlated.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 211.

<sup>117</sup>Time does not allow me to elaborate on this point. For a useful discussion of the need to differentiate theological and epistemological issues from an evangelical perspective, see Paul G. Hiebert, "Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology" and "The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift," *TSF Bulletin*, 8(4): 5-10; 8(5): 12-18 (1985).

Second and more important, the missiological problem of religious pluralism is surrendered to the inclusivist or pluralist. The primary missiological issue of religious pluralism is the factual reality of religious pluralism, as made explicit on the cover of the January 4, 1993, special issue of *Newsweek* magazine (international edition), which depicts contemporary reality by a vivid scene "in the streets of Tbilisi, Georgia," and by the headline "THE YEAR OF FRATRICIDE 1992: HATE THY NEIGHBOR."

Religious pluralism is not a new problem but a perennial, important issue as seen throughout biblical history in terms of the "nations" in the Old Testament and especially the Jew and Gentile question in the New Testament. To a certain degree the issue in modern times was resolved in the history of the thirteen colonies in the new world by a secular constitution that was amended in the bill of rights to guarantee religious freedom, but an implicit (Christian) civil religion remained,<sup>118</sup> and by an even more secular constitution in France. In the modernization of Asian nations, India, too, attempted — after the second World War — to resolve religious pluralism by a secular state that would respect religious differences, a solution that appears to be falling apart. In China the final (or current) solution was also a secular state that explicitly rejected religion but allowed toleration of the major religious traditions, including Christianity, a rather tenuous solution at its best. In Japan's modernization the Meiji oligarchy, contrary to the trend elsewhere in the world, explicitly established civil religion to incorporate religious diversity but exclude Christianity,<sup>119</sup> an issue to which the recent annual Hayama Missionary Seminar participants have continually returned.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>The key article that triggered the contemporary debate was Robert Bellah's *Daedalus* (Winter, 1967) essay, "Civil Religion in America," reprinted in the author's *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. Harper & Row (1970).

<sup>119</sup>See my essay, "Nihonjin no identity, tennosei oyobi kindaika" in *Tennosei no kensho: Nihon senkyo ni okeru fukahi na kadai*. Shinkyo shuppansha (1991). Cf. also Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868-1988*. Princeton University Press (1989).

<sup>120</sup>See the recent issues of the Hayama Report, 1992, 1991, 1990, 1989, 1988, 1987.

In secular democracies, where religious choice is viable, the ideal situation of the logical debate about the "truth" of the particular tenets of a particular religion may be an interesting option. Therefore, the rules for a "context-independent" criteria need to be established. But I suspect in most of the world, including places where the validity of religion is denied — as shown in the current break up of the former Soviet Union and other socialist nations — religion is deeply rooted in one's cultural identity on a national, ethnic, and personal level. Thus, the missiological issue of religious pluralism is not "why should one accept [choose] Jesus and not the Buddha?" but why should I abandon my (given) identity in Shinran, Nichiren, etc.? For the Japanese to become a first generation Christian is to deny one's identity as Japanese, an alienating experience. The missiological issue is not simply a rational decision for objective truth, although obviously there is a cognitive component to decision making, but involves the degree one needs to reject, alter or deny one's identity. In other words, to what degree is alienation from parents, family, friends and nation necessary when one becomes a Christian?

For the first-generation Japanese Christian, there will be alienation from family, friends and society. But how much, at what point, and to what degree must Japanese believers give up, alter or deny their Shinto-Buddhist-Confucian way of thinking, acting and feeling in order to become Christian? For these missiological issues an "exclusivistic theology" is not helpful and, as I have argued above, perhaps not even epistemologically or biblically adequate. In Pauline thinking, it was possible (although perhaps not logically) to maintain one's Jewish religious identity (Phil. 3: 3-6) and become a Christian, just as it was possible for Gentiles to become Christians without losing their identities as Gentiles. I close with another classical quote, this time from a famous and controversial Japanese Christian, who rejected the idea of "an amorphous universal man" and argued for a Christianity with Japanese particularistic values:<sup>121</sup>

When a Japanese truly and independently believes in Christ, he is a Japanese Christian, and his Christianity is Japanese Christianity...A Japanese by becoming a Christian does not cease to be a Japanese. On the contrary, he becomes more Japanese by becoming a Christian. A Japanese who becomes an American or an Englishman or an amorphous universal man, is neither a true Japanese nor a true Christian.<sup>122</sup>

...My friends are Honen rather than Wesley, Shinran rather than Moody. Those of the same religion do not necessarily have the same direction of faith. The heart with which I turn to Jesus is like the heart with which Honen and Shinran relied on Amida. It is not the heart with which English and Americans believe in Christ.<sup>123</sup>

...Does Christianity lose by bringing the spirit of *samurai* into it? Was not Latin Christianity a happy fusion of the Christian faith and the old Roman spirit? Was not Luther's German Christianity a valuable and distinct contribution to Christianity? So then, pray be careful that you call your American or English Christianity a universal religion, and condemn my Japanese Christianity as national and sectional....I have seen no more sorrowful figures than Japanese who imitate their American or European missionary teachers by being converted to the faith of the latter.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>This argument is developed in my essay, "Service to Christ and Country: Uchimura's Search for Meaning," in *Culture and Religion in Japanese-American Relations: Essays on Uchimura Kanzo, 1861-1930*, edited by Ray A. Moore. The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Study (1977). Reprinted in *The Japan Christian Quarterly*, 54: 92-110 (Spring, 1988). The quotations are from .

<sup>122</sup>*Uchimura Kanzo zenshu* (1932-33), Vol. 15: 518-19

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 16: 130

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 15: 579.

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## Interreligious Dialogue

by  
Clark  
Offner<sup>125</sup>

### Introduction

Over the years, one of the attractions of this Hayama Seminar for many of its participants has been the breadth of perspective of those in attendance. Unlike many other missionary gatherings which attract like-minded people having a common ethnic, theological or spiritual affinity, Hayama Seminar has traditionally been a gathering of different-minded individuals who were usually able to air their agreement or dissent, whether quietly or vociferously, in a congenial manner. Some missionaries who felt threatened by the views of those on the opposite side of important issues or who presumed that participation in such a gathering was an unwarranted compromise have not returned, but those of us who have endured one another over the years have found ourselves benefited by the interaction of intrareligious dialogue. It seems, however, that the range of perspectives has been narrowed, viewpoints have been mutually influenced or the "Hayama spirit" has had a moderating effect so that arguments of earlier years have been toned down. Either pulpit-pounders have stopped coming or they have stopped pounding the pulpit.

Thus it is commendable that a new element has been introduced into this year's program which may inject a dash of new vitality into the ongoing tradition. At Seminar business meetings over the years, a regular item for discussion or debate has been whether or not the doors should be opened wider to permit the participation of women and Roman Catholics. The inclusive statement adopted at the 1992 Seminar has already borne fruit in that both a

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Roman Catholic and a woman are included in the program, not as outsiders or visitors, but as integral participants. Despite their minority status, we trust they feel welcome.

## Definition

The English word "dialogue" comes from the Greek noun dialogismos and is related to the verbs dialogizomai and dialegomai, all of which are combinations of "through" and "speak." These Greek terms may denote a kind of speaking within oneself, or reasoning, a kind of "dialogue" that all thinking people regularly engage in, but is more commonly used in relation to speaking between two or more persons who exchange opinions, reason together, discuss, debate or dispute. In the New Testament, it is used to signify the mental state of Mary when she heard the strange salutation of the angel (Lk.1:29), of the inner thoughts or reasonings of those seeing Jesus' deeds (5:22; 6:8) and of the disputing of Jesus' disciples among themselves (9:36). It is often used of Paul's reasoning in synagogues and public places with Jews and other unbelievers (Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8f). (Incidentally, I prefer the Japanese term *mishinja*, literally, "not yet believer" to the harsher English term "unbeliever.")

The English word "dialogue" denotes a conversation, an exchange of ideas or opinions. Although the term is not used in relation to Jesus, his conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus (Jn.3:1ff), the Samaritan woman (4:7ff), the Roman centurion (Lk.7:2ff) and the Syrophenician mother (Mk.7:25ff) may be considered "dialogues." The Old Testament

contains many dialogues between God and people (Abraham, Moses, psalmists and prophets, for example) and between people (Job and his friends, certain prophets and their contemporaries). The incarnation itself manifests a concern on the part of God to speak in a very concrete way to people who may or may not be ready to listen to or perceive his Word. Dialogue in the New Testament is not limited to the reasonings of Paul with the "not yet believing" Jews or Gentiles. Within the Christian Church itself a form of dialogue was carried on regarding the important issue of the role of the Old Testament law, with its rite of circumcision, dietary regulations and observing of holy days in the Christian life. Such questions on which believers held very diverse opinions were not avoided but confronted and discussed. As a result factions, divisions and heresies developed and have continued until today. Some divisions are based on fundamental differences which cannot be

overlooked, but others are related to quite minor matters, the result of misunderstandings or personal, emotional involvement. Until persons with their various opinions, beliefs or perspectives engage in an honest dialogue, the true character of the differences is often not grasped. Dialogue within the Christian community has been generally promoted in recent decades to the mutual enrichment of the parties involved. In the global village in which we now live and with the increased contact between formerly distant cultures and religions, an attempt to at least correctly understand those with different customs and beliefs is a pressing necessity in the sphere of religion as well as in society at large.

In a broad sense of the term, the very fact that a missionary lives among people of a different religion establishes what a Pontifical Council has called a "dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations." A second kind of dialogue is a "dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people." The "dialogue of religious experience" involves persons, rooted in their own religious traditions sharing their respective modes of "prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the absolute." This paper, however, will focus on what is termed the "dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values."<sup>126</sup>

## **Purpose**

It is necessary from the beginning to clearly elucidate the purpose of interreligious dialogue. Dialoguers are not included in the divinely appointed offices noted in Ephesians 4, where the list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The Apostle Paul would probably have fit into each category, but there seemed to be a different type of ministry related to each of these offices within the church. While "building up the body of Christ" was the common aim, different methods were used in accordance with the particular "gifts" of the individuals. Christian leaders engaged in interreligious dialogue may function within the church as prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers with the aim of strengthening

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<sup>126</sup> Dialogue and Proclamation (Excerpts) in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1992): 84.

the church, but when they meet with leaders of other religions, they must recognize the different dimension in which they are operating. At times, indeed, they may speak as prophets or teachers, but the offices of evangelist and pastor are not appropriate here.

This is to say that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to convert, to win new believers nor to build them up in the faith. Rather the purpose is to understand the faith of another and to share one's own beliefs. Jerry Gill has contrasted apologetics with dialogue. He characterizes the apologetic approach as a one-sided presentation, whether aggressive or defensive. All religions may similarly engage in their own kind of apologetics. But the dialogical posture is to listen and share. "We must remember," he writes, "that even believers 'see through a glass, darkly,' and there is no inherent contradiction between confidence and humility."<sup>127</sup>

According to John V. Taylor, dialogue "means a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions, between their various ways of thinking. The object of this dialogue is understanding and appreciation, leading to further reflection upon the implication for one's own position of the convictions and sensitivities of the other tradition."<sup>128</sup>

Along with the aim of seeking to honestly understand the faith of the other, the Christian seeks to give a faithful witness to his or her own convictions. Lesslie Newbigin has written that "the purpose with which the Christian enters into dialogue with people of other faiths" is to be an "obedient witness to Jesus Christ." He further makes clear that

...this does not mean that the purpose of dialogue is to persuade the non-Christian partner to accept the Christianity of the Christian partner. Its purpose is not that Christianity should acquire one more recruit. On the contrary obedient witness to Christ means that whenever we come with another person (Christian or not) into the presence of the Cross, we are prepared to receive judgment and correction, to find that our Christianity hides within its appearance of obedience the reality of disobedience. Each meeting with a non-Christian partner in dialogue therefore puts my own Christianity at risk.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Jerry Gill, *Faith in Dialogue, A Christian Apologetic* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 12.

<sup>128</sup>John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue" in *Christianity and Other Religions, Selected Readings* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 212.

<sup>129</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Lutheran Church in America, 1975), 11.

To consider interreligious dialogue, therefore, as a means of evangelism is a confusion of categories. The aim is to learn, to understand the beliefs of another while making a lucid explanation of one's own. There is no need to water down or refrain from expressing one's genuine convictions. As John Cobb has written, "The best dialogue occurs when the partners are deeply convinced of many things. Truth is best approached not by the absence of convictions but by submitting strong convictions to the light of criticism."<sup>130</sup> Those who are unsure of their position or whose convictions are based simply on dogmatic, authoritarian pronouncements have not been given the gifts for inter-religious dialogue, which involves humble listening, sympathetic understanding and reasoned explanation.

### **Presuppositions**

Ted Peters, professor of systematic theology at Pacific Lutheran Seminary, began an article entitled "A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue" with the following description:

It happened at a recent interreligious gathering. At the other end of the building, in the meditation room, some members of our group were learning Zen techniques while the rest of us sat in the Gothic chapel waiting for mass to begin.

Suddenly a commotion broke out in the chancel. A Catholic priest from Tibet had grabbed the microphone and was shouting something about Jesus Christ being the 'only way, the truth and the life!' A couple of other priests chased him around, trying to grab the microphone. Then two men leaped out of the pews and joined the melee. I thought to myself, 'Yes, now I see that religious wars are possible.'

When the attackers found they couldn't bodily throw the interloper out without losing every sense of dignity and decorum, the presiding priest

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<sup>130</sup>John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue, Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 45.

asked us all to leave and announced that mass would be held in another room. He was hoping that the self-appointed orator would lose his audience. Most left. I stayed, and so did a dozen others. We listened to the priest's impassioned rebuke. We were selling out our Christian faith, he said. The very fact that we were conversing with 'Buddhist idolators' was evidence that we had lost our commitment to the Christ of God 'who alone can bring us out of darkness into the light.' To conclude, he bowed and prayed for our souls.

This dramatic episode reminded me of the pressing need for a coherent theology of interreligious dialogue.<sup>131</sup>

Dr. Peters then proceeds to present three different positions from which one might approach interreligious dialogue. The first he calls "confessional exclusivism" which he presumes was the position of the renegade Tibetan priest. According to this view, religious insights of non-Christian religions cannot be seriously considered by one who recognizes the centrality of Jesus Christ and the absoluteness of the divinely inspired revelation in him. To those holding this view, interreligious dialogue is not only useless but positively dangerous, apt to lead participants astray by contaminating the truth with lies.

The second view, which he finds in the writings of John Hick and Paul Knitter, he designates "supra-confessional universalism." In this view, religions are different roads up the same mountain or to the same center. One transcendent divine reality is partially revealed under different names in both Christianity and non-Christian religions. From this philosophical perspective, Christians should abandon or tone down their claims about the uniqueness of Christ and of salvation through him alone. In order to facilitate interreligious conversation, it is advisable to emphasize "the Godhead" rather than Christ.

Dr. Peters questions the assumption that the various religious traditions include partial revelations of the same divine reality. This cannot be affirmed, he maintains, until dialogue takes place to see if it is actually so. Furthermore, he adds, "by asking the Christian partners in the conversation to give up their confessional stance, the supra-confessionalists de-Christianize Christianity, thereby dissolving the very dialogue they wish to promote." John Cobb would agree, for he has written: "To sacrifice belief in the incarnation for the sake of

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<sup>131</sup>Ted Peters, "A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue" in *The Christian Century*, (October 15, 1986): 883.

dialogue would not only impoverish us but would also take from us our most precious potential gift to the dialogue partner. But", he continues, "there is no need for such a sacrifice in order to enter dialogue."<sup>132</sup>

The third view presented by Dr. Peters, which he affirms (and with which I concur), he calls "confessional–universalism", which he describes as follows:

This position affirms the claims of the Christian faith but is open to the insights of other faiths. It is confessional, because it affirms the gospel of Jesus Christ as borne through history by the Christian tradition. It is universal in two ways: first, because it regards its claims as ultimate (valid for all people of all times and places), and second, because it believes that there is more truth to be learned and that dialogue has the potential for expanding our understanding.

Dr. Peters' article includes four conditions for making interreligious dialogue meaningful and fruitful. 1) Each party to the dialogue should have a distinctive position to put forth. 2) Participants should be genuinely disposed to listen sympathetically to the positions of others. 3) The disposition of love is required, by which we impute integrity to other participants and seek to genuinely share our own faith. 4) Time and stamina is needed to discuss matters in depth and with thoroughness. He concludes with the observation that, as a result of dialogue, we may have to change our minds. "But there is absolutely nothing to fear on this score. If the God in whom we believe is in fact the creator and reconciler of the cosmos, then there is no truth — if it be genuine truth and not just partisan propaganda — that we could ever learn that could possibly lead us away from God."<sup>133</sup>

Over the centuries, Christians in general and Christian missionaries in particular have viewed non-Christian religions in various ways. At times, the beliefs of others have been completely ignored as the Christian message was proclaimed regardless of the religious or cultural milieu. When non-Christian religions are considered evil, the work of the devil, Christians feel bound to try to demolish them. Needless to say, such a self-righteous, judgmental attitude has provoked a malignant concept of the character of Christianity that many of us wish to change. The spirit of the Crusades in the 10th-12th centuries may find support in the Old Testament commands to exterminate the Canaanites, but it is impossible to reconcile this with the spirit of Christ.

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<sup>132</sup>John Cobb, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>133</sup>Ted Peters, *op. cit.*, 885.

In more recent decades, "separated brethren" within the Christian family have begun talking together and having fellowship with one another. In some cases, the result has been a healing of divisions and a uniting or reuniting of groups that were previously considered incongruous. It was found that the gaps separating them were not unbridgeable, that differences were not always doctrinal or theological and that even when they were, the divergence was not as great as had been imagined. Earlier divisions that were based on personal, ethnic, regional differences, a transient historical situation, different methods, different interpretations of certain Bible passages had become hardened and, at times, misrepresented. One result of the ecumenical movement (in which I include the International Congresses on World Evangelization that met in Lausanne and Manila) is the recognition that conversation, fellowship or dialogue with those with different beliefs, opinions, interpretations or emphases may be mutually enriching. Differing emphases need not be mutually exclusive; they can contribute to a deeper understanding of a many-faceted truth. Not only does one's understanding of the position of the other increase; one is better able to grasp more fully the meaning of one's own tradition. Movements to bring together divergent elements within the Christian Church have stimulated similar attempts to converse with believers of other religions. But if the underlying, unexpressed motivation for such conversation is simply to better understand the enemy in order to more effectively defeat him, the effort is neither honorable nor conducive to genuine dialogue.

Professor Leonard Swidler of Temple University who has been engaged in interreligious dialogue for many years has written a "Dialogue Decalogue" which he calls "Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue."<sup>134</sup> He begins by making a clear distinction between dialogue and debate. Dialogue is not confrontational. The aim is neither to persuade nor convert but to learn, "to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality." Participants in dialogue must be completely honest and sincere and they must assume the complete honesty and sincerity of the other partners. They must not compare their ideals with their partner's practice, but rather their ideals with their partner's ideals and their

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<sup>134</sup>Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward A Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 13–16.

practice with their partner's practice. Here, I am reminded of the words of Robert E. Speer, whose conservative theological perspective was very influential in my early study of non-Christian religions. In his book, *The Light of the World*, written in 1911, he emphasized that any comparison between Christianity and non-Christian religions "must be absolutely just and fair." "If it is not just and fair, it is not Christian, and no truly Christian result can flow from it. We must not judge any religion by standards and methods whose application to our own religion we would resent."<sup>135</sup>

Professor Swidler goes on to say that the participants in interreligious dialogue must define themselves. They are not to be defined by non-believers. "Only the Jew, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside." Dialogue, he maintains, can take place only between equals. If "the Muslim views Hinduism as inferior, or if the Hindu views Islam as inferior, there will be no dialogue," he states. Mutual trust and a self-critical attitude are also important. One must be willing to humbly accept criticism of one's own tradition and recognize its weaknesses when viewed from a different perspective.

John V. Taylor notes the difficulty of honestly recognizing and living with contradictions, whether between our beliefs and those of others or the unresolved opposites in ourselves. "Instinctively we either try to destroy what is opposed to our understanding of truth or we pretend the antithesis is unreal."

It takes a high degree of maturity [he continues] to let the opposites co-exist without pretending that they can be made compatible. It takes the same maturity to respect an opinion that conflicts with one's own without itching to bring about a premature and naive accommodation. I suppose this is what is entailed in loving one's enemies. One has to appreciate the reason for their opposition, grant its integrity, and deal honestly with its challenges, without surrendering any of one's own integrity or diminishing the content of one's examined convictions. And there will generally have to be a great deal of that kind of loving before we can expect any genuine reconciliation of ideas and beliefs. The loving which is expressed through the attempt to listen and understand and honour, through the frank recognition and appreciation of convictions that deny one's own, through the opening of one's imagination to the real otherness of the other, is, in my view, the function of interfaith dialogue.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Robert E. Speer, *The Light of the World, A Brief Comparative Study of Christianity and Non-Christian Religions* (Boston: The Central Committee on the United Study of Missions, 1911), 305.

<sup>136</sup>John V. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 213.

## **Dangers**

Those who consider other religions demonic and fear contamination from engaging in serious conversation with sincere believers of those religions will, of course, refuse to participate in such dialogue. Others will, for various reasons, not be comfortable engaging in interreligious dialogue, including those who are unsure of their own faith, who have never developed their own rational understanding of the beliefs they have accepted or who are unable to intellectually articulate their convictions. While I recognize the fears that arise in the minds of some that engaging in interreligious dialogue will result in a weakening of the evangelistic spirit and the dangers implied in such words as compromise, relativism, syncretism, heresy, apostasy, I will leave the discussion of such dangers to those who wish to raise them during the discussion period, since I do not fear that a genuine (Biblical) Christian faith will suffer from a dialogical encounter with believers in other religions and I would rather conclude this paper emphasizing the benefits of such an encounter.

## **Benefits**

In this concluding section, the focus changes from a theoretical emphasis quoting from the works of others to a more practical outworking of the theory based on personal experience. Before coming to Japan, in order to gain a basic insight into the religious or philosophical outlook of the Japanese people, I chose as the subject of my seminary thesis: "A Comparison of 'Salvation' in the Amida Sects of Japanese Buddhism and Christianity" and "Marxism and Religion" for my graduate school thesis. Using only English language reference materials, I was able gain a preliminary understanding of the major religious ("Pure Land" or Jodo Buddhism) and social (Marxism) influences in the Japan of that day.

After arriving in this country, however, I recognized the need for living, personal contact and Japanese source material to attempt to understand the thinking or faith of this people.

Research for my doctoral dissertation, written in Japan and related to the so-called New Religions, included visiting the headquarters of the various religions, speaking with founders, leaders or important teachers there as well as attending meetings on the local level and talking with local leaders or lay believers. I also had limited contact with Buddhist and Shinto priests. In the process of such interreligious conversations, I became aware of the fact that many religious leaders not only had misconceptions related to Christianity but they were ill-informed about Japanese religious traditions other than their own as well. (And some were not that clear regarding their own tradition either.) I also felt the need to consider how I would respond to the same kinds of quite direct, and sometimes embarrassing, questions regarding Christian theory or practice that I posed to them if they were to interrogate me.

As a result, I began a "Religion/Culture Discussion Group" (*Shukyo Bunka o Kangaeru Kai*) that has met monthly for over twelve years. (Our December meeting was #132; for the mathematicians who caught the discrepancy, we do not hold meetings in August.) The meetings are listed in the meeting column of local newspapers and regular attenders receive postcard notices. There are always a variety of religious or non-religious backgrounds represented. It is our custom to have a speaker, whether from within the group or an invited guest, give a talk for about one hour and then have a discussion period of a little more than an hour. Over the years, speakers have included Buddhist priests from Jodo, Jodo Shin, Nichiren and Soto sects, Shinto priests, Christian pastors or priests, leaders or believers in Tenrikyo, Omoto, Rissho Koseikai, Islam and other smaller religious groups as well as avowed atheists.

And what have been the benefits? I have come to a deeper understanding of people, of the thinking and faith of Japanese, who due to their culture, education, social surroundings have come to view life and the world in an entirely different way than I do. I have also come to a deeper understanding of myself and my own faith as I have interacted with those with different beliefs. Some of my stereotypes related to the beliefs, practices and believers in other religions have been discarded. Various aspects of my own traditional, conservative, westernized, provincial, "logical," comfortable theology have had to be altered as a result of

this interaction on a personal level. My understanding of God has been enlarged and deepened and new facets of Truth have been revealed. I have also been provided with a regular opportunity to give a clear presentation of my Christian faith to those present, many of whom would never enter a church and whose impressions of Christianity and Christian methods have been very negative. I have been given the opportunity to speak at gatherings of other religious groups and to contribute articles to periodicals of other religions. Some participants in this dialogue have manifested an earnest, honest, open spirit, a humble willingness to learn. Others display the narrow, dogmatic attitude of a closed mind. I have been forced to recognize the difficulty for most people of combining genuine tolerance with firm conviction. Those with the seemingly strong conviction tend to close their ears while others speak and only seek to convince others of their higher truth, while some of the so-called "tolerant" souls have no conviction of their own, so they agree with whatever is said. I have also been embarrassed to discover in the attitudes of believers in other religions a more Christian spirit than I myself manifest at times and I have been forced to consider whether the heart of the Christian faith is related to a verbal, propositional statement or a certain spirit that is communicated by life.

I am thankful that, while engaged in this interreligious dialogue, I have not been able to retreat to an "ivory tower." As the pastor of a Japanese church, I am forced to keep my feet on the ground by preparing sermons, Bible studies and other talks for a small, provincial, very common congregation. Certainly my messages and methods have been influenced by the contact with the "not-yet believers," but I believe that they are more in keeping with the spirit of Christ as a result.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will reiterate that God has seen fit to bestow certain gifts upon certain people to enable them to effectively accomplish the particular work given them to do. All Christians do not possess the gifts to be prophets, teachers, pastors or evangelists or to engage in interreligious dialogue in a formal sense. It is well for us to recognize our own gifts and limitations and to work accordingly, without condemning others for pursuing a different type of ministry in line with their gifts. We need to remember what group of people received the sternest rebuke of Jesus and why. It was not the believers of other religions but the religious leaders of God's chosen people who were so sure of their own theology and biblical interpretation that they missed the Truth himself.

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**A Response to:****Interreligious Dialogue**

by  
Don  
Schaeffer<sup>137</sup>

I am grateful for the privilege of dialoguing with Clark Offner on the subject of interreligious dialogue. I must confess I feel rather inadequate because of my limited experience. Clark was ministering in Japan before I was even born!

I want to thank Clark for a well written paper which shows the fruit of his long experience of dialoguing with others. I commend his emphasis on the importance of dialogue and on love as the spirit in which dialogue must take place. Like Clark, I am convinced that dialogue is necessary (albeit a different kind of dialogue than he has in mind) and I affirm the importance of listening to and understanding others.

Although Clark refers to the Bible, I have the uneasy feeling that the Bible is not the controlling authority in his discussion of dialogue. This is my basic concern and it affects virtually every area of his paper. As one who accepts the absolute and final authority of the Bible, I believe that the truth of Scripture relating to dialogue must not be compromised.

Clark refers to several examples of dialogue found in the Bible, but the dialogue found there is rather different from the kind of dialogue Clark proposes. In the story of Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4, we do not see Jesus seeking to appreciate her religious values, but rather we see Jesus insisting that "you Samaritans worship what you do not know" (Jn. 4:22). Jesus is not attacking the Samaritans' sincerity. "Rather, he is saying that...they stand outside the stream of God's revelation, so that what they worship cannot possibly be characterized by truth and knowledge."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 223.

Likewise with Paul. Paul dialogues because he is an evangelist who is seeking to persuade people and bring them to the saving truth in Christ. Paul goes to Athens and he is "revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry" (Acts 17:16, JB). But his reaction to idolatry is not only negative but also positive, as he seeks by proclaiming the gospel to turn the people from their idols to the living and true God. Luke tells us that Paul dialogued in the synagogue as well as in the marketplace (Acts 17:17).

As John Stott reminds us, "Paul's dialogue was clearly a part of his proclamation and subordinate to his proclamation. Moreover, the subject of his dialogue with the world was one which he always chose himself, namely Jesus Christ, and its object was always conversion to Jesus Christ."<sup>139</sup> Dialogue in the New Testament is always linked to the proclamation of the gospel. Apostolic dialogue always aims for the conversion of people to Jesus Christ.<sup>140</sup>

This being the case, I am not sure why Clark states "that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to convert [or] to win new believers." I concur with Clark that we dialogue to understand the faith of another, but I want to understand with a view to presenting the gospel in more meaningful and persuasive ways. Perhaps Clark can explain to us why he considers dialogue as a means of evangelism to be "a confusion of categories." Luke shows that dialogue for Paul was a method of evangelizing in which he carefully dealt with his hearers' questions and doubts.

In dealing with the presuppositions of dialogue, Clark refers to an article by Ted Peters which points out different positions from which people approach dialogue. All who are involved in dialogue bring existing theological perspectives which in large measure determine how they dialogue. I put myself in the first camp, the exclusivist one, believing that God has revealed himself definitively in the Bible and that Jesus Christ, the ultimate disclosure of God himself, is the only way to God.<sup>141</sup> Although I hold to this view, I see

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<sup>139</sup> J. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 63.

<sup>140</sup> See Martin Goldsmith, *What About Other Faiths?* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), chapter 9 "Dialogue and/or Proclamation?"; Ajith Fernando, *Jesus and the World Religions* (London: Tyndale, 1987), chapter 2 "The Place of Dialogue in Evangelism"; David J. Hesselgrave, "Interreligious Dialogue – Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Theology and Mission*, ed. D. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 227-240.

<sup>141</sup> For a lucid defense of Christian exclusivism see the excellent study by Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Some of the following discussion is indebted to chapter 8 "Evangelism, Dialogue, and Tolerance."

dialogue not as useless or positively dangerous as Clark states, but rather as a very necessary endeavor in evangelism.

Clark puts himself in the third camp, "confessional-universalism," which "affirms the claims of the Christian faith but is open to the insights of other faiths...believ[ing] that there is more truth to be learned." Perhaps Clark can more clearly delineate his position by responding to the following questions.

First, what authority status does the Bible have for you? Is it absolute, non-negotiable truth? I believe that Christianity, unlike other religions, is a revealed religion and my approach to dialogue comes from a commitment to a fully authoritative Bible. If the Bible is not our final authority, where and how do we find truth or are we awash in a sea of relativism where everyone can believe what is right in his own eyes?

Second, how do you view non-Christian religions? Do other religions save? The Bible teaches that at the heart of the non-Christian religions is a distorted view of God that results in a wrong understanding of people and their lost condition. Non-Christian religions are not devoid of truth (because of general revelation), but neither do they lead people to God. They are inadequate and misleading when it comes to salvation. If in our desire to dialogue we give the impression that God and salvation can be found in other religions apart from a radical conversion, then nothing is gained and all is lost. It is not a question of whether there is truth and good in other religions; it is a matter of there being but one divinely appointed way of salvation.<sup>142</sup>

Thirdly, what do you think of Christ? Is Jesus the only way to God? In dialogue one can so relativize Christ and His work that we deny His uniqueness. The Christian attitude as Kraemer so elegantly stated is not: "'We have the revelation and not you,' but pointing gracefully and humbly to Christ: 'It has pleased God to reveal Himself fully and decisively in Christ; repent, believe and adore.'"<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>Stott says "what we vehemently deny is that these [non-Christian religions] are sufficient for salvation and (more vehemently still) that Christian faith and non-Christian faiths are alternative and equally valid roads to God.... [T]here is also a need...to disclose the inadequacies and falsities of non-Christian religion and to demonstrate the adequacy and truth, absoluteness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ." John Stott, *op. cit.*, 69.

<sup>143</sup>H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Kregel reprint, 1963), 119.

I enter into dialogue with Japanese not to defeat them or demolish their religions, but rather to bring them to Christ. I do not want to coerce or manipulate or treat people insensitively. The truth must always be spoken in love. And yet we must be careful not to lose the truth by compromising the gospel in attempting to dialogue and make the truth attractive to others. Some who dialogue change the gospel into something unrecognizable in their desire not to cause offense. Yet Luke tells us that Paul's dialogue resulted not only in some being persuaded, but also in others becoming obstinate and even starting riots (Acts 17:4-5; 18:4-6; 19:8-9; see also 17:17-18). Dialogue never became a substitute for evangelism in Paul's mission, replacing proclamation. Rather dialogue is an essential part of evangelism as we seek to listen to others so that we may share the gospel in a relevant way. Perhaps Clark and I are not as far apart as I think we are. Further dialogue may show how deep our differences really are on the nature of interreligious dialogue.

## The Dynamics of Religious Change and Development Among Japanese Buddhists

by  
Kenneth J.  
Dale<sup>144</sup>

I was requested to present a paper on practical aspects of religious life in Japan. How do Japanese make religious decisions and changes? What religious concepts or precepts have an effectual appeal to Japanese people? Where is the intersection between religious values and everyday life?

I would like to deal with these questions by centering some observations around the theme of the dynamics of religious change and development or growth among Japanese Buddhists. It might be more desirable to be able to make a presentation on how Japanese change from Buddhism to Christianity, but I am going to focus on an aspect of religious change which most of us have probably not had a chance to observe or experience. I will report on observations on how Japanese Buddhist leaders try to motivate people toward stronger belief, and how they present Buddhist teachings as the answer to people's practical everyday problems.

I will do this by reporting on a specific case study of a twentieth century Buddhist sect, Rissho Koseikai. Although I did this study a number of years ago, the parts of it which I will present in this paper seem still relevant to the religious scene today.

We will especially focus on the Rissho Koseikai (hereafter, RKK) activity called *Hoza*, which RKK translates as "group counseling." Anyone is free to attend a Hoza group, and there present any kind of problem for discussion by the group, and solution by the trained group leader. 110

These leaders also function as teachers. I have personally attended many Hoza sessions, taking careful note of the points of teaching and problem-solving made by the group leaders.

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I will share with you quite a number of verbatim reports — excerpts from these sessions.

After this survey of Hoza conversations, we will briefly take up some points of interpretation from a psychological and Christian perspective. In this will be included interpretations by my colleague, Dr. Susumu Akahoshi, who is a Christian psychiatrist.

Lastly, some evaluations of the Buddhist approach to religious change and development, and comparisons with the approach of the Japanese Christian church will be made.

## **I. A Report of Observations of Rissho Koseikai**

### **A. Problem-solving in Hoza of Rissho Koseikai**

The officially stated purpose of Hoza is to apply the teachings of fundamental Buddhism to everyday life problems, to help people solve any and all the problems of their life by a proper application of Buddhist doctrine to specific situations. This process is called *musubi* in RKK terminology, which literally means "tying together." The teaching is tied in with the everyday problem; i.e., the problem is solved in the light of the Buddhist Law.

Perhaps the most characteristic thing about the handling of problems brought to Hoza is the use of a stereotyped answer for them. Generally speaking, problems are not handled as individual, unique experiences which require an individual, unique solution. Rather, they are seen as merely a particular manifestation of a universal problem common to everyone. Therefore the solution required is a general, universally applicable one.

The comprehensive answer will be stated in the form of an inclusive formula at the end of this section. First, cases from Hoza conversations will be presented to illustrate the various aspects of this formula.

#### **1) Manifestation of *Karma***

In RKK the idea of suffering as a manifestation of *karma*, that is, the Buddhist teaching that the ethical consequences of one's acts determine future fate, either in one's own life, or in the experience of future generations, is a presupposition basic to the understanding of all human problems. The following is a typical illustration.

*Mrs. D:* My 4-year-old is dumb, but do you suppose even with this speech handicap it will be possible for him to enter the RKK kindergarten?

*L:* We must realize that this problem is eventually related to your own treatment of your mother when you were a child. You caused your mother suffering, so now you are reaping the results of that in the suffering which your child causes you.

## **2) Value of Suffering**

This is an important step in the total solution. The individual is exhorted not to be bitter or despairing about *karma* and the suffering which has appeared as the fruit of *karma*, but rather to be thankful for it, recognizing that it has opened his eyes to see the need for a change of heart. Thus the disadvantageous situation can be turned into advantage for that individual's life.

(Mrs. B described her miserable home life and says she is considering leaving her husband.)

*L:* Don't leave him, whatever you do! Rather, be thankful for him and for this trouble, because that will make you strong. Even in the case of the development of cultures, it is the country which has difficult circumstances which develops faster than the one in good circumstances. That's why cold Japan has developed faster than the warm islands of the south seas.

*Mrs. A:* My health has not been so good lately.

*L:* The Buddha gives us sickness so we will be led to enlightenment through it and be more thankful for our health from now on. Only those who have been sick can help another sick person. So your sickness is for the sake of helping you to help others.

## **3) Self Reflected in Others**

This is a central concept and is a key to answering most of the problems raised in Hoza. People expose sin in one another simply by reflecting each other's character. Suffering forces a person to self-examination and investigation of the cause of his suffering. At that point his first impulse is to blame someone else as being the cause of his trouble. But RKK teaches that the fault always lies in oneself. The other person's action merely mirrors or reflects the real cause, namely a weakness in oneself.

*Mrs. A:* I'm very upset because the person who led me to faith has moved from Tokyo without telling me anything about it.

*L:* Don't blame him. There must be something in yourself which has caused this. How has your relationship with him been in the past? I hope you have learned that you shouldn't blame others for misfortune, for the fault is always in yourself. It is just as it is when you point with your finger at someone, blaming him. Notice that when you do that there are always three fingers pointing back at yourself.

#### **4) Need for a Change of Heart**

When the individual brings his problem and relates his suffering in Hoza and finds the cause of his trouble to lie in his own evil past, what must he do to free himself from this suffering which *karma* has produced? He must have a change of heart, repent, and apologize to others and to his ancestors. Several things are especially significant here. The first is that the vicious chain of *karma*, that is, the moral cause-effect law of the universe, can be broken by a change of heart. Another is that the repentance before the Buddha is indistinguishable from repentance before one's deceased ancestors. Thus repentance and veneration of ancestors are inseparably connected. Another significant point is that change of heart is also inseparably linked to the person whom one has offended. Where the problem involves broken relations with another person, part of the solution lies in going to that person and humbly apologizing for past wrongs.

(Mrs. E told her experience of having her miserable home life improved through attending Hoza.)

*L:* If Mrs. E had not cut the causal chain of her lustful nature here in Hoza through sincere repentance, her son who has just gotten married, would no doubt have the same trouble she has had. So you too, Mrs. A, must break your *karma* chain now through a change of heart, or your baby here will have the same trouble in his marital life when he grows up. (Mrs. A, having her child with her, had previously told her marital problems.)

#### **5) Exhortation to Submissiveness**

In most cases of problem-solving, an ethical solution which instructs the inquirer how he must behave in order to solve his problem is a part of the answer. Even this

ethical solution is standardized, and can be summed up in the exhortations, "Don't be selfish, but be considerate of others and submissive to others." Humility and submissiveness are supreme virtues.

*Mrs. A:* I find my husband very hateful. He's a good-for-nothing! I've tried my best to be a good wife; our trouble is all his fault.

*L:* We all say that at first, but we learn differently after learning the Law. Every one of us wives here was bossy and irate with our husbands at one time. But now after learning the Law, we have seen that our family strife was due to our own bossiness, and we have all become, or at least are becoming, humble and submissive persons.

## **6) Exhortation to Faithfulness in Ancestor Veneration**

The last component of the standard answer is the exhortation to be devout in performing the rites of ancestor veneration. This is closely interwoven with the idea of *karma*, for one's personal *karma* is not confined to his own life as an individual, but is integrally bound up with all those who gave him his life. The comforting and appeasing of ancestors, and learning to adopt the attitude of gratefulness toward them is one of the means of breaking the chain of *karma* and finding release from suffering.

*Miss C:* I've become afraid to go out of the house lately, so I just stay home all the time. When I do go out and someone looks at me, I blush and feel embarrassed. Once I almost fainted when I was riding the train. Tell me what's the matter with me.

*L:* What is your name? Did anyone in your family ever die of a neurotic condition?

*Miss C:* Yes, 17 years ago my mother died from mental illness.

*L:* You haven't been praying enough for your deceased mother. You must pray for her comfort. If you do that, you will get well yourself.

In summary, then, based upon the evidence of the above cases, the standard answer to the problems presented in Hoza for solution can be stated thus: Your suffering is a manifestation of the law of *karma* in your experience. Do not be resentful about this suffering. Rather, be thankful, for it has forced you to re-examine your life. And do not be resentful toward other people who may seem to be the cause of your trouble, for other

people's behavior is simply mirroring your own. Ultimately the cause of your suffering lies in your own self. Therefore you must have a change of heart and apologize both to your ancestors and to the one you have wronged. Then you must start immediately to live right, which means you must not be selfish or proud, but thoughtful of and submissive to others. At the same time you must be faithful in venerating your ancestors, for the living cannot separate themselves from their deep-rooted connections with those who have gone before.

### **7) Answers Related to Folk Beliefs**

In addition to the above, leaders frequently make use of devices which to the Western observer can be generally described as superstitious. But in RKK thought it is believed that such methods as divination, onomancy and the use of the horoscope are about 85 percent reliable. Leaders claim that these methods are used as short-cuts in getting to know the member's character and in analyzing his problem.

*Mrs. B:* At lunch this noon my three-year-old fell off his chair and bumped his head. It swelled so badly that I had to put cold cloths on it. Do you think his head might be injured?

*L:* Tell me more about your family before I can answer. What year were you born? What year was your husband born? What is the disposition of your child? Has anyone in your family ever died of an accident?

*Mrs. B:* Yes, seven years ago an uncle died in an accident.

*L:* (Looking through the horoscope) Oh, oh! This is a crucial year for you, Mrs. B! This accident could have very disastrous results. You must pray fervently to your ancestors all during this year, lest something terrible befall your family.

### **B. Doctrinal Instruction in Hoza**

The second major category of material which comprises the content of Hoza conversations is instruction in the doctrinal teachings of RKK. Here we will make an effort to sift and classify the teaching material into a few major themes, or key ideas, which constitute the essence of RKK teaching as actually presented by Hoza leaders. We will naturally find some of the themes brought out in problem solving will be repeated in the instructional statements.

## 1) The Doctrine of Interdependence

The doctrine of interdependence comes first because it is a key to the whole RKK system for interpreting the sufferings and blessings of life and the road to self-improvement. There are different ways of expressing this concept, as indicated in the following excerpts.

*L:* The difference between Christianity and Buddhism is that Christianity sees people as individuals, separate from one another, and created by a God who is also a separate being. Buddhism sees all things as part of the Great Whole, connected integrally by cause and effect.

All things are interrelated and interdependent. Think of your life in terms of a cross where the vertical line represents the interrelatedness of all the things existing in the world at the present moment, and the horizontal line represents the interrelatedness of all things throughout time — the past on the left side, and the future on the right side.

The concept of interdependence is focused in the formula, *in-en-ka-ho*, which is a dominant motif in all RKK teaching. The formula can be defined thus: *in* means primary cause (cause in past time); *en* means present condition or circumstances (secondary, cause); *ka* means result, and *ho* means recompense (reward or retribution for the result). In Hoza conversations the meaning of this basic concept is explained and made operative in everyday life. The *in-en-ka-ho* formula has practical value for the reshaping of everyday life.

*L:* The practical, important thing is to be aware of this truth of cause and effect and to realize that our present troubles are caused by past mistakes, and that present mistakes will cause future trouble. In accordance with that knowledge it is our responsibility to repent of the past and resolve to do good in the future. Thus we will create good rewards for our future. To act this way is to know enlightenment. Unenlightened people don't know why they are suffering. They just say, "How awful! What shall I do!" without trying to find the cause for their trouble, so they don't know how to avoid similar trouble in the future.

The significance of this approach to life's experiences is sharpened when it is compared, as it frequently is, to the Christian way.

*Mrs. A:* You Christians teach, "Turn the other cheek," but we say, "Find out why he hit you," for that is the only way to solve the problem.

## 2) The Doctrine of *Karma*

Behind the *in-en-ka-ho* formula lies the basic Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, which recognizes the interdependence and continuity of succeeding generations, and also recognizes reincarnation of the same soul in more than one earthly existence. When these aspects of *karma* are brought into the discussion of "*in-en-ka-ho*," issues become blurred and unverifiable explanations are offered as reasons for a particular problem. Such explanations sometimes instill fear or distract attention from more immediate factors. A few examples will show this.

*L:* If you don't put forth your best efforts to do good works, you will surely reap punishment. The mercy of the Buddha is equal toward all, but the distinction as to whether we receive it or not is created on our part, by whether we do good or evil. Of course there is a difference in the reward of those who do good works diligently and those who don't. However, even if two people do their best all their life, there is sometimes inequality of reward. This is because of the *karma* working from their previous life. Previous life refers to your total past: what happened to you one minute ago, or what happened to your great grandfather. Although he has long been dead and you never knew him at all, his soul might be living in you, and your present suffering might be because of his evil deeds.

## 3) The Value of Suffering

As already indicated in the examples of problem-solving, RKK teaches that suffering is a valuable part of human experience, because it is the occasion through which people are forced to reflect on and discover the moral dynamics of life. Thus, suffering is the alarm clock which awakens the soul to its true nature and turns it toward a better life.

*L:* In Hoza we find the cause of suffering. Usually the cause is not clear at first, and it takes some investigating. Take my case, for which I found the solution in Hoza. I was cheated by a crafty salesman who came to the door offering me woolen material at a bargain price. I bought material from him, but it turned out to be some poor substitute for wool. In Hoza I came to the realization that the primary cause for this misfortune was the selfish desire of my own covetous heart, and the secondary cause was the crafty salesman. The solution lay in repenting of my covetousness.

#### 4) Ethical Teachings

The teaching discussed thus far lies in the realm of theological doctrine. But RKK does not put primary emphasis on theology or doctrine as such. The thrust of the teaching is always aimed at *concrete change of behavior*. Practice of the virtues of gratitude, filial piety, unselfishness, and the like are the proof of salvation and the ultimate goal of RKK's religious teaching. The prior importance of ethical behavior and actual practice as over against mere conceptual knowledge of religious doctrine is constantly emphasized.

*L:* Only RKK is a truly practical religion, that is, it is only RKK which applies religion to life. All other religions are simply intellectual doctrines to be understood in the head but not practiced in life.

Showing gratitude and honor to parents is the primary virtue. RKK seeks to bring about a renewal and strengthening of this traditional ethical base and value system, called *oya kôkô* (filial piety).

*L:* In a word, RKK is the teaching of filial piety, for the attitude of respect on the part of children for their parents, along with our Japanese family system, is the essence of all that is best in Japanese life.

Working out from the base of the family, the RKK member is exhorted to live in harmony on all levels of his social existence. The harmony which begins in the home must be carried out in the community, the nation, and the whole world. World peace is the ultimate goal, and is a motif currently being emphasized in RKK public meetings.

*L:* The idea of Hoza is the spirit of harmony, i.e., mutually helping each other to live in harmony, beginning with family and neighborhood, and extending to nation and world. In all relationships we should not live for ourselves but for others.

What is the path toward achieving harmony in society? It is to get rid of one's selfishness and live for others.

*L:* The source of evil is in our selfish heart. We must learn how to live with and for each other, and by the help of each other. No man is an island, but we are all particles in the great stream of the universe.

Specifically, what stance should the individual take in order to live for others? The essence of the answer to this question is in the exhortation to be submissive toward others. Although this principle is applied especially to women in their relation toward their husbands, and to youth in relation to their parents, it is also advocated as a general ethical principle.

*L:* We must be thankful even for a mean husband, because if we learn to be submissive even to them, we have indeed perfected our character. Our spiritual task as wives is to learn to be meek before our husbands.

## 5) Veneration of Ancestors

RKK affirms and gives fresh impetus to the traditional practice of ancestor veneration, a concept deeply rooted in Japanese religious feeling. Exhortations to be faithful in the act of ancestral veneration (*senzo kuyô*) run like a refrain through Hoza discussions and teaching. The principle theological interpretation of ancestral veneration made in Hoza is that this act gives recognition to one's dependence on all that has gone before as being the ground and grace of one's own existence.

*L:* Mr. D, you should foster the feeling of gratitude to your ancestors. This is the basic thing in our religion. You will never understand what we are teaching here if you don't start from that point. We can't expect you to change all your Christian conceptions, but at least you must try to understand this most basic element, namely, the need for venerating your ancestors.

But there is a second theme running through the emphasis on ancestral veneration, one which has even more emotional power. That is the idea of ancestral veneration as being an effectual act of comfort for or appeasement of the dead. Frequently there are emotional appeals made on the basis of the longing of a deceased parent or grandparent for the comfort of someone's prayers.

*Mrs. F:* My son died some years ago on the 23rd of the month. My husband died several years prior to that on the 18th of the month. Is it all right to do the memorial service for both of them on the same day?

*L:* Yes, if you choose the earlier date. The earlier the better, for your son is waiting for that memorial service all the time, and it will make him happy to have it come early. You know that the memorial service is a great comfort to the deceased.

## Conclusion

In the above we have given illustrations of the central points of RKK doctrine as it is popularized for laymen in Hoza.

It was observed that teachings which cluster around the concept of social and cosmological interdependence are fundamental. Teachings centering around a positive interpretation of suffering, teaching oriented toward practical, ethical admonition, and exhortations regarding the significance and necessity of ancestral veneration are all prominent in Hoza instruction.

The positive doctrinal instruction given in Hoza also stands in sharp contrast to the general attitude of indifference toward particular claims to truth. Cultural anthropologists generally agree that the Japanese mind inclines toward reconciliation of opposites rather than toward polarization, and this perspective on truth produces a broad tolerance in matters of religion. The Zen authority Suzuki says that as a mother embraces all her children with unconditional love and never discriminates among them or calls some good and others bad, so man should embrace all things, not judging some good and others bad, but leaving all things as they are. It is natural and right to accept all things as they are, rather than to try to reconcile what seems to be in opposition. Truth or falsehood is not the primary issue in religion. Truth and falsehood are subjective and therefore relative. The common approach to religion is expressed in the Japanese proverb: "The many paths of Mt. Fuji all lead to the summit," which implies that the various religious roads all appear to be different, but all are the same in essence.

In contrast to this general indifference toward religious truth, RKK holds a clear position and proclaims a straightforward message. Its official claim is to endeavor to save all mankind through enlightenment to the Four Noble Truths, and it carries on this saving work by propagating its teachings through publications, mass meetings, personal evangelism and Hoza. In a society where ethical and social structures have disintegrated and the masses are without spiritual leadership, such positive, aggressive teaching meets with ready response from many quarters.

## **II. Some Interpretations of the Observations of Hoza**

The following section of the paper is mainly borrowed from the commentary on Hoza by Dr. Susumu Akahoshi, a Christian psychiatrist with whom we have worked for many years. His interpretations are a perceptive analysis of the dynamics of religious change and development from both psychological and theological perspectives.

### A. A Psychological Interpretation of Hoza

I recognize that the various forms of subtle pressure in Hoza have a connection with the Japanese dependency-type of psycho-sociological mentality. Forms of coercion can be at least partially explained by the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of traditional Japanese group life, in which unquestioning obedience is a virtue. In the Hoza group there is the tacit understanding that a degree of coercion may be necessary to form groups in which the members can enjoy relying on each other, and it is this which makes use of pressure a viable means of group leadership. This psychology is revealed in the Japanese proverb, "Yield to the powerful" (*Nagai mono niwa makareru*).

The instruction in RKK teaching as it is conducted in Hoza reveals the psychology of dependency, as evidenced by the frequent expression of Hoza leaders, "Our basic belief is that we live in dependency upon all things in the universe." The Japanese special dependency-type religiosity is verbalized in doctrinal form in this doctrine of inter-dependence. Indeed, this is a central and fundamental characteristic of Japanese religion from ancient times.

Furthermore, such ethical imperatives as "Honor your parents," "Be unselfish," "Be humble," etc. are all for the purpose of maintaining group harmony. It is quite clear that the fundamental philosophy of the Seventeen Articles of the Shōtoku Taishi Constitution, namely, "Hold harmony in honor" (*Wa wo motte, totoishi to nasu*) constitutes the core of RKK ethical teaching, and that this teaching issues from the psychology of dependence. The exhortation to venerate ancestors is the ultimate ethical imperative expressed in the form of a religious rite. This is the final expression of the dependency-type religiosity of RKK, for, as the text says, here is a recognition of one's dependency on all that has gone before as being the very ground of one's own existence.

Thus, the essence of salvation in dependency-type religion consists of a change of heart from sheer dependency (*amae*) to dependency-type autonomy (*amae-gata jiritsu*). Conversely, it can be said that in Western autonomy-type religion the essence of salvation consists of a change of heart from sheer autonomy (*jiritsu*) to self-love dependency (*jiko-ai-gata izon*).

## **B. A Comparison of Japanese and Western Religiosity**

There is an intrinsic foreignness of the Gospel in relation to any human culture. The Christian Gospel is a "stumbling block" to both the Oriental dependency-type religiosity and the Occidental autonomy-type religiosity, and even if an international type of religion devoid of particular nationalistic bias is established in the future, the Christian Gospel would continue to be a stumbling block for it also. For all human religiosity is an act of the human ego, no matter how advanced and refined it becomes.

The fundamental character of Japanese religiosity is expressed in the term "collectivity orientation," as was discovered in the observations of Hoza. I would like to point out a few problems which arise as we attempt to compare this characteristic with Western religiosity.

In Japan there is danger that religiosity may be little more than group psychology, and the fostering of individual maturity will be neglected, so that without the group to depend on, the individual may fall. Japanese religiosity purposes to maintain group harmony, and considers group harmony to be more vital than individual maturity. Moreover, personal maturity in Japanese religiosity is the maturity of dependency-type autonomy, and maturity is recognized as the ability to promote group harmony, not as the fulfillment of the self based on rational values, such as marks Western individualist maturity. Such maturity is possible only within the context of a group. Indeed, without the group to depend on the individual falls. Hence, Japanese religiosity lacks a fundamental sense of individual responsibility.

## **III. Some Evaluations and Comparisons of Risho Koseikai's Hoza with Christian Patterns**

This last section will present a few major issues which grow out of the above observations and interpretations of the dynamics of religious change and development in RKK's approach to contemporary Japanese. After a brief description of each topic, a comparison with the approach of the Christian church in Japan will be made. Hopefully these comments might stimulate thinking on the part of Christians about the task of Christian evangelism and future directions for church growth in this same soil of Japan.

### **A. Accommodation to Social Structure**

*Hoza is an extremely effective organ of religious propagation because, as a group movement, it is rooted in traditional patterns of collectivity orientation, group dependency, and mutually binding interpersonal relations, all of which are factors of primary importance for the maintenance of social and psychological security for Japanese.*

"We-consciousness" — a commitment to the group over against individual aggressiveness — is one of the chief characteristics of Japanese culture. Hoza is a supreme example of accommodation of a religious activity to the social structure in which it exists. Given the social solidarity consciousness of the Japanese it would seem that participants find the healing they need to a greater extent through the group approach of Hoza than they would through an individual approach. In Hoza people find the fellowship and sense of belonging which is so vital to them.

Christianity has come to be identified with an emphasis on the individual. This has been a needed counteractive force in this other-directed and group-directed culture. But this emphasis is an ambiguous virtue. "One feels that Protestant Christianity has become so individualized that even the family has been lost sight of as a basic unit for evangelization," yet in the Japanese social setting it is especially important to work with the family or group as the basic unit rather than with the individual.<sup>145</sup>

Japanese critics say that unfortunately the urban church has no primary-group character, but this is urgently needed because it gives the believer both religious security and also emotional security.

### **B. Relevance of the Message**

*Hoza, as part of a popular religious movement of and for the masses, propagates a popular message, that is, its concerns are concrete, appealing and wholly relevant to the everyday problems of common people. The message promulgated in Hoza meets people on their own level of comprehension and is attractive to them because it promises happiness and many other benefits, reinforces their existing ethical values of conformity and submission, and sanctions popular folk beliefs.*

RKK has attempted to make Buddhism relevant to the life of every man. It has sought to make Buddhism a people's faith (*minkan shukyo*).

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<sup>145</sup>R. Lee, *Stranger in the Land*, 182.

The ancient sutras exist in language that is not even readable to modern Japanese, but President Niwano has digested their content and proclaimed it in a form understandable even to the least educated. The aim of Hoza is to help people find what *oshakasama* (Sakyamuni Buddha) is saying to them today. An effort is made to renew the people's conscience by recalling them to their ethical responsibilities: obedience to parents, submissive service of wives to husbands, humble service to others, etc.

RKK believes that, although everyone wants to have a pure faith, yet that purity should not be sought at the expense of separating oneself from the world. Religion must partake of the contaminated (*doro-kusai*) world in which it exists; only thus can it truly encounter and struggle with the corruption.

If the new religions are preoccupied with making their message popular and relevant, Christianity is preoccupied with the purity of its theology. Japanese Christianity jealously guards the traditions of classical dogma handed down from the Western forebearers. This has been both its strength and its weakness. A firm grasp of the historical faith is one of the strengths of the Japanese church as it takes its place alongside the churches of the world. At the same time this has been its weakness in that "Japanese Christianity has had no language with which it could speak directly to the Japanese laborers and masses." A noted Japanese Christian novelist says that "Christianity in Japan has been the property of a few intelligent people," and as such "floats unattached on the surface of present day Japanese society. The fact that a number of new religions are getting to the hearts of the masses may be disquieting for those Japanese Christians who deplore the decrease in the number of their believers."<sup>146</sup> A popular movement is bound to become dirtied with a mixture of pure and impure elements. Can the church risk becoming a popular movement? But we must also ask, Can the church risk remaining in its isolated splendor of theological purity?

### **C. Techniques of Propagation: "Counseling"**

*The techniques of propagation used by Hoza introduce modernized approaches into the dormant climate of established Buddhism. They are geared toward efficient operation in an urban setting, as evidenced by such things as lucid teaching, practical counseling, and zealous personal evangelism. At the same time, the methods of Hoza are adapted to traditional patterns such as*

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<sup>146</sup>R. Shina, cited by J. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, 306.

*teaching by the case method, rote learning and counseling in a group context where dependency is fostered.*

As for the practice of counseling, it is obvious that the traditional Japanese approach to counseling is foreign to American concepts of counseling, the aim of which is to help individuals accept responsibility for making the significant decisions for their own lives. If Hoza were to be seriously studied as "group counseling," the word "counseling" would have to be used with the Japanese connotation and definition of the word, recognizing that this counseling would have a different aim and different dynamics from counseling in the Western context.

A chief source of the conflicting interpretations of counseling lies in the differing concepts of personality and individual responsibility, which in turn are the products of cultural and religious systems. That is to say, Western personality theory is based on the concept of respect for the individual person as being the supreme value. That fundamental respect demands that every individual be granted the freedom and responsibility to make his own choices, both in matters of religious faith and everyday decisions. This attitude toward the individual is, generally speaking, lacking in Hoza as we have observed it. In its place is an approach which makes group harmony and obedience to group leadership the supreme value.

The Christian church has within its faith and theology the richest resources for conducting helpful and healing counseling based on the foundations of respect for the integrity and freedom of persons, of nurturing of socially responsible selfhood, and of the ultimate concern of love for the other. All that remains is to find a functional form — perhaps a Hoza-type group — through which these resources can be channeled to the masses. Without a suitable form of expression, the Christian treasures remain hidden.

#### **D. Levels of Personal Need**

*The physical and affective needs of individuals, such as problems of health and marital relations, and the need for social fellowship, especially among women, are fulfilled through Hoza, for it is not primarily a place of intellectual instruction, but a place of answering everyday life problems on the most concrete level. This is particularly necessary in view of*

*the Japanese tendency to value emotional, intuitive experience above logical reasoning, and also particularly necessary for reaching the less educated strata of society.*

The danger inherent in an emphasis on the benefits of religious faith rather than on the absolute worth of the object of faith itself seem not to be duly recognized by RKK. The value of happiness and of material benefits is justified as a type of *hoben*, or means of attracting people to the true faith. But in the conversations of Hoza it is painfully obvious that the meaning of religion tends to stop at the level of *hoben* in the form of experienced benefit, and seldom arrives at the ultimate realization of Truth.

The problem for the church is quite different. It is threatened by the extreme cold intellectualism and by a lack of affective and experiential qualities. "There is no doubt that the current presentation of the Christian message is much too complicated, too theoretical and too distanced from daily concerns. Its thought patterns are too intricate; it uses too much theological jargon."<sup>147</sup> The church and its message have the reputation of being "primarily an affair of the mind, something rarified, disembodied, disincarnate... Not a few, therefore, are turned away by the seemingly intellectual demands of the Gospel. They come in search of bread and instead receive a stone for their starving souls."<sup>148</sup>

There is no question about the necessity for Biblical and doctrinal teaching in Christian propagation. The distinctive content of the Christian revelation cannot be adequately communicated without a certain amount of conceptual teaching. The problem is one of balance. As Kobayashi, himself a Japanese Christian theologian and observer of the new religions, says, "Religion is basically that which is experienced by an individual, and not something that is taught or indoctrinated. Religious experience comes first, and systematization of the faith follows." He quarrels with pastors who put primary emphasis on conceptual learning and belittle the experience of faith within the fellowship of the church. "When Japanese Christians evaluated the New Religious Movements, they made serious mistakes," he says, for "they were happy to discover the superiority of Christian theology in comparison with the systems of thought in these New Religious Movements, which were still underdeveloped." However the intellectual understanding of religion should not be given

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<sup>147</sup>J. Spae, "The Image of the Church" in *Japan Christian Yearbook 1968*, 192.

<sup>148</sup>R. Lee, *op. cit.*, 161ff.

priority over the total experience of religious reality itself.<sup>149</sup> Hoza has gone to the extreme of emphasizing emotional experience and affective relationships at the expense of rational interpretation, whereas Christianity has gone to the extreme of emphasizing intellectual indoctrination at the expense of affective experience and fellowship. The late Hendrik Kraemer, after a visit to Japan, was asked what he thought was the most urgently needed thing for the renewal of the church in Japan. His answer was one word: "Passion!"<sup>150</sup> Passion! That is what RKK members have and Christians lack. RKK shows itself to be a movement of renewal, revival and reform within an old religious tradition. It is bursting with enthusiasm; its leaders are charismatic; its procedures are disciplined; its message is full of hope; its methods are experimental and experiential. In many respects, how like the Christian Church described in the New Testament!

By way of contrast, Christianity in Japan displays many of the characteristics of an old religion. Interest in theological speculation rather than in direct experience of the faith, a highly trained professional clergy — such factors as these "may easily lead to the decline of the religion unless there be a real re-awakening of the Japanese Christians to the urgent task in their own society," warns Kobayashi.<sup>151</sup>

It is my thesis that increased understanding of the dynamics operative in the popular religious movements can help to stimulate a needed re-awakening in Christianity. Therefore I have felt it worthwhile to look in some detail at the dynamic relationship of religion and practical life in this popular Buddhist sect, Rissho Koseikai.

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<sup>149</sup>S. Kobayashi, "The Japanese Churches and New Religions," *Studies in the Christian Religion*, (3/65): 46ff.

<sup>150</sup>H. Shinmi, "Insights, Challenge," *Japan Christian Yearbook* 1966, 67.

<sup>151</sup>S. Kobayashi, *op. cit.*, 59.

**A Response to:  
The Dynamics of Religious Change and Development  
Among Japanese Buddhists**

by  
Robert  
Carlson<sup>152</sup>

I am a recent arrival to Japan. Therefore I cannot speak with any authority about Japanese experience especially in such an experienced and august group as this. Please excuse my attempts at comparison. I am still learning.

My day-to-day work is with English speaking people only. So in many ways I am ghettoized in Tokyo. Again I can share what reflects my experience from the standpoint of an "alien" orientation. I am not an authority on missiology. My work and practice has been in the area of pastoral care, pastoral education, pastoral formation and pastoral growth and development. In this work I am familiar with the case study method, and in moving educationally from praxis to theory and back to praxis.

I am indebted to you for letting me share this conference. I have found it theologically challenging, stretching of my thinking and theological processes in a significant way. Richard John Niehaus said that Practical Theology is to Theology what band music is to music. For years I have been immersed in Practical Theology. So I ask your forbearance as I toot my piccolo in response to Dr. Dale's paper.

We are indeed indebted to Dr. Dale for an instructive and insightful presentation that is the fruit of his many years of careful and friendly study of the Rissho Koseikai. There is much here to chew on and to ponder for the months to come. In the limited time I have available I will be able only to focus on some of the issues presented. This is not meant to imply that these are necessarily the most important or the most crucial. They only represent

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what struck me and occasioned some resonance with my own experience.

Dr. Dale focuses in this presentation on the power of the hoza as a problem solving, indoctrination, character formation and instructional group. It certainly is an impressive process and is documented in this paper and in Dr. Dale's book in a fashion that few cultic groups have been. Dr. Dale argues that the moral concepts and the authoritarian leadership are particularly well suited to the Japanese consciousness. In hoza people change from dependence to interdependence in the context of a group with a leader who supports "right thinking." A more characteristic movement toward change in the west is the movement from dependence to independence to interdependence.

But of course the "power of the group" or a "powerful leader" seen as an antithesis to independence, is not strange to Western psychology. William James in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, long ago talked about the place of the group in bringing about change, both in dramatic conversion experiences and also bringing about change in the slower, more subtle changes of an educational and developmental nature. Strong leaders and a strong group are particularly significant in impacting what James called "twice born men." This may be for good or for ill. Jim Jones and Jonestown spring to mind for an example of the latter.

### **What is at stake here?**

I suspect it is the need for a new "family" that enables us to move from one family/dependence to another. Ernest Bruder, one of my mentors, used to say it this way: "In the family have they been hurt. So in the family shall they be healed. But it is not necessarily the same family!" The support given by the hoza group, the assistance in new conceptualizations to accompany the new experience, and the actual formation of a "homeness," are obviously critical to the power of this movement.

Although we talk about this in the Christian church, far too often we have to acknowledge that our experience of it is a somewhat tepid version of what we see in the more aggressive and sometimes authoritarian (Christian and non-Christian) cultic groups.

Often in the church the focus, as Dr. Dale suggests, is on beginning with theologizing or indoctrination. But in hoza, it seems people are accepted for having a problem. And the emphasis is on problem solving, on dealing with the suffering inherent in human experience.

The focusing on what is, on beginning with the existential, with the pain, is crucial to both growth and to conversion. In hoza then, indoctrination is a step toward problem solving, not the screening mechanism that precedes problem identification.

In psychology, crisis theory suggests that it is possible in a time of crisis to do one of two things: (a) To regress to older, more primitive ways of problems solving, or (b) To move ahead to discover new and innovative ways of coping. Thus in a time of suffering there is always the potential for regression or for new growth, for new development. Counseling is often based on this understanding. Even as we increase dependence on the counselor in a transitional sort of fashion, the ultimate goal is to strengthen the individual's own coping skills. And that rhythm of dependence/independence is seen in a Western mind as the essence of interdependence. Thus the counseling experience prepares people to care for one another and to care for themselves in the same process. In this way hoza is similar to a counseling experience.

The difference, however, is just as important as the commonalities. That is, that for the Western mind, the goal of caring is also the affirmation of individuation, of separateness, and not just of dependence. We can care for another in time of need, because we are different from, separate from, the moment of and the experience of their pain. Thus we give a "perspective." We reach into the abyss of suffering, with sensitivity and tenderness, because we too have been there. But we "reach in" with one foot firmly planted on "not-suffering." Thus we have the strength to touch another with the touch that brings healing.

Focusing on individuation is not the same as just helping people look out for themselves. If they are not challenged to see their meaning as to see beyond themselves then they have fallen short of healing. Indeed Freud himself stated that one of the purposes of religion is to help people see beyond their own immediate family to the broader family of all humankind; that is, to be responsible for the suffering of others. All suffering should lead us to sensitivity. It should equip us to appreciate the bonding we have as human beings. We share curse, failure, tragedy and grief. And hopefully share renewal, healing and hope, with all other human beings.

Like Risho Koseikai we can affirm the reality of suffering, and the importance of facing the reality of what one has contributed to the suffering; that is, moving from failure through repentance to renewal and new life. Thus we can "reframe" the suffering for its positive aspects and thus lead us to use our experience to help alleviate the suffering of others.

The great architect of Western thought, Immanuel Kant, suggests that all healthy religion must deal with five elements: trouble, hope, trust endeavor, and mystery. Trouble and hope are like opposite ends of a continuum. We move back and forth on that line sometimes troubled more than we can stand, and at times hope beyond that which is hopeful. Faith gives us some perspective on trouble, but keeps our hope from being magical or delusional.

So also trust and endeavor are on opposite ends of a continuum. At times we trust on others and on God. And at times we must stand for ourselves and work for truth, justice and a better world. Keeping trust and endeavor in balance is another task of good religion. But then finally there is mystery! There is the truth beyond all truth and beyond expectation. Beyond the limits of science, beyond the limits of what we can know is a Knowledge that exceeds our codes and creeds. Such is Divine Mystery. We can only stand in awe.

It seems to me that we need to look at and affirm from Rissho Koseikai:

- (1) The acceptance of people in suffering without requiring a doctrinal leap of faith.
- (2) The provision of support and interest for people caught in emotional and human problems, afflicted with failure and in need of dependence on others.
- (3) Continued faithfulness to stay with these folks over time in the changing vicissitudes of life, and not just focusing on "one time" change.
- (4) Providing a framework and a focus for extending beyond themselves in service and outreach to others.

As a matter of fact, those four steps are the basic outline of a Twelve Step Process. Twelve step groups, closely rooted to the Christian stream and tradition are probably more like hoza groups than most other processes we see in the Christian Church today. AA, founded by Bill W., and supported in its development by Sam shoemaker, an Episcopal clergyman, often seems to contain the kind of passion that Dr. Dale sees in hoza.

### **Is it possible to open ourselves to passion?**

Perhaps passion comes when we walk most closely and respectfully with mystery, risking ourselves when the way is not cognified. Intellectualization, as important as it is for balance and for direction is seldom supportive of passion. It can create intensity and at times even stubbornness, but rarely passion. It is more from the life of the spirit and emotions that passion comes.

As Rissho Koseikai finds this passion in hoza, may we find our passion in the spirit of the Christian community.

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## Panel Discussion

*The excerpts on the following pages were taken from a video of the panel discussion and are intended to give the reader a better understanding of and feel for the interaction which took place at the Seminar. An attempt has been made to include most of what the panelists said in their major statements.<sup>153</sup> However, the interaction which followed the panelists' statements is not included.*

### Dr. Hiromasa Mase:

God and Buddha are the same divine Reality in the dimension of "god beyond god" and "buddha beyond buddha." This idea is on the verge of our language limits. In trying to step further than that our language begins to idle. The Japanese language may have an advantage in the expression of these phrases in that the word *shinbutsu* is made up of two characters, one for god and one for buddha.

As far as religious pluralism maintains the idea of one divine reality it is not relativism because relativism is a thought form which totally negates the idea of the one ultimate reality. The ultimate is the ultimate and we don't know what it will be like.

In the phenomenal religious world there are many faiths, and each faith is considered to be equally valid in the sense that each involves salvation. In this context it is valid to say that as far as religions are concerned, any religion is OK. This is the voice of naturalism. But at the same time from the religious side is heard the precaution: "Just a minute! *Any* religion is OK?" Pluralists join with this religious voice.

Don't think that because religious pluralism sees various religious faiths as equally valid it also suggests that any religion is OK. No, religious pluralism is a *religious* understanding of religions, not a *naturalistic* understanding. In each religion people live in the way in which they are changed into the selfless self-centeredness. The biblical message to me was that I was lost, and that I had already been found. God works for good. This is my profession of faith.

### Dr. Kenneth Dale:

I really have to think hard when I listen to you, Dr. Mase. You have drawn forth a lot of argument from the floor today, as I'm sure you expected. Some people like to conceptualize

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<sup>153</sup>Generally the wording of the panelists has been retained, but at some points the wording has been slightly changed in order to render conversational English more readable.

and argue and others don't. There are many facets to life and personality. Some people are strong in intellectualizing, and others are stronger on doing things with their hands and helping others with a sense of mercy.

My work is more with people than with ideas. In my work in counseling we put people before propositions. It's like two different worlds. We don't ask about people's religious affiliation. We start with their needs, which are only rarely religious needs. When traced back far enough their problems do sometimes have a connection with the religious orientation of their life, but they don't come complaining that they are having trouble with their hermeneutic or with their struggle of deciding whether to hold to a high or a low christology. But their painful and pressing needs are found in the areas of emotions, health, and relationships. So we try to practice mercy in dealing with people's needs.

There is a link between the dialogic approach to religions that Clark Offner was talking about this afternoon and counselor training. I heard Clark using the word "listening" several times when giving his paper. When dialoging with people of other religions you must first listen. Similarly, the first principle of counseling is that you learn to listen. People don't usually listen to each other very well, especially "between the lines."

Dialogue must be among equals. Dialogue requires that we accord each other absolute respect. This is true both when the subject of discussion is our religious belief, as in the case of religious dialogue, or a deep emotional problem, as in the case of counseling. To treat another as an equal is to try to see life from the perspective of the other person.

### **Dr. Clark Offner:**

Listening is very important. It is very difficult. It's sometimes difficult for us expatriate missionaries to understand what Japanese people are really trying to say. The Japanese people tend to speak around the subject they are addressing without really verbalizing their central concern. Often it is our temptation in these cases to talk too much rather than to listen.

I feel that many of us are pharisaical in our attitudes to others. With our coming from the West we often find ourselves trying to verbally and rationally force our gospel on others while not really listening to what others' are saying nor understanding their needs. We have done this even by taking the word *kami* (god) and instilling it with a new Christian meaning

which is foreign to its meaning in Japanese tradition and history. In so doing we are saying that the Japanese *kami* are not *kami* in the traditional Japanese sense. We've taken their word and have in a sense denied the original meaning of that word. We could have taken a different word like *tenshu* (heavenly lord), as the early Catholics did, or *tenpu* (heavenly father). Many of us seem to hold this attitude of forcing our western words and concepts on the Japanese. Since I've come to Japan I have changed. It's inconceivable for me to think that a person can live for twenty years in a foreign land and not change. It's inconceivable to think that thirty years after graduating from seminary and coming to Japan we wouldn't change our way of thinking and our ideas. I wonder whether a sympathetic, thinking person can be that way.

Perhaps some of you have read about the junior high school boy who, after studying as an exchange student in the US for several years and becoming quite proficient in English, took English tests here in Japan upon his return only to find out that his answers were marked as wrong. His good English answer was not the answer the teacher wanted. His parents complained and brought a legal suit against the school.

University entrance exams here in Japan contain questions about the motivation of various characters in novels. The questions on these tests are multiple choice. Shusaku Endo, the author of one of the books so used, took such a test and chose an answer to a question dealing with a character in one of his books only to find out his answer was wrong! Endo discovered that there is more than his, the author's, way of understanding the characters in his novel.

Many of us come with that kind of attitude. That is, we think we have the answer: your answer needs to align with the answer that I have already decided is right. I wonder what God, who is the Author of this novel (the Bible), thinks when he looks down on us. The Pharisees had a different understanding of what was required of human beings than God did. I think we need to be open to the possibility of our being mistaken.

**Dr. Jan Van Bragt:**

My strongest impression of this seminar is that there is an uncompromising fidelity toward the Scriptures, the Word of God. This is admirable. It requires me to ask myself what my attitude is toward the Bible. However, this has left me with the question of whether perhaps this strong preoccupation with the texts of Scripture entails a certain lack of confidence in how the Holy Spirit is guiding Christ's church now.

One of the signs of the times, and I would say providentially so, is that we are being drawn closer together with other religions in an ever shrinking cosmic village. Concerning Don Howell's paper, I find his title to be illegitimate: "How wide is God's mercy?" There is only one answer to that; namely, infinite and unlimited. Woe to any theologian who puts limits to that, even by the human use of Scriptures.<sup>154</sup>

Nevertheless, I appreciated Don Howell's description of the divinity of Christ as found in the Scriptures. It was very convincing and I agree with it. The consequence of that description, however, may be different for me than for Don Howell. It tells me that the working of Christ can never be limited or tied down to anything human, be it the Jewish people, the church, or even the Bible. This is the case no matter how closely Christ has wanted to be linked with any of those items. Christ's work goes beyond all those borders. He wants to do away with all those borders.

Although my position is different than Professor Mase's, I share the feelings that underlie his attitude: the imperative to recognize and appreciate all people for what they are, and the humble feeling of being pilgrims in an ongoing pilgrimage which Christ has said will be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and which we do not yet fully grasp. In my paper I have referred to Barth's view as one necessary image of a "double exposure." The other necessary image is what I think Professor Mase is saying. But neither of the two images is the full truth. The full truth must hold both these images together. The real question of the theology of religions for me is, "How can we bring the two images together so we can see them as more or less one image?" I think we may never succeed in this until the parousia but in the meantime I think the rule of thumb will be the potentiality for love.

### **Dr. Harold Netland**

I have appreciated each presentation and I have learned from each one. I don't think I will leave the same person I came.

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<sup>154</sup>Editor's note: The 1993 Hayama Seminar Planning Committee chose the title, "How Wide is God's Mercy?" as the title for the seminar.

## Hayama 1993 Registrants

Robert Anderson  
 Priscilla Anderson  
 Carl Beck  
 Tim Boyle  
 Robert Carlson  
 Corl Javan  
 Paul Clark  
 Frank Cole  
 Rick Conrad  
 Kenneth Dale  
 Robert Foster  
 Erik Froyland  
 Bo Hallengren  
 Midori Hallengren  
 Bill Hinchman  
 Ron Hopkins  
 Don Howell  
 David Husby  
 Alf Idland  
 Roy Jensen  
 Kenny Joseph  
 Harold I. Johnson  
 Dennis Kavanaugh  
 Philip Kinley  
 Paul-Gerhard Knoppel  
 Harry Landaw  
 Steven Lay  
 Robert Lee  
 Bill Lengefeld

Dale Little  
 Hiromasa Mase  
 Jack McIntosh  
 Paul Metzger  
 Mariko Metzger  
 Ken Milhouse  
 David Moore  
 Harold Netland  
 Tom Nowlin  
 Mariane Nyselius  
 Clark Offner  
 Leonard Petersen  
 Floyd Powers  
 Paul Pratt  
 Jon Prins  
 Russel Sawatsky  
 Donald Schaeffer  
 Leroy Seat  
 Art Shelton  
 Charles Shenk  
 Heinrich Silber  
 Robert Sorley  
 Ron Stoller  
 Abraham Thulare  
 Jan Van Bragt  
 Curt Vanderpoel  
 Doug Woyke  
 Marvin Yoder  
 Wolfgang Zschaemisch

