

ENCOUNTERS IN FAITH

Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue

Peter Feldmeier

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Introduction

Most approaches to and presentations of religions focus on two things: doctrine and history. Far and away, doctrine dominates. It is as though the purpose of a given religion is to provide a set of metaphysical claims. History is also emphasized, as typically one traces the organizational development of a religious community, its historic spread, and its theological progressions.

There are good reasons for emphasizing these two dimensions. One is that doctrine and history are indeed important aspects of a religion, and they play formative roles in the development of worship, leadership, community structure, and a religion's role in society. Another reason is that these two areas of a religion represent the easiest aspects to study and communicate. As important and valuable as they are, however, if treated exclusively, they can be limiting and distorting. For some religions, such as Judaism, specific doctrine is less important than it is in others, such as Christianity. In many indigenous or native religious traditions, the life of the tribe is so integrated that one simply cannot separate religious considerations from every other part of the culture. Additionally, such a limited focus on doctrine and history tends to neglect the importance of religious practices and the experience of community life, which often represent the heart of a religion.

It is also the case that if one addresses another religious tradition solely in terms of doctrine and history, that religion will feel particularly foreign, or other. From such a perspective, one does not acquire a great *feel* for the religion, and appreciating it on its own terms becomes more difficult. Such a perspective also gives one a kind of permission to dismiss religious claims that simply do not resonate with one's usual way of thinking about things religious. For example, a Christian religious view typically asserts that everyone has a soul, while Buddhists reject this claim, believing instead that

there is no eternal, unchanging core, or self, by which one might identify oneself, a doctrine called “no-self.” A Christian might walk away from Buddhism thinking, “They don’t believe in a soul, but we do.” It is as though that’s all one needs to consider, without seeing how no-self works in forming a kind of religious quality in pious Buddhists, perhaps one that resonates with what Jesus tried to have his disciples embrace.

There is an additional liability in considering religions within such narrow confines. That is, religions then are usually studied somewhat distinctly from each other. For example, in a world religions course, one might spend three weeks on a given religion, wrap it up with an exam, and then move on to the next religion. By the end of the semester, students often do not know what to make of the course, except that they learned an enormous amount of interesting data about various religious traditions. What do these data mean however? The question may be especially vexing if one has personal religious beliefs. Are these other religions and their claims then false? Do they represent a legitimate alternative? Given that many representatives of other religions are intelligent, moral, reflective, and spiritually mature, should one then conclude that all religious claims are equally true (or untrue) or that the truth of religious claims can never be known? What do these religions have to do with one’s own religious life beyond providing alternative visions? Looked at more positively, could dialogue with other faiths help one rethink one’s faith in some ways? In exploring the religious imagination of other faiths, can a person return to his or her own faith with new insights or questions? Could such experiences even help a person see one’s faith more clearly? This book addresses all these questions from the viewpoint that, indeed, there is much to learn from the world’s religions. The reader will see, for example, that attention to important Buddhist principles can help a Christian understand one of Jesus’ parables, or how understanding Muhammad’s mystical life opens new ways of understanding the Christian apostle Paul.

In this text, Christian theology and spirituality act as a counterpoint to and a comparison with the other traditions discussed. For this reason, there is no chapter on Christianity itself. The reasons for this approach are several: First is that Christianity remains the majority religion among the North American audience that will be

primary readers of this text. In March 2009, a massive published study showed that 76 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christian (down from 86 percent in 1990). For this reason, Christianity is a default religion of reference in American culture. Those who belong to the religions represented in this book also will benefit from this interface with Christianity, again given its dominance in the United States. Second, such a one-to-one comparison can be particularly timely, given, for example, the scandalous way that Islam is often portrayed today, especially in contrast to the Christian West. The situation begs for direct dialogue. Finally, Christian theology has a long and rich history of interreligious discussion. Thus, this book can model for Christians and non-Christians alike how they might approach other religious traditions and then see their tradition in light of such encounters.

This book also was written to address some of the limitations in standard presentations of world religions. It will include doctrine and history when appropriate. More importantly, it intends to draw the reader into the ethos, or character, or religious imagination of a given religious tradition. It is not merely an objective description of other traditions as might appear in a book of world religions. While this book intends to be fair and accurate, it also intends to be an intentionally sympathetic engagement. Oddly, such an approach is rare. A Muslim scholar (a shaikh, no less) critiqued the chapter on Islam in manuscript form. After his review, he suggested that we write a book together on Islamic spirituality. He said that the kind of approach I brought to the chapter he read does not exist in books on Islam in English.

There is a dictum: “Spirituality unites where doctrine divides.” This does not mean that people ought to ignore doctrine, and the reader will find that some claims of various traditions are questioned and even challenged here. Still, the point of the book is not merely to suggest doctrinal comparisons and contrasts, but to explore how the heart or spirit of different religious traditions can speak to the reader. Thus, this book is not a world-religions textbook that intends a wide-ranging survey of the whole of various traditions. It also does not aim at providing ethnologies of different religious cultures or detailed explanations of religious practices or holidays, arguably central to most religious traditions. Ultimately the point of this book

is to provide points of contact and discussion among religions. These points are intentionally chosen, as they speak to something of the core of the spiritual imagination of each religion. When John Henry Newman was made a cardinal, his coat of arms carried the motto, *cor ad cor loquitur*, “heart speaks to heart.” This is the aim.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book could be used quite successfully in a world-religions course, either augmenting a general world-religions textbook or as a grounding text as students read primary sources, such as the **Qur’an** or **Bhagavad Gita**. It could also be used in a regular theology or religious studies course, because considering theological material in light of religious plurality is becoming a popular, and even standard, vehicle for theological insight. Finally, it is envisioned as a text appropriate for spirituality courses, as it was written to address broad themes in spirituality, including prayer, religious imagination, models of holiness, stages of spiritual progression, and even descriptions of religious experience.

The chapters move from large, grounding issues to engagement with specific religious traditions, and then to final questions in interreligious dialogue. The book begins by asking what people think about religious traditions other than their own (chapter one). Then it moves to one of the most pan-religious topics—**mysticism**—and investigates whether and how religions may share some Ultimate Horizon or various experiences. The reader will also see how one’s religious training can condition religious experience (chapter two). Chapter three addresses the theme of spiritual or religious mediation. Is the cosmos spiritually structured such that God uses **mediators** to affect human lives? What is the role of spiritual masters, and how do they mentor religiously serious people? In chapter four a particular religion—Judaism—is investigated with a challenging question: what does being Jewish mean? Such a question influences Jewish notions of time, space, and sacrament. The central image of Islam as surrender, or submission, is explored in chapter five. Such a concept is a daunting and glorious challenge for Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Chapter six studies Hinduism and its wholly different notion of the soul wandering from one life to another until it becomes liberated. What is the soul and what is its association with Ultimate Reality? Chapter seven probes Buddhism and explores what happens when one accepts so much of the Hindu worldview but then dramatically denies the very soul seeking liberation. Chapter eight on Zen provides a paradoxical vision of life in which the liberation one seeks is already before one, even part of one, and only has to be realized. The question is asked whether Zen could be conceived as a way of being in the world that could combine with other religions. The reader is further stretched in chapter nine by the challenge to think religiously without an Ultimate Reality or Horizon at all. How might being religious be conceived of as profoundly skillful attention to the energies and relationships before one? Chapter ten looks at native traditions, particularly those of the Americas, and confronts assumptions about the distinction between humans and other life forms, while offering a living prophetic witness to the sacredness of the created world. Chapter eleven looks at the New Age movement. While utterly wide-ranging and varied, the movement seems to have broad similarities in its different expressions. While this chapter is the least sympathetic, it recognizes in the New Age movement modern lessons ignored at one's peril. In each of these chapters, Christianity becomes a dialogue partner, rethinking itself in light of the religious imagination each chapter provides.

Examining religious traditions leads to new questions. Are there universal lessons or insights to which most religions attest? Are holy people from different religions fundamentally alike? Is spiritual transformation more important than what one believes, and what is the relationship between the two? Can one belong to more than one religion? Addressing such questions is the aim of this text as well as a challenge for further study.

Christianity in a Multireligious World

A STARTING POINT

The Acts of the Apostles describes the apostle Paul spending time in Athens, distressed over the numerous idols he saw. Paul met with some philosophers who brought him to the Areopagus, a kind of public square, to have him speak to them and others about his religious beliefs. This is Paul's short speech:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through your city and looked carefully at the objects of worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "to an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God

and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For, “In him we live and move and have our being,” as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

—Acts 17: 22–31

There is much to consider here. As a Jew, Paul surely found idols offensive, perhaps even ridiculous. He reminds the Athenians that God transcends time, place, and anything their imaginations can produce. However, he also commends their religious spirit. In the context of both affirming and challenging their religiosity, he proclaims the true God of the heavens and Earth and Jesus Christ whom God has raised and made Lord and judge. His access point is the altar devoted to the “unknown god.” Paul’s message is that he can identify this unknown god, who is actually the God of the universe.

Is Paul’s identification of the “unknown god” with God himself merely a rhetorical device or a clever introduction? Neither seems to be the case and for several important reasons. In his speech, Paul affirms that he thinks the Athenians are religiously minded, and some of their spiritual intuitions are excellent, particularly their worship of the unknown god. While Paul names their unknown god, he only does so partially. He identifies him as the real God of the universe but recognizes with them that God also remains unknown. That is, even as revealed, God retains his transcendence; as Paul says, he is beyond the “imagination of mortals.” Paul also explains that their authentic religious sensibilities are responses to God. God creates humans, Paul says, as a single family and in a way that causes them to search for God and discover him because he is near to them. As a Jew, Paul surely would have believed that humans are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26),



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Paul preaching at Athens, 1515–1516, by Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio; 1483–1520).

and thus, humans are spiritual beings by nature. Additionally, he states that everything human is grounded in God's presence: "In him we live and move and have our being." Indeed, Paul says, all humans are God's children. Paul is saying that God is present in their lives, that they implicitly know God, and that on some level they are already responding to God's grace. One can think of grace here as God's favor and his loving, saving presence in human life. Finally, Paul insists that humans are all part of God's plan and that he is now going to share that plan and how they might embrace it.

Paul is not inventing a new way of considering God and the graced relationship that God has with the world. Old Testament theology understands God's saving plan as universal. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord," says the psalmist, "and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:27–28). Through the prophet Isaiah, God calls all people to his salvation: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For

I am God, and there is no other. . . . To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isaiah 45:22–23). Isaiah announces that God’s plan is to use the faith of Israel as a vehicle for bringing salvation to the ends of Earth. Israel would be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6), guiding all peoples to God, so that “my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7; see also Isaiah 2:2–3; Micah 4:1–2; Zechariah 8:20). Paul believed that in the final period of salvation history the Holy Spirit would particularly infuse the universe with the divine presence. In fact, when the Holy Spirit begins to anoint both Jews and Gentiles, the early Church understands this as a fulfillment of prophecy for God’s universal salvation (Isaiah 11:10, 43:9; Joel 2:28; Acts 2:14, 33, 15:16–17). As the prophet Zechariah proclaimed succinctly: “The Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zechariah 14:9).

For Paul, as for the rest of the New Testament witnesses, Jesus Christ has become the means for God’s universal salvation. In the Gospel according to John, one finds, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12) and “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In First Timothy, one reads, “This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Jesus Christ, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:3–6).

Christianity teaches that God’s providence has brought salvation to the entire world through his Son; that in his Incarnation, one is able to be united to God’s very being, in his death, one is forgiven and ransomed from sin, and in his Resurrection, one is freed from the curse of the grave. This faith in God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ gives Paul the impetus to share the good news with others. This is what Paul was doing at the Areopagus. However, the context for sharing this good news is telling. Paul assumes that sincerely religious people already know God and experience his presence in their lives.

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT ABOUT NON-CHRISTIANS

The Patristic Church (Second–Fifth Centuries)

Throughout its existence, Christianity has wrestled with the issues in Paul's speech to the Athenians. On the one hand, Christianity teaches that Jesus is the absolute savior and sole mediator between God and humanity (Hebrews 5:9). "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). On the other hand, it was often assumed, even from the beginning, that those who do not know the Gospel explicitly can still experience God in their lives. Broadly, Church fathers believed that pious, devout Jews and Gentiles who lived before Christ were saved by Christ's grace. Before the Incarnation in Jesus, the preexistent Word (*Logos*) spoke to them in the depths of their souls. Justin Martyr (100–165), for example, spoke of the seeds of the Word (*Logos spermatikos*) planted in the hearts of these pious souls. It was also believed by many that Christ's sacrifice transcends time, because it involved God's eternity. Those Christians who believed in the salvation of non-Christians who lived before Christ included many of the greatest early Church thinkers, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom. They presumed that God was benevolent, and in choosing Israel, God did not reject others but wanted his providence to include all nations.

Once the Church existed, its greatest challenge regarding God's universal salvific will had to do with nonbelievers. If before Christ one did not have to be part of Israel, after Christ did one have to be an explicit member of the Church? In the context of the now-present Church, optimism about the salvation of non-Christians was much more mixed. Once the Gospel had been fundamentally preached, not believing in Christ was assumed an intentional choice to reject God's explicit offer of salvation. Cyprian, who was clear that non-Christians before Christ could be saved, was equally clear that non-Christians after Christ could not be saved. Perhaps the greatest articulator of this position was Augustine (354–430). While Augustine believed in free

will, he also believed in predestination; thus those who were not part of the Church were not predestined to heaven. One should remember, however, that many Church leaders believed that fundamentally the world had the Gospel and failure to convert was an intentional rejection of Christ. Even at that, many Church fathers were also ambivalent. As a group, their natural impulse was to imagine as large a net as possible, with hints of the presence of the Church outside its overt borders.

The Medieval Church (Sixth–Fourteenth Centuries)

Despite many of the Church fathers' broad perspective toward the whole of humanity, Augustine's particular position strongly influenced the medieval western Church. Indeed several crucial teachings in the West strengthened the perspective that God's saving grace was restricted to those specifically and visibly inside the Church. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council declared, "There is only one universal Church of the faithful, outside which none shall be saved." In 1442, the Council of Florence issued a profession of faith that read, "All of those outside of the Catholic Church, Jews, heretics, schismatics, pagans, unless joined to the church, are damned to hell."

What does one make of such a seemingly clear and severe restriction to God's saving grace in the medieval Church? Like all doctrines in Christianity, these teachings need to be interpreted in light of their historical context, which includes the prevailing assumptions for not being in the Church. In each of the previously mentioned claims, the context was some form of schism or decided break with the Church. This constituted—in the medieval mind—a break in love, communion, and the authority that Christ invested in bishops as successors of the apostles, particularly the pope.

One could also understand the issue in terms of the metaphor of Christ's body. Since the early Church, Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ has played an important role in Christian self-understanding. The Church is conceived as the body of Christ with Christ as its head (Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18). This means that Christ can never be understood as completely distinct from his body. Rather, he identifies

with it in some real way (Ephesians 4:4ff). For the medieval Christian, to separate oneself from the body of Christ was tantamount to separating oneself from Christ himself.

What did the Church say then about non-Christians who appear to be drawn into the same condemnations as the so-called heretics and schismatics? Like the late patristic Church, the medieval Church assumed that non-Christians chose to reject God's grace in Christ. Interestingly, the presumption of God's universal will that all be saved was never really challenged. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) argued that non-Christians could not be damned for what they could not avoid and that those seeking God's salvation were already responding to grace in some way and would receive that grace to be saved. Aquinas stated that there could be a kind of implicit desire for baptism if one desires God in the depths of one's heart. Centuries later, when the Church was heavily invested in missions to the newly explored Americas, this implicit baptism of desire was broadly assumed and fundamentally became the theological rule in Roman Catholicism.

The Reformation (Sixteenth Century)

During the Reformation, Protestant thought regarding non-Christians being damned corresponded to the Catholic medieval conclusions—but for very different reasons. For reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, humans had no free will regarding salvation. In Luther's mind, it was absurd to think that humans had an effect on their salvation. Salvation is a divine reality, something God alone could effect, with no cooperation on the human side. Instead, if one was predestined for salvation, God worked irresistibly in the soul, and the soul simply became Christian. While this approach may seem coercive on God's part, the experience for the soul was that it was now free and flourishing in the Holy Spirit. Calvin argued that one is saved because God predestined that individual to be so and infused his or her soul with saving grace. If one is damned, this too is predestined.

While predestination seemed unfair from a human point of view, for Calvin it all appeared fitting. Everyone is a sinner and thus deserves to be damned. Those who are damned, therefore, only end up receiving what they deserve. This highlights God's justice. Those

who are saved and reconstituted in the Spirit are not any better than the damned before they received the Spirit. Thus, those saved witness God's mercy. Additionally, simply because God shows mercy to some, one should never think that God is forced to show mercy to everyone. The Catholic Church assumed God's desire was to save everyone but only if one chooses to cooperate with God's saving grace. The early reformers decidedly rejected this position as "works righteousness," or some form of self-contribution to one's salvation. On the contrary, the reformers believed that God does not desire universal salvation but only the salvation of those he chose before time even began.

THE MODERN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Introduction

Modern Christianity continues to wrestle with the issues associated with non-Christians, including what to think about other religions and how to understand the state of souls who are not Christian, particularly those who are religiously devout. For the past fifty years, theologians have been developing a discipline known as the **theology of religions**. This discipline seeks to give definition and shape to Christian reflection on the theological implications of religious diversity. It looks to scripture, doctrine, theological tradition, philosophy, and even the social sciences to discover inherent possibilities and rules that ought to guide encounters with other religions. In addition, it asks crucial questions: Does God's grace work through these religions? Are these religions vehicles of salvation? Are they in conflict with or complementary to Christianity? Compared to Christianity, are these religions as valid, less valid, invalid, or simply differently valid?

It may seem imperialistic, even obnoxious, to make such declarations about other religions, but one cannot avoid the issue. Typically, religions articulate an Ultimate Horizon of meaning and truth, one that is all embracing. Rarely would they simply claim that their adherents are comfortable considering the universe in a particular way, knowing that others feel comfortable considering it differently. Such respectful differences make sense when talking about social clubs, sports preferences, or even political systems. Religions often

represent a universal, absolute vision. Christians believe that Jesus is Lord of the universe and not just Lord for those who belong to Christianity. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the highest expression of revelation in the universe, not only for them but also as an absolute fact. Most Hindus believe that the self (**Atman**) is in some way identifiable with Ultimate Reality (**Brahman**), and that this is true whether you believe in it or not. Buddhists believe that **Nirvana** is only attainable when one renounces any sense of Atman, or self.

To have religious commitments and to believe that those commitments imply the status of others outside one's faith need not be equated with arrogance. Having universal claims is usually central to being religious. In fact, if one were talking with a Hindu who did not believe in an eternal Atman, one might very well be wasting one's time. On the one hand, no one wants an arrogant dialogue partner who considers any alternative vision of reality to be wrong or pernicious. On the other hand, no one wants a dialogue partner who is devoid of serious, universal religious commitments. This latter partner becomes minimally boring and ultimately irrelevant.

The Threefold Schema

In his groundbreaking book, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, Alan Race categorized various Christian theologies of religions under three basic headings or fundamental positions: **exclusivism**, **inclusivism**, and **pluralism**. These categories have remained relatively standard. Following is the briefest of sketches:

Exclusivism is a theological position held by many Evangelical Christians that posits no grace or salvation outside of Christian confession. Unless one proclaims explicit faith in Christ, one cannot be saved. The famous dictum is *extra ecclesiam* (or *Christum*) *nulla salus* (outside the Church [or Christ], there is no salvation). The biblical evidence for such a position is daunting. Jesus says in John's Gospel: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Such exclusive language is also used by the apostles, as Peter says, "Only in him [Jesus] is there salvation; for of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:11–12). Those who are exclusivists emphasize that God's revelation acts as a judgment

against any human attempt to know him without it. Given that all revelation is centered on and ultimately comes from Christ, then any truth claims not revealed by Christ are de facto erroneous. The Christian who does not start with Christ and his uniqueness has failed from the beginning.

Inclusivism is a theological position held by most mainstream Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Christians. This position holds that Christ is the absolute savior and that his saving grace is operative outside formal Christian confession. Inclusivism is built on three assumptions: The first is that God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and, thus, makes saving a real possibility. Second, all experiences of truth, goodness, love, and so on, are experiences of God's grace working in one's heart. To respond to this inner working of God's grace by seeking the truth and embracing the good is to walk with God. In the First Letter of John, one reads, "Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light" (1 John 2:10) and "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). Third, all grace is mediated by Christ, and so to cooperate with grace is to live in and through Christ's saving presence. According to inclusivists, one is not saved because one is simply a good person who does good things. One is saved by Christ's grace. The good that one does, the love that one shares, and the truth that one pursues are all responses to Christ's saving presence. Everyone is saved in the same way—by Christ. The difference is that non-Christians only experience this grace implicitly in their lives. That is, they do not realize that it is Christ working through them. The advantage a Christian has then is that in knowing the Gospel, one has a privileged ability to cooperate with grace.

The Catholic Church has retained its historical commitment to the necessity of belonging to the Church, but the understanding of membership has changed. In the medieval Church, unless one was explicitly part of the Church, one was necessarily assumed to be separated from Christ. Today, if one is implicitly cooperating with the grace of Christ, then one is assumed to be implicitly part of the Church ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" [*Lumen gentium*], nos. 2, 4, 14–16; "Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" [*Nostra aetate*], no. 2). This current position can boast of biblical support, but it is less clear. Usually inclusivists

MORE EXCLUSIVIST AND INCLUSIVIST TEXTS

For more exclusivist texts, see John 1:3, 1:17–18, 3:6, 3:18, 6:28–29, 8:24, 12:48, 14:6; 1 John 1:12–13; Acts 2:38; Romans 3:23–28; Galatians 3:22; 1 Timothy 2:4–6; 2 Timothy 1:11–12; Titus 3:7. For more inclusivist texts, see Mark 9:40; John 3:16–17, 8:12, 11:9, 12:46; 1 John 2:2, 2:5–6, 4:7–8, 4:12, 6:33; Acts 17:22; Romans 5:18; 11:32; 1 Corinthians 5:19, 15:28; Colossians 3:11; Eph 1:10; Galatians 5:22–23.

align their position with texts that point out the universal quality of Christ's salvation or that transformed lives imply God's presence. As the apostle Peter says in another speech, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

Pluralism is a theological position professed explicitly by no formal Christian body but held by a minority of Christians in mainstream and liberal Protestant traditions as well as in Roman Catholicism. Pluralism is the most difficult position to describe because it has the greatest variety. Broadly, pluralism refuses to name Christianity as the singular normative religious revelation. Pluralism ascribes to three principles: God transcends comprehension; God is one; an absolute unity underlies all reality. It is this God, or this unity, that religions are addressing. Thus, whether one calls the Eternal Absolute the Trinity (Christianity), YHWH (Judaism), Allah (Islam), Eternal Dao (Daoism), Dharmakaya (Buddhism), Brahman (Hinduism), and so on, one is speaking about the same reality even if that reality is somewhat differently conceived. Pluralists do not suggest that these various conceptions of Ultimate Reality do not matter. The difference between a personal God in Christianity and an impersonal Dao dramatically affects one's religious life. However, these names reference the same reality; the same Ultimate Truth.

Pluralism tends to see all (or most) religions as fundamentally similar. Some pluralists argue that religions, at their core, express the same spiritual experience. Others argue that they represent different paths to the same kind of salvation project. In both approaches, pluralist scholars draw on a variety of data from very different religious traditions that show uncanny similarities in the nature of religious experience and even in how holy people are conceived.

Christian pluralists cannot boast of much biblical evidence. Perhaps they might point to texts that remind the reader that God is beyond all consideration. For example: “Then the Lord addressed Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge. . . . Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’” (Job 38:1–4) or “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you” (Psalm 139:17–18). Such texts are few and far between, however, and they are overwhelmed by counter texts. This imbalance does not daunt pluralists. They argue that the Bible is not designed to address the issue of religious plurality. Rather, the Bible’s intent is to infuse a deeper faith in Christ.

To illustrate these three positions in practical terms, imagine that on a given Sunday three ministers are preaching to their respective congregations, each personally representing a different theology of religion. They might preach very similar sermons, exhorting their congregants to give their lives over to Jesus Christ. Their sole interest that day is to facilitate a deep love and reverence for Christ the Lord. Privately, the exclusivist might think, “If you don’t do this, you will end up in hell.” The inclusivist may think, “While it matters less if you are explicitly Christian, this is the most excellent way to encounter Christ’s saving grace.” At the same time, the pluralist may think, “God is, of course, beyond all religious expressions, but this is a profound one that certainly brings salvation.”

A famous simile found in both Hinduism and Buddhism illustrates the point of religious pluralism: Six blind men approach an elephant. One touches its trunk and concludes that it is like a large snake; another, the tail and imagines it like a feather duster; the third, the side and describes it as a great rounded wall; another, the leg and imagines a pillar; the fifth, the ear and considers it as if a basket; and finally, the



IMAGE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PUBLIC DOMAIN

Blind monks examining an elephant, by Hanabusa (1652–1724).

last one grasps a tusk and describes it as a plow. The elephant here represents the large and mysterious God, and each of the blind men, a different religion with its authentic, although incomplete, experience of divine revelation. While the blind men's experiences are real, and their descriptions apt, a problem arises when each man extrapolates this limited experience to the whole reality. Pluralists take a similar position, arguing that God, by definition, exceeds all comprehension and conceptualization. Concepts are limited, but God is not. Concepts are based on human experience of the world, and God is beyond the world. Pluralists argue that all religions operate as paradigms, that is, perspectives, models, or lenses in interpreting the spiritual universe. Because every paradigm is by nature limited, no religion can claim to speak for all things religious. Both the complexity of the universe and the transcendence of God demand the conclusion that all religions are in some sense relative and limited.

Truths and Problems in Each Perspective

Every theology of religions has assets and liabilities. Exclusivist Christians point to the necessity of Christian revelation in making

sense of God. They also argue that central to being Christian is witness for the sake of conversion. There are, however, few bona fide exclusivists, and their position often strains credibility. For example, to take the exclusivist position at face value means that all people, even those who have had no chance to hear the Gospel, will be damned. This seems like a divine setup: to be created in order necessarily to spend eternity in hellfire.

Further, self-proclaimed exclusivists are often inconsistent in applying their own principles. For example, it is inconceivable that the death of an infant in an Evangelical Church would not occasion a Christian burial, and surely, that infant would be characterized as saved by Christ. Any theology that would claim the infant born of Christian parents is saved but the one born of Hindu parents is damned—neither child having actual Christian faith—is obviously problematic. Other Evangelicals argue that all children are saved before the age of reason, but once one has reached the age of reason then one must be Christian. Such a caveat, however, is contrary to exclusivist claims that one has to be Christian to be saved. Further, exclusivism imagines some arbitrary cutoff line for salvation and damnation. Some Evangelicals theorize that at the moment of death non-Christians are given a chance to choose Christ, if on Earth they had no legitimate opportunity. Others suppose that God will save all who would have become Christian on Earth if they had the legitimate opportunity to choose at that time—an assessment that God's omniscience guarantees. These theories reflect the problems inherent in the exclusivist position.

Many Evangelicals hesitate to make absolute claims about the salvation of non-Christians. They claim that they know Christians are saved by the grace of Christ through faith. However, they cannot claim to know God's mind about others. Perhaps all are damned; perhaps some are saved; conceivably, all are saved. This is God's domain. Their job, they say, is to proclaim the good news, nothing more or less. This was the conclusion of the evangelist Billy Graham: to speak exclusively and let God be God.

The inclusivist position appeals to most Christians because it holds a number of values or truths together. Inclusivists remain squarely in the tradition that claims that the Trinity is the full revelation of God and that Jesus Christ is the absolute, universal savior. It

also recognizes that God's grace is a universal principle of love, goodness, and truth, and that non-Christians obviously seek, embrace, and cooperate with that transcendental ground.

One can imagine, for example, a Christian monk absorbed in contemplation and communing with God. One can further imagine a Hindu contemplative wholly absorbed in meditation and communion with Brahman (Transcendent Absolute). Both report the same experience and both evidence the same kind of transformation. To say that one is graced, and the other is suffering delusion—simply for having a different name for God—seems ungrounded to the inclusivist. This approach does not suggest there are no differences between the two religious members. For the inclusivist, to help bring the Hindu into the fullness of the Gospel would be to support the grace already being experienced and to bring the grace to its fulfillment. The thinking is like Paul's in the Areopagus when he named what the Greeks already knew and experienced on some level.

One liability of this position is that it neglects the Christian imperative to share the Gospel. Clearly, the Bible and the consistent tradition of the Church are that spreading the faith is crucial to Christian identity and response to Christ. However, why share the Gospel when one can be saved without knowing it? One only needs to look at missionary initiatives in the past forty years. The vast majority of them are being performed by Evangelical Christians who embrace an imperative to convert others to the Christian faith. A second liability is that one tends to interpret the experience, and even the doctrines of others, through Christian lenses. Looking for Christ implicitly tends to keep one from listening to the uniqueness of another religious tradition.

Pluralists emphasize that God is beyond all concepts. While all Christian faiths concede God's transcendence, pluralists incorporate this truth with great vigor. Today's culture is increasingly characterized as **postmodern**. A postmodern perspective argues that one must take the other as truly other, as expressing a unique version of reality. Western culture has become increasingly sensitive to all conceptualizations and expressions of truth being rooted in unique places and times. No articulation of truth, therefore, is exempt from historical or philosophical critique. Society has become suspicious of a classist notion of knowing or having privileged access to truth. What

were previously understood as objective expressions of truth are now widely suspected as being assumptions of Western culture. In short, Western culture has come to a greater appreciation of the relativity of the human perspective.

One great liability in pluralism is that it does not represent the majority of Christians or the historical Christian tradition. Many have difficulty imagining how one could be a Christian, and indeed be a compelling dialogue partner with someone from another religious tradition, imagining some version of the following caveat of one's faith: "I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord (insofar as that is a useful, historically conditioned paradigm of religiosity that makes no claims on anyone else unless they too would find that it may be useful to them)."

A fourth model may be emerging: one that has been called the **mutuality model**. This form highlights the radical uniqueness of various traditions. In it, one need not seek commonalities in other religions or make proclamations about them from one's religious perspective, whether affirming or challenging. Setting aside those concerns, one is allowed to really listen to the genius of another tradition. Take, for example, **Zen Buddhism**. Instead of dismissing it as a natural religion (exclusivism) or looking for an implicit presence of the Holy Spirit (inclusivism) or stretching its description to include universal religious expression (pluralism), the Christian enters into a different way of even considering the spiritual life—allowing it to speak on its own terms. One problem with the mutuality model is that it is hard to practice, as one cannot help but bring one's religious assumptions into the encounter. A second problem lies in assessing what the encounter means. If the other is simply other, then what is the relevance of the encounter?

HOLDING A POSTMODERN CREATIVE TENSION

Is it possible to hold all these positions in a creative tension without being in self-contradiction? Instead of imagining postmodernity as hopelessly relativistic, guiding interreligious dialogue into a metaphysical no-man's land, one might see it as the best representation

of reality. One might take physics as a guide. According to quantum theory, nothing exists on its own as a static, discrete reality. Rather, everything is relational and in constant process of becoming. Similarly, one might understand the truths of Christianity as dynamically interrelated with other religious expressions of truth. Consider that Newton's physics were once believed to be an absolute, universal descriptor of physical laws. Indeed, they remain absolutely true insofar as building a bridge is concerned. However, they do not answer every question; neither are they equally valid in other paradigms of physics. One does not reject Newton's laws, and one uses them as absolutes when appropriate. One does not, though, claim that alternative descriptions in other paradigms of physics are thereby necessarily false. Indeed, building a cell phone requires that some operations use Newton's laws and other operations use quantum laws. Each set of laws is employed when appropriate.

The same might be said when addressing a theology of religions. Is it possible that one could discover how to embrace responsibly the strengths and truths of a given theology of religions when useful and appropriate? Thus, in a given encounter, one may take on a posture along the lines of pluralism to highlight profoundly similar expressions of mysticism. In another forum, one may skillfully operate under the mutuality model and allow a strange and different religious expression to be just that—shockingly other. In sharing one's personal faith, one's language and posture could surely be exclusivist and experienced by others as profoundly inspiring.

Other religious traditions have their own versions of a theology of religions. Speaking very generally one could safely characterize them as follows. Islam is decidedly an inclusivist religion. The Qur'an is the ultimate revelation and other revelations are judged by it. Still, Islam believes that non-Muslims are saved just like Muslims, based on whether they have responded to God's call to submission as best they know how. Judaism allows converts, but generally does not proselytize. Judaism might be best characterized as being in the mutuality model. It delights in various expressions of unique religiosity without needing to impose its understanding on others. Buddhists typically believe that one cannot attain Nirvana unless one is a Buddhist on the Eightfold Path. However, they also believe that Nirvana is rare and that almost certainly everyone will

have many more lifetimes and that a non-Buddhist religion might be very appropriate for someone in a given lifetime. This makes Buddhists strangely both pluralists and exclusivists at the same time. Hinduism would be hard to evaluate in this regard, because it varies so much. Some Hindus may believe that different gods are to be worshipped at different places and that, for example, Jesus is the god of the West and appropriate to believe in if one lives in the West. Other Hindus believe that only Brahmins who strictly practice jnana yoga will attain enlightenment.

In every chapter, this book approaches dialogue with the assumption that the other has something to teach about faith, doctrine, ways to God, and even God personally. The witness of Pope John Paul II inspired this approach, specifically the day of prayer the pope convened in 1987 with religious leaders from around the world. In a lecture on the interreligious experience of the Assisi Day of Prayer (the gathering was held in Assisi, Italy), the pope stated, "There are undeniably differences [in religions] that reflect the genius and spiritual 'riches' that God has given to the peoples" (John Paul II, "The Meaning of the Assisi Day," 562). His statement is extraordinary in that the pope is not only affirming that other religions have the presence of God, but also that some religious differences could be due to other religions having spiritual riches given by God that are unique to them. Engaging other religions can make one spiritually richer and theologically deeper than one would be without knowing about them.

Following John Paul's initiative, this text will engage in a kind of **comparative theology**, examining a number of religious expressions in their own right first and then in comparison with the Christian faith. By crossing over to the religious imagination of other traditions, one can see how they could bring new questions or insights. This kind of engagement is not merely a comparison of religions or doctrines, whereby one recognizes convergences and divergences. It is a juxtaposition to create an ongoing, reflective process of considering religious perspectives anew in the context of encountering other traditions.

HOPES AND POSTURES IN ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

One goal in writing this book is to expose readers to aspects of profound and venerable traditions. The exposure will not only be in terms of theological claims but also will include the spiritual ethos intended by certain religious practices and the religious horizon, or vision, that a given religion intends to bring to its adherents. This book can also offer a new way of thinking religiously. There is a saying, “To learn a foreign language is to learn a different way of thinking.” Learning another language can even help one understand one’s own in a different light. Buddhism, for example, might challenge the non-Buddhist to rigorously consider the subjectivity of the mind or the interconnectedness of the universe. The Daoist relationship between **yin** and **yang** might teach one to better recognize when to take a posture of assertion or of receptivity and how these postures inform each other.

Encountering another faith might also provide a context for a healthy critique of one’s religious sensibilities. Without stepping outside of a personal tradition in some way, one risks the danger of theological myopia and tunnel vision. Of course, such an encounter with another religion can also affirm one’s religious sensibilities even more deeply. Consider the following expressions of crossing over into another worldview and returning changed:

The great Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrestled with religious faith in his later years. At one point, he read a moving story about an Indian prince named Josaphat, who met a Christian named Barlaam. Barlaam told Josaphat the story of a man whose life was being eaten away by time. Instead of being obsessed with his incessant worries, this man decided to renounce the life he was clinging to and to embrace a whole, new life—one in which he renounces his ego and all worldly attachments. The prince was so inspired by the story that he converted to Christianity and was later declared a saint. In the medieval period, Josaphat was celebrated in both the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox calendars. Here, the story becomes interesting. The Latin *Josaphat* is a translation of the Greek name *Loasaf*, which itself is a translation of the

Arabic *Yudasaf*, from the Persian *Bodisaf*. *Bodisaf* is the Persian term for the Sanskrit *bodhisattva* (a term for the future **Buddha**). Tolstoy was inspired by a Christianized story of the Buddha, and through it found a way to become a devout Christian who particularly strove to live the spirit of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The story does not end here. Tolstoy's piety then inspired a number of Europeans whom the Indian spiritual leader Mohandas Gandhi met in England in the late 1890s. In crossing into their Christian faith perspective, particularly in learning to read the Bible allegorically and embracing the piety of the Sermon on the Mount, Gandhi returned to his native Hinduism with a new vigor. There, he began to read the classic on spiritual warfare, the Bhagavad Gita, in a new way. He now experienced it as a manual for social action as devotion to God and the truth. His writings and spiritual witness later inspired a young Baptist pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. While traveling in India, King met those committed to Gandhi's vision of a spiritual warrior fighting for justice in a nonviolent manner. In studying Gandhi, King came to see possibilities in his Christian faith.

—John Esposito et al., *World Religions Today*, 522–527

Interreligious encounter and the work of comparative theology succeed best when those involved embrace a kind of skillful posture. One would do well to embrace the following:

1. *Be without any ulterior or covert motives.* Do not pretend to dialogue if your real intention is to convert or prove superiority.
2. *Cultivate an essential openness.* Provide a spacious heart that listens intuitively, allows for self-reassessments, and is open to the whole process.
3. *Religious traditions are respected in their own right.* Understand them in a way those traditions would recognize and agree with.
4. *Differences are not to be avoided.* Recognize that there really are different worldviews and these make the dialogue exciting.
5. *Make no hasty determinations.* Realize that one can know and legitimately say less than one might want to.

Above all, when engaging in another religious tradition, one ought to take off one's shoes as if stepping onto holy ground. Without this foundation, one lacks the very love and respect that is, in fact, central to authentic religious life. Without this foundation, one misses the depth of insights, meaning, and spirit of those encountered. Finally, without this foundation, one forgets that God has already preceded one's arrival. At least, this is the claim of the apostle Paul in Athens.

Review Questions

1. Paul believed the Athenians were truly religious people and that they knew and were responding to God on some level. What is the evidence for this claim?
2. Christianity appears to have approached the possibility of non-Christians being saved with some inconsistency. How have the positions shifted through the centuries and can it be argued that Christianity has retained any logical continuity in this regard? If so, explain.
3. What are the theological grounds and values for the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism?

In-Depth Questions

1. Are you an exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist, and why? How would you deal with the liabilities in your given position?
2. Is the postmodern approach (one that embraces different theologies of religions at different times) intellectually coherent?
3. Do you think that fundamentally all or most religions are about the same in different ways?

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