

True Religions: The Idea of Religious Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

True Religions: The Idea of Religious Pluralism

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Since the early 1980s a popular threefold typology has been the dominant means for classifying theories of religious diversity within the Christian theology of religions and the Western philosophy of religion. Despite its popularity, this typology has also been widely criticized for being incoherent on account of including a theoretical type that is not real; namely, religious pluralism. Religious pluralism is considered unreal in the sense that it is not sufficiently different from the other two types, called religious exclusivism and religious inclusivism. Indeed, some critics have argued that there is only exclusivism, or only inclusivism, and so the threefold typology should be abandoned altogether. This work will review late twentieth century theories of religious diversity, and argue that religious pluralism is a real and distinct theoretical option for religious diversity theorists. More specifically, it will argue in favour of a fourfold typology that includes two different types of religious pluralism; humanistic-universalistic pluralism and metaphysical pluralism. Within this fourfold typology, both types of pluralism are characterized by an argument that pluralizes some particular idea of true religion. Thus, both types of pluralism advance the novel idea of *true religions* and, by extension, the even more novel sounding idea of *the true religions*.

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Introduction

1. Conceptualization Theories of Religious Diversity: The Need for a New Typology

Ten years ago I completed a work called “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity in Terms of Non-Dualism, Divine Unity, and Trinitarianism *Together: A Tripartite Theory, Philosophy, and Theology of Religions.*”¹ In this work, I made three complementary arguments that the three religious truths of non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarian – though radically different – are equally true and equally ultimate since they are religious truths about the same Ultimate Reality² generated from different points of identity, or different/perspectives, within the same (tripartite) ultimate reality. Upon completion, I believed that I had solved a major problem of religious diversity, if not *the* problem.

Although I did not circulate “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity” very widely I did share it with a few academics and with the religious communities/persons that I sought to reconcile with my pluralistic arguments. The response I got was discouraging: the religions were not interested and the academics seemed unable to form

¹ This work was completed as a dissertation for a PhD program in Religious Studies (Martin, (“Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity”).

² Because I capitalize the term “God” I will also capitalize the term “Ultimate Reality” since I take these to be synonymous. Likewise, I will capitalize other terms that I take to be synonymous with these two, such as the Real, Transcendence, the great Other, the Divine, and the Trinity. I will also capitalize terms that are meant to signify aspects or dimensions of God/Ultimate Reality, such as the Father, Void, the Most Great Spirit, the Logos, Universal Spirit Energy, Cosmos, and Creativity. Moreover, I will capitalize terms used to signify identity with God/Ultimate Reality, such as Incarnation, Manifestation of God, God-Realizer, and Prophet of God. I will not, however, capitalize conceptualizations about the nature of God/Ultimate Reality such as trinitarianism, non-dualism, panentheism, polytheism, and monotheism. I will also not capitalize terms that signify religious communities – such as the sangha, the ummah, and the church – even though I recognize that these may be thought of as identified with (aspects of) God/Ultimate Reality. And, I will also not capitalize pronouns referring to persons believed to be identified with God/Ultimate Reality, even though this is the norm within religious communities. Finally, I will also not follow the capitalization conventions for “terms of art” used in particular traditions; for example, I will not capitalize terms such as “day of resurrection,” or “final divine revelation.”

an intelligible response. The only positive response came from Raimundo Panikkar who sent a note with the following message: “Many thanks for your thoughtful study. I have written extensively on this....I could so far only glance at your pages. Would you say that you describe three perspectives—or that the one ultimately ‘includes’ the other? I would encourage you to continue in this line.” The question Panikkar asks here is significant; he wants to know if I see the three religious perspectives as ultimately collapsing into a single religious perspective or as ultimately true *with respect to their differences*. In other words, he wants to know if my position is “inclusivistic” or “pluralistic.”

From my point of view, my position was *truly* pluralistic and, thus, overcame the limitations of traditional theories³ of religious pluralism – for example, the pluralistic theories of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter – that do argue for the equality of religions on the basis of their participation in a religious *commonality*. In other words, traditional theories of religious pluralism claim that religions are equal with respect to their sameness; I was arguing that they are equal in their differences.

The uniqueness of my position made it difficult to classify. Since the publication of Alan Race’s *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, in 1983, his threefold typology has been the dominant means for classifying theories, philosophies, and theologies of religions – most especially within the Christian theology of religions and the Western philosophy of religion.⁴ Very basically, Race says

³ I will sometimes use “theory” as generalized term for the theories, philosophies, and theologies of religions reviewed in this dissertation. This is not meant to obscure the fact that in the broader examination of religion there has been, and still is, disagreement and an even animosity amongst scientists, philosophers, and theologians.

⁴ See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*. Race’s scheme is typically referred to as a typology, and so I will usually refer to my classifying work in this dissertation as typological. A distinction can be drawn between typologies and taxonomies; the former sorts things out according to conceptual constructs known as “ideal types,” and the latter according to empirically observable characteristics. Typologies are more commonly used in the social sciences and taxonomies are more commonly used in biological

that there are three typical Christian responses to other religions; exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism says that Christianity is the only true religion; inclusivism says that Christianity is the best or superior religion, even though other religions may have elements of truth derived from Christianity; and, pluralism says that Christianity is one among many true religions.

My position in “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity” was pluralist in the sense that it claimed there were multiple forms of true religion, but I saw it as a significant departure from the most well known “pluralistic” theologies that Race reviewed in *Christians and Religious Pluralism*; namely, the theologies of Paul Tillich, John Hick, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. It seemed to me, that Race’s typology was in need of revision.

Around the same time that I completed “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity” two Christian theologians – who had already published critical responses to pluralistic theologies – published their own theologies of religions. In 2000, Gavin D’Costa (a Roman Catholic theologian) published *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, and in 2001 S. Mark Heim (a Protestant theologian) published *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*.⁵ In *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, D’Costa argues that all theologies of religions are “exclusivist” because they use truth criteria to determine what is and what is not authentic religion. Furthermore, he argues that his own (exclusivist) Roman Catholic trinitarian theology of religions better meets the stated goals of traditional pluralistic theologies, such as being tolerant of other

sciences; see, K.B. Smith, “Typologies, Taxonomies.” Given this distinction it would probably be more accurate to call my work taxonomical, since the lines I draw are always and strictly based on observable characteristics of particular theories of religious diversity. Nonetheless, I will often refer to my classification scheme as a “typology” since this is conventional.

⁵ See D’Costa: *Meeting of Religions*; Heim, *Depth of the Riches*.

religions and open to the truth that they *may* possess. S. Mark Heim, identifies his own theology of religious ends as “inclusivist” and, indeed, is of the view that all theologies of religions are inclusivist since there can be no meta-perspective from which to view particular religious perspectives. But, even with this qualification, Heim believes that his own trinitarian theology of religious ends can serve as a useful tool for allowing Christians to see the truth of other religions, since it does not try to authenticate other religions by reducing them to a religious commonality, the way traditional theories of religious pluralism do. Heim says that the ends of other religions are true in and of themselves and, indeed, that Christians need to realize them in order to realize their own end.

By claiming that all theories of religious diversity are “exclusivist” or “inclusivist,” D’Costa and Heim respectively raised questions about the coherence of Race’s threefold typology, and even the “reality” of religious pluralism itself. Paul Griffiths (a Christian philosophical theologian) contributed further doubt about the usefulness of Race’s typology with his publication of *Problems of Religious Diversity* in 2001.⁶ In this work, Griffiths contends that the classic threefold typology is only coherent as a means of dealing with the question of salvation, and specifically the question of who is saved. As such, it is not even capable of dealing comprehensively with the question of salvation because it does not handle the related question of whether or not all will be saved. And, like D’Costa and Heim, Griffiths expresses doubt about the very reality of pluralism by suggesting that pluralists (such as John Hick) are only semi-pluralistic because they qualify their answer as to who is saved with a substantive definition of salvation that necessarily excludes some.

⁶ See Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*.

In 2002, Paul Knitter (a pluralist theologian) tried to address these doubts about Race's typology by proposing a new fourfold typology in *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.⁷ Knitter's new fourfold typology is largely a reworking of Race's threefold typology with new names for exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and the addition of a new category. Knitter calls this new category "the acceptance model" and constructs it to account for theories of religions, such as Heim's, that affirm the truth of other religions with respect to their deep differences.

Knitter's category of the acceptance model provided me with a potential place for my own theorizing about religious diversity in "*Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity*" and, indeed, I could see some profound similarities between Heim's work and my own. On the other hand, Heim and I had also come to very different conclusions. For Heim, even though he recognizes truth in other religions, this truth is ultimately integrated into Christian truth, or the Christian end of communion within the triune God. From my perspective, there was no singular final end – my three ends or truths were a permanent condition. Thus, I was reluctant to place my work along side Heim's within Knitter's acceptance model.

2005 saw the publication of two volumes on religious pluralism that revealed a divide in the "pluralist camp"; namely, *Deep Religious Pluralism* edited by David Ray Griffin, and *The Myth of Religious Superiority* edited by Paul Knitter.⁸

David Ray Griffin, in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, argues that there are two types of pluralism: identist and deep. Identist pluralists are the traditional pluralists criticized by Heim and D'Costa, and representative of pluralism, as such, in Race's typology.

⁷ See Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.

⁸ See Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism*; Knitter, ed., *Myth of Religious Superiority*.

According to Griffin, the defining characteristic of identist pluralism is a religious commonality that is used to judge the authenticity of all religions. In contrast to identist pluralism there is deep religious pluralism. Deep religious pluralism claims that different religions are equally true because they are related to different, but equally ultimate, aspects of Ultimate Reality.⁹ Griffin presents John Cobb Jr. as an impressive representative of deep religious pluralism. John Cobb adopts Alfred North Whitehead's pluralistic metaphysics that conceives Ultimate Reality as a tripartite structure consisting of Creativity, God, and Cosmos to argue for the equal ultimacy of different types of religions – specifically acosmic religions (such as Buddhism) that are related to Creativity, theistic religions (such as Christianity) that are related to God, and cosmic religions (such as North American Native spirituality) that are related to the Cosmos.¹⁰ Thus, the defining characteristic of deep religious pluralism is a pluralistic metaphysics that is used to authenticate the truth of different religions at the deepest level.¹¹

Finally, I had a legitimate conceptual category for the type of religious pluralism that I produced in “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity.” I had produced a version of “deep religious pluralism”; I used a pluralistic metaphysics to argue for the equal ultimacy of three very different types of religion.

The Myth of Religious Superiority is largely an apology for traditional or “identist” religious pluralism, and the traditional threefold typology that supports it. It is also intended to be a platform for the expression of non-Christian forms of identist pluralism. In the *Myth of Religious Superiority*, Perry Schmidt-Leukel provides a

⁹ See Griffin, “Religious Pluralism.”

¹⁰ See Griffin, “John Cobb’s Religious Pluralism.”

¹¹ In the body of this study, I refer to identist religious pluralism as “humanistic religious pluralism,” and deep religious pluralism as “metaphysical religious pluralism.”

religious defence of the idea of pluralism and the classic threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In this defence, he “defines” religion as that which, minimally, has the property of mediating salvific knowledge of ultimate reality; and pluralism as the claim that there are multiple forms of religion but that none among these is the ultimate form of religion. In contrast, inclusivism also recognizes that there are multiple forms of religion, but claims that among these there is one ultimate form. Exclusivism claims that there is only one form of religion.¹²

Using these definitions, Schmidt-Leukel (I think accurately), classifies Mark Heim as an inclusivist, since, for Heim, Christian salvation is the ultimate end in which all other ends are fulfilled. This shows a disagreement between two identist pluralists (Schmidt-Leukel and Knitter) about how to classify religious diversity theorists such as Mark Heim – Knitter thinks Heim warrants a new category and Schmidt-Leukel sees him as a typical inclusivist. But, in any case, neither Knitter nor Schmidt-Leukel formed their typologies in light of deep religious pluralism as articulated by Griffin.

Obviously, part of the reason for this was that deep religious pluralism was practically invisible when Knitter formulated his fourfold typology and when Schmidt-Leukel reformulated the classic threefold typology: Griffin’s *Deep Pluralism* was not published until 2005; my own version of deep pluralism was not in circulation; and, otherwise, there was only one relatively unknown version of deep religious pluralism in print – Stephen Kaplan’s *Different Path, Different Summits* (2002).¹³

To my knowledge, there are no other versions of deep religious pluralism apart from Cobb’s/Griffin’s, Kaplan’s, and my own. Raimundo Panikkar should probably also

¹² See Schmidt-Leukel, “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism.”

¹³ See Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits*.

be included in this category, but it is very difficult to identify a concrete theory in his work.¹⁴ Nonetheless, even though deep religious pluralism is a very small steam, relative to identist pluralism, it is now extant. Thus, I believe any typology that tries to account for theories of religious diversity, within the Christian theology of religions or the Western philosophy of religion should include a category for, or at least a discussion of, deep religious pluralism.

Obviously the threefold typologies of Race and Schmidt-Leukel do not make room for deep religious pluralism, and neither does Knitter's really. David Ray Griffin has, as indicated, distinguished between two types of pluralism; however, I do not believe that his descriptions of either identist pluralism or deep pluralism – or even his understandings of exclusivism and inclusivism – are sufficient to classify the sorts of religious diversity theories that have come into existence since the publication of Race's classic study.¹⁵

Consequently, the intent of this dissertation is to provide a new (fourfold) typology for understanding theories of religious diversity that is useful for classifying late twentieth century theories of religious diversity. Thus, it may be thought of as an attempt to update Alan Race's *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, using theories of religious diversity that have appeared since the publication of Race's study in 1983. This "new" fourfold typology will obviously include a category for "deep religious" pluralism, but will also try to establish more clearly the meanings of "identist pluralism," and even "inclusivism" and "exclusivism." This dissertation is *not*, however, an attempt to argue

¹⁴ Perhaps, this is Panikkar's intent.

¹⁵ Others have suggested the idea that there is a second type of pluralism but have offered little evidence to back this idea up; see May, "Baha'i Principle of Religious Unity"; McCarthy "Reckoning with Religious Difference"; Panikkar, "Religious Pluralism."

for the validity or rightness of any particular type of theory; it is strictly a historical and taxonomic work based on a careful review of the literature (both theoretical/theological and taxonomic/typological) standing tall on the fields of the Christian theology of religions and Western philosophy religion in the late twentieth century.

My original intent for this study was to produce a typology of theories of religious diversity that could be used “cross-culturally,” or that could be used to understand types of theories of religious diversity that appear in different religious traditions. In the end, though, all of my theorists, are Christian, either by birth or confession, *and* Western academics so it would be presumptuous to suppose that this fourfold typology has cross-cultural validity the way that I originally imagined it might. Nonetheless, I do believe that this typology is effective for classifying the representative theories that it does discuss, and that it can be effectively used to classify similar theories within the Christian theology of religions and the Western philosophy of religion. Moreover, I believe that there is a need for such a typology given the current state of conceptual confusion within these fields, particularly with respect to the meaning of religious pluralism and its types.

2. Chapter Summary

This dissertation is divided into two parts: 1) The Historical Emergence Religious Pluralism in the Twentieth Century; 2) Late Twentieth Century Alternatives to Exclusivism and Inclusivism.

Part 1 has three main objectives. First, to show the historical backdrop against which the concept of religious pluralism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Second, to *sketch* the historical emergence and development of religious

pluralism as a concept, and movement, within the Christian theology of religions and the Western philosophy of religion. Third, to provide a new fourfold typology for theories of religious diversity, that is better able to understand recent developments in religious diversity theorizing than the threefold typology commonly used.

Chapter 1: Historical Background to the Emergence of Religious Pluralism, is dedicated to the first objective and will focus on past attempts to understand religious diversity, with special attention given to shifts in ontological orientation that have precipitated concomitant shifts in such understandings. Other factors influencing the emergence of religious pluralism, particularly social ones, will be further discussed in Part 2. Nonetheless, my main focus in this section is not to forge strong *causal* links to explain why religious pluralism emerged, but to get a clear picture of the dominant perspectives that were in play before pluralism emerged; the perspectives that would be rejected by pluralists.

Chapter 2: A Historical Outline of the Emergence and Development of Religious Pluralism is dedicated to the second objective of outlining the historical emergence of religious pluralism as a movement within Christian theology and the Western philosophy of religion. The lives and thoughts of the main characters introduced in this historical sketch will be the focal point of Part 2 of this dissertation.

Chapter 3: A “New” Fourfold Typology for Theories of Religious Diversity is dedicated to the third objective of developing a new typology for better understanding recent developments in theorizing about religious diversity. The third objective involves a “chicken and egg” scenario, wherein it is not obvious what should come first; the theory that explains the data presented in Part 2, or the data that has led to the theory. I have

decided to start with the theory (Chapter 3), but ask that this be read in a state of suspended judgement until the data that supports the theory is presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 (in Part 2).

In Part 2, I will present the cases from which I derive my types or classes; or, more specifically, from which I develop the concepts of humanistic religious pluralism, neo-religious inclusivism, and metaphysical religious pluralism.

In Chapter 4: Humanistic Religious Pluralism, we will examine the theories of three humanistic religious pluralists; namely, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter. Using the criteria for identifying theories of humanistic religious pluralism developed in Chapter 3, I will argue that each of these theorists is a humanistic religious pluralist. More specifically, I will argue that they are humanistic pluralists because they exhibit the following three main features of humanistic religious pluralism: 1) the rejection of the idea of a singular (or uniform) ultimate form of religion, and the affirmation of the plurality of true religion; 2) the affirmation that God (or Ultimate Reality) is one, and the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion; 3) the employment of the idea of a religious universal, as opposed to the idea of a religious end or the idea of a religious essence.

In Chapter 5: Neo-Religious Inclusivism, we will examine the work of three “neo-religious inclusivists”; namely, Paul Griffiths, Gavin D’Costa, and S. Mark Heim. Following Ernst Troeltsch’s distinction between “exclusive supernaturalism” and the “evolutionary apologetic” I affirm that all forms of inclusivism identify true religion with an *idea* about religion – either an essence or an end – and not with any particular form of religion. This conceptual move allows inclusivists to think in terms of absolute and

relative forms of religion. And, following Perry Schmidt-Leukel to an extent, I affirm that the main claim made by inclusivists is that there are many religions but only one ultimate form of religion. Each of the inclusivist theologies reviewed in this chapter make this claim, either implicitly or explicitly. However, I also call these forms of inclusivism “neo-inclusivism” because they exhibit a characteristic not found in traditional Christian inclusivisms; specifically, they make the claim that non-Christians may have, or really do have, truths that Christians (and all others) need in order to attain the ultimate (Christian) end.

In Chapter 6: Metaphysical Religious Pluralism I will examine the arguments I made in “Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity,” as well as the metaphysical pluralisms of Stephen Kaplan and John Cobb Jr./David Ray Griffin. Like humanistic pluralists, metaphysical pluralists also reject the idea of a singular (or uniform) ultimate form of religion, and affirm that there is a plurality of true religions. But metaphysical pluralists make a different argument; they claim that there are *multiple ultimate* religious truths because religions reflect or manifest Ultimate Reality (i.e. there is strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion), and Ultimate Reality is itself multiple or plural.

I conclude with an argument for the comparative validity and usefulness of my conceptual categories, and some reflections on the possible future of the idea of religious pluralism.

PART 1

THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1

Historical Background to the Emergence of Religious Pluralism

David Ray Griffin traces the emergence of religious pluralism back to the work of Ernst Troeltsch in the early part of the 20th century. For Griffin, religious pluralism entails two affirmations – one rejecting religious absolutism and the other accepting the presence of religious truth and values in other traditions.¹ He also identifies four main bases for the emergence and growth of Christian pluralism: sociological, theological, ethical, and ontological.

As for sociological reasons for the recent growth of religious pluralism, Griffin notes a twofold change. On one hand, there has been a vast increase in knowledge of other religions, be it through books and other forms of media or through personal acquaintance, which has led to an appreciation of the wisdom and beauty of other religions by Christians. And, on the other hand, Christians have become collectively more self-conscious of their own moral and spiritual shortcomings. Both of these developments have made it less plausible to hold the view that other religions have no value in terms of mediating salvation. (9-10)

Theological reasons for the emergence of pluralism within Christianity are connected to the primacy of Christianity's doctrine of divine love. In other words, if love is the highest virtue of Christianity then it is very difficult to reconcile the notion of an all-loving God with the notion of this God privileging one particular religious community

¹ Griffin, "Religious Pluralism," 3; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

with an opportunity for salvation while abandoning all others to a certain destiny of eternal damnation. (10-11)

The ethical reason for the emergence of pluralism is also connected to the Christian doctrine of love, and in particular the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. For Christian pluralists, the notion of treating religious others as though they are inferior beings is incompatible with this commandment. (11-12)

For Griffin, though, an ontological shift among modern Christian thinkers is most directly responsible for the emergence and current growth of religious pluralism. This ontological shift is, specifically, a move away from an ontology of supernaturalism and to an ontology of naturalism. Supernatural, is "belief in a divine being that occasionally interrupts the world's normal causal processes" and, for Griffin, this ontology is the basis of all forms of Christian absolutism. (13)

Therefore, pluralism – as the opposite of absolutism – must reject this ontology and Griffin suggests that this rejection could simultaneously be called the affirmation of naturalism.

I agree with Griffin, that the work of Ernst Troeltsch marks the dawn of religious pluralism; however, I do not see Troeltsch's significance in what he accomplished as a pluralist – because he never became one – but in his efforts to clearly define the two traditional means used by Christians for understanding religious others. It is in opposition to these two traditional means for understanding the religious other that Christian pluralists would form their own positions. Troeltsch called these the supernatural apologetic (or supernatural exclusivism) and the evolutionary apologetic. The supernatural apologetic sees Christianity as the perfect form of religion and other

“religions” as a mass of human error – Christianity is the only religion. The evolutionary apologetic sees Christianity as the perfect realization of the essence of religion, and other religions as less perfect realizations of this same religious essence—Christianity is the best religion. The supernatural apologetic is now commonly referred to as exclusivism, and the evolutionary apologetic is referred to as inclusivism.

The historical context in which inclusivism started to gain widespread appeal – late 18th to early 19th century Europe – is one in which intellectuals had awareness of vast religious diversity. The appearance of this diversity started to emerge in the 15th century with the fracture of Western Christendom in the Protestant Reformation, and the exploits of the great western navel powers who were bringing home knowledge about the habits and customs of the peoples of the Far East and Meso-America. This process gained momentum throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, and the awareness of “religious diversity” led to the habit of thinking of Christianity as a token of a type called religion.²

In this context it became increasingly difficult for Christian intellectuals to maintain the validity of the supernatural apologetic that reduced everything outside of Christianity to nothingness with respect to being religious – the evidence seemed to suggest that there was more than one religion. In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers* appeared in Germany as an apology for religion to the sophisticated thinkers of the Enlightenment who had little use for the religion and its superstitions. *On Religion* is commonly recognized as the first time that religion was conceived, by a Christian theologian, as an *idea* – as a philosophically conceived essence. In this new way of thinking, Christianity is not religion itself but one

² For one discussion of this process, see Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 5.

religious movement in which the essence of religion is realized – but, predictably, the one in which the essence of religion is seen to be most fully realized.

This approach was novel and useful because it didn't require Christians to say that other religions were not religions – as the supernatural apologetic did – and it still allowed Christians to come to the conclusion that Christianity is the absolute religion, or, at very least, the best religion. It is important to recognize the logic at work here. No religion is, in itself, absolute – it is the essence of religion that is absolute. Nonetheless, the religion that perfectly realizes the essence is absolute, or, the religion that most perfectly realizes the essence is closest to the absolute. This is where the notion of Christianity being the superior, rather than the only, religion begins.

It is hard to know if the first inclusivists employed the idea of an absolute essence in order to provide a more benign evaluation of other religions than they could with supernatural exclusivism; or, if they were just trying to preserve its life in a new form, now that the weight of ubiquitous religious diversity, and type-token logic, was threatening to make Christianity into just one religion among many. Probably the latter for the first inclusivists, and probably the former for “post-pluralism inclusivists” who breathed new life into inclusivism two hundred years after Schleiermacher gave birth to it. In any case, we do know that inclusivism appeared as an alternative to exclusivism, and that it employed a very different strategy for understanding religion and religions.

The strategy of inclusivism was to absolutize an essence of religion instead of a particular form of religion. Troeltsch rejected both forms of absolutism, and tried to establish, instead, a religious “norm” based on an analysis of the history of religions. Troeltsch's quest first led him to a quasi-absolutism in the form of an historically derived

norm that looked suspiciously like Christianity; his conclusion was that Christianity was the “focal point and culmination of all religious developments” and, therefore, the superior religion – at least for now and the foreseeable future.³ But, in the end, Troeltsch opted for relativism, or the position that there are no religious norms let alone religious absolutes, as the more reasonable conclusion.

Nonetheless, in an effort to move beyond the supernatural apologetic, and, more especially the evolutionary apologetic, Troeltsch became very clear about the nature of these two positions. As far as I know, no one else has achieved comparable conceptual clarity in differentiating exclusivism from inclusivism; thus, Troeltsch will be our point of entry into this study of religious pluralism.

1. Ernst Troeltsch: The Supernatural Apologetic and the Evolutionary Apologetic

Ernst Troeltsch was drawn to the idea of Absoluteness in both its religious or supernatural form and its philosophical and essentialist form; he was drawn to the certainty that it conferred. But Troeltsch was also drawn to the human, the relative, and the historical – and his vocation was that of an historian. In 1902 Troeltsch published a small book called *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, in which he tried to unite the opposing tendencies of the religious/absolute and the historical/relative. His aim was to establish the normative truth of Christianity through historical study, although in the end his final claim about the normativeness of Christianity rested on religious conviction.

About twenty years after this (*circa* 1923), Troeltsch prepared a paper called “Christianity Among the World Religions” in which he reviewed and renounced his

³ Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 107.

former conclusion. His new conclusion was that Christianity is only valid, true, and normative in Europe and the Americas where Christianity had grown up. Other cultures have their own religions and value systems that are as true and normative to them as Christianity is to Europeans and those of the Americas. In other words, religious truth is relative. This was Troeltsch's final position, even though he insisted that what is true only "for us" is still "very truth," and held out the convergence of norms as a future ideal.⁴

Religious pluralism is often linked with relativism,⁵ and, so, it might be natural to think that the theory of religious pluralism grew out of Troeltsch's relativism. Paradoxically, this is not the case, and theories of religious pluralism have as much in common with Troeltsch's earlier "normativism" and perhaps even the philosophical essentialism that he also rejected. Indeed, the first pluralists did something that Troeltsch never thought to do; they tried to argue that there could be *multiple forms* of a religious norm.

This novel conceptual move, of "pluralizing a religious norm," is at the heart of what I will call *humanistic religious pluralism*. But before turning our attention to this we will examine Troeltsch's conceptualization of the two positions he consciously rejected before trying to establish a historically grounded religious norm; namely, the "supernatural apologetic" and the "evolutionary apologetic." We will do this because, as said above, the supernatural apologetic and the evolutionary apologetic would later become known as exclusivism and inclusivism respectively, and pluralists would propose their own theories of religious diversity as alternatives to these.

⁴ Troeltsch, "Christianity Among the World Religions," 221-222.

⁵ See McLelland, "Pluralism Without Relativism,"; Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*; Cobb, "Beyond 'Pluralism'."

Troeltsch begins *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (1901) by saying that the historical view of the world has become dominant; it is “a dynamic principle for attaining a comprehensive view of everything human.”⁶ Within the purview of history is everything from the past and everything across the broad spectrum of the present. Such a long and broad historical view of things allows for comparisons, and this poses a threat to cultures and value systems that have always assumed the obviousness of their validity. (46)

Troeltsch continues by saying that because it is now possible to take a look at *all* cultures, it is now possible to establish criteria for value; in other words, we can now establish criteria that will tell us what human value systems are valid. And, this capacity brings to an end all past and naive attempts to prove validity based on either revelation or the truths of natural reason. History has replaced theology and philosophy as the means for determining value; it is “the foundation of all thinking concerning values and norms. It is the medium for the self-reflection of the species upon its nature, origins, and hopes.” (47)

Troeltsch recognizes that the historical method⁷ for determining values constitutes a threat to Christianity which has always naively assumed its own normative truth. But despite this assumption, Christians have from time to time felt the need to offer an apology for the normative truth of Christianity. The first of these apologetic reflections

⁶ Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 45; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

⁷ Following is Troeltsch’s description of the modern idea of history and the historical method: “The modern idea of history, which depends on critical source-analysis and on conclusions derived from psychological analogy, is the history of the development of peoples, spheres of culture, and cultural components. It dissolves all dogmas in the flow of events and tries sympathetically to do justice to all phenomena first measuring them by their own criteria and then combining them into an overall picture of the continuous and mutually conditioning factors in all individual phenomena that shape the unfolding development of mankind” (Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 46-47).

makes a sharp distinction between Christianity, as a “divinely ordained institution”; and, non-Christianity as a “homogeneous mass of human error.” (47) The truth of Christianity is based on both the external miracle of Christ’s incarnation in human history and the inner miracle of conversion (the recognition of the external miracle). On this same basis, ecclesiastical philosophy and theology would develop the concept of the church, and, thus, the church and church history came to be seen as derived from heaven in sharp contrast to ordinary history:

Ordinary history with its merely human and humanly conditioned truths is, according to this view, the sphere of sin and error. Only history as written by the church gives truth that is absolutely certain, though not absolutely exhaustive, because it works with powers that derive not from history but directly from God.

(47)

But the modern idea of history has radically undermined this apologetic by placing all history on the same plane. This meant that Christianity was just one religious phenomenon beside all of the others, and in this context it became impossible to authentic the validity of Christianity on the basis of miracle; other religions had their miracles too, and there was no justification for allowing Christian miracle (as a criterion for truth) and not the miracles of others.⁸

When Christians realized it was no longer possible to validate Christianity by the traditional means of seeing Christianity as a miracle in history but not of history, it employed a different method; one taking the total history of humankind as its starting point. This alternative apologetic was, thus, playing on the same turf as the historian,

⁸ David Hume’s “Of Miracles,” also played a role in discrediting the unique validity of Christian miracles; see Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

taking history as a “dynamic principle in its own right.” (49) What was different about the historical approach of the Christian apologist, though, was that it assumed a single teleology or aim for all of human history. In other words, human history was moving towards a culmination and, of course, Christianity was the point of all this upward movement:

The history of mankind was viewed causally and teleologically as a single whole. Within this whole the ideal of religious truth was thought of as moving forward in gradual stages, and at one definite point, namely, in the historical phenomenon of Christianity, it was deemed to have reached absolute form, i.e., the complete and exhaustive realization of its principle. (49)

According to Troeltsch, this way of thinking was in line not only with a historical view of the world, but also the relatively new idea of thinking of Christianity as one of the religions of the world. The idea that Christianity is a *type* of religion, stems from the Enlightenment and did not become common until about the 18th century.⁹ The genealogy of this idea might be traced back to Rene Descartes who, in the 16th century, wrestled authority away from the Church and enshrined it in the rational self.¹⁰ In any case, philosophers, and eventually theologians, after Descartes started to see religion as a philosophical concept, that was realized in varying degrees by different religions but not identical with any given religion: religion had become a “species.”

Returning to Troeltsch’s analysis in *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, it was hoped that this concept of a universal principle of religion, which enfolded all movement from the least to the most complete realization of itself, would be able to account for the

⁹ Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 5.

¹⁰ For a genealogy of religious pluralism that starts with Descartes, see Kreiger, *New Universalism*.

multiplicity of religious forms, since every religion could be located somewhere along the path towards realization of the principle. Moreover, it was hoped that this universal principle would show that Christianity, as the perfect realization or actualization of the principle of religion, was absolute truth or normative religious truth:

There exists, in reality, only *one* religion, namely, the principle or essence of religion, and this principle of religion, this essence of religion, is latent in all historical religions as their ground and goal. In Christianity this universally latent essence, everywhere else limited by its media, has appeared in untrammelled and exhaustive perfection. If Christianity is thus identical with this principle of religion that is elsewhere implicit and that comes to complete explication only in Christianity, then the Christian religion is of course normative religious truth. (49-50)

This new apologetic found its first profound expressions in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. These two thinkers generated the idea of religion as a philosophical concept – an essence – and the idea of this essence developing to fulfillment *within the history of religions*. These two ideas became the “apologetic foundation of the so-called modern or liberal theology.” And this is particularly significant for our discussion because the theory of religious pluralism sprung from this school of liberal theology.¹¹

But, for Troeltsch, the “modern apologetic” or the “evolutionary apologetic” represents the primary opponent to his own argument that Christianity was normatively

¹¹ See Chapter 4 in Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

true but not absolutely true.¹² In order to establish this thesis it is necessary for Troeltsch to be clear about what is meant by “absolute,” and he does this by differentiating the “absoluteness” of what he now calls the supernatural apologetic from the absoluteness of the evolutionary apologetic.

He begins by pointing out the main similarity shared by the evolutionary and the supernatural apologetics; namely, that they are both set on proving the absolute truth of Christianity as a matter of course, or as a theoretical requirement. (51) In neither case is independent criteria set up against which the validity of Christianity and other religions can be evaluated. In the first case, it turns out that Christianity is revelation opposed to human error; and, in the second case, it turns out that Christianity is the fulfillment of the principle of religion and not one of its lesser forms.

For Troeltsch, the only difference between the two is the path they take to the same goal; (52) the main difference here being that the supernatural apologetic employs “form” and the evolutionary apologetic employs the logic of “essence and content.” By “form” Troeltsch is referring to the mode of seeing absolute truth in a specific form or embodiment, and seeing that as radically distinct from the opposing forms of non-truth in the world. For the orthodox supernaturalist, the form of absolute truth appears as a miraculous cleavage within ordinary history and its relative truths; it is a direct issue of divine causality:

Christianity has been defined in principle as something that stands in opposition to everything human and historical, in opposition to all merely relative truths and powers. Absoluteness here consists of miracle. It is the absoluteness of a Christian

¹² That Christianity is normatively true but not absolutely true is the main thesis or argument of *The Absoluteness of Christianity* – and not as the title seems to suggest, that Christianity is absolute in the traditional sense.

Sunday causality in antithesis to the relativity and mediacy of a non-Christian weekday causality. (52)

The supernatural apologetic is satisfied with this type of “absoluteness” which, for Troeltsch, is an impoverished understanding of absoluteness because absoluteness signifies an end which other things approach and so these other things are not just nothing.¹³ In fact, Troeltsch says that the language of absoluteness isn’t even native to the supernatural apologetic, and that its all or nothing attitude is better described as “exclusive supernaturalism”:

... the expression “absoluteness of Christianity” was not coined by holders of this view [supernaturalism]. They fashioned only the theory of exclusively supernatural revelation, in contrast to which everything outside Christianity stands as the work not of God but of man. What this apologetic understands by the term “absoluteness” is actually exclusive supernaturalism. (53)

Thus, Troeltsch sees absoluteness in its fullest sense only in the evolutionary apologetic, where the conceptual orientation is essence and content rather than form.

Troeltsch says that the evolutionary apologetic grew out of recognition of the impracticality of arguing for the superior position of Christianity based on form. But the same favoured position could be maintained by arguing that Christianity was the “realization of the idea of religion itself.” (53) This idea allowed Christians to drop the notion of supernatural causality, because the normal causal processes of history (the structures of causality) could be seen as the context for the realization of the idea of religion in history.

¹³ Here Troeltsch is using absolute in the way that ultimate is commonly used in English, as something “being or happening at the end of a process.” (OED)

Troeltsch continues by describing (in Hegelian terms) this new way of thinking about religion that is able to use normal history as the means for realizing the absolute religious end, instead of seeing it as the mere opposite of true religion which appears paradoxically and supernaturally within history. All finite beings move towards the realization of the “idea”—this is the “movement of the divine life as a causal, teleological, and unitary life process.” (54) And, for finite consciousness (i.e., for human beings), this idea is always conceived as the idea of God or the idea of religion. Thus, religious life unfolds throughout history in the shape of “content and essence” wherein historical reality is the content that strives to realize the essence of the idea of God or religion. For human beings, this content is a state of consciousness, and this consciousness gradually and continually moves from preliminary and circumscribed states toward its ultimate consummation or fulfillment in the perfect realization of the idea of God. (54)

From the summit of perfect realization of the idea of God, all of religious history can be viewed as part of the evolutionary process wherein all is moving towards fulfillment of the universal principle of religion; in other words, all of the lesser forms of religion can be seen in their relative degrees of perfection and completion:

A kind of religious geology teaches such a man to understand all lands and provinces in this realm as preliminary stages to the summit they all help to form, the summit that exists not in isolation from all else but simply as the crown of the whole. Of course this is not absolute knowledge of God – only God himself possesses that – but it is the absolute realization of all human knowledge of God, a realization that exhausts its principle and its substantive goal. This means it is *the* knowledge of God that man, as he proceeds from and returns to God, can

understand as the finite spirit which, though rooted in infinity, consumes and purifies its finitude in devotion. (54-55)

At this point, Troeltsch is able to express the heart of the difference between the supernatural apologetic and the evolutionary apologetic; the former is grounded in supernatural revelation and the latter in human consciousness. The former creates a one and only proposition, while the latter allows for degrees of perfection; hence, it meaningfully employs the terms absolute and relative truth:

Only in this context does the expression “absoluteness” possess its full meaning. It signifies the perfect self-comprehension of the idea that strives for complete clarity, the self-realization of God in the human consciousness. It is the philosophical substitute for the dogmatic supernaturalism of the church. (55)

For Troeltsch, the theories of the supernatural apologetic and the evolutionary apologetic are the only ones that can be taken seriously as a means for proving the “normative” truth of Christianity. And even though the historically-minded theologians of his day were declaring supernatural exclusivism and Hegelian religious essentialism to be dead, Troeltsch maintains that they often employed the arguments of both in inconsistent ways that obscured their “inner spirit.” Moreover, such theologians showed little capacity to distinguish between absoluteness in the supernatural sense and absoluteness in the philosophical sense, and therefore were unable to employ one of the most useful aspects of philosophical absolutism – the aspect that allowed for a positive recognition of other religions. For some of these theologians,

the term “absoluteness of Christianity” simply represents the claim Christianity makes to exclusive truth, a claim which, though it conflicts sharply with all

similar claims, nevertheless belongs to the very nature of Christianity and therefore must simply be accepted. They do not take this to mean that the interpretation of Christian thought should exclude a flexible consideration of other kinds of truths and other ways of understanding, such as those of the natural sciences. Unfortunately, however, this theology that makes so much of the Christian claim takes no account of the corresponding claims of other religions. (56-57)

After expressing his exasperation with the inability of contemporary theologians to think profoundly about these matters, stemming from an inability to distinguish supernaturally revealed truth from absolute truth in the philosophical sense, Troeltsch introduces a further notion of truth, which he says must be understood as distinct from both of these. This is the notion of “simple normative value.” (57) To make the distinction between simple normative value or normative truth, as opposed to absolute truth in the philosophical sense, Troeltsch begins with a historical examination of the idea of absoluteness of Christianity.

Troeltsch begins with a consideration of how early Christianity dealt with its religious environment, an environment populated with mutually hostile religions. In this environment, early Christianity was forced to make some theoretical and practical decisions about where it stood in relation to these other “religions.” According to Troeltsch, the early church followed the lead of Saint Paul and adopted, for the most part, the Jewish, and particularly the “Hellenized-Jewish apologetic against the heathen.” (57) But, he says this never really caught on because it relied too much on the idea of Paul’s personal (and unrepeatable) experience of Christ and possession by the Spirit to be

comprehensible to later generations (who were not capable of understanding such lofty ideas). (57-58)

Institutional Christianity, says Troeltsch, formed its definitive view of other religions in its debate with Gnosticism. In these debates, Christianity adopted the ideas of supernatural revelation and incarnation, and it would use these ideas which became doctrines to argue that Christian faith meant perfect and final knowledge of God, “that it was something essentially new and ‘absolute’.” (58) This was the theory of the uncultured element of the congregation. The more cultured members adopted a more philosophical idea for understanding Christianity's relation to other religions. In contrast, for the philosophers of the church, the “moments of truth” in other religious-like-things – the cults, the mythologies, the philosophies, etc. – were expressions of divine Reason that are present in the natural world. But these instances of truth are comprehended in complete and perfect form in the incarnation of the Divine reason, Jesus Christ. As such, Christianity reveals all previously concealed divine mysteries and the truths of natural reason in “absolute” form. (58)

In both the un-cultured and the cultured forms of “absoluteness,” absoluteness is grounded in the idea or theory of supernatural revelation. Troeltsch says that this way of thinking – which would eventually lead to the development of the idea that God revealed in Christ was the Divine Reason (the Logos) which enfolded natural reason – was unique to antiquity. Thus, the sense in which Christianity was absolute for early Christians was entirely different than it was, for the theologians of the Enlightenment who conceived absoluteness as the fulfillment of the causal processes of history. Early Christians saw religion as appearing in history but not of history; and later historically-minded Christians

saw religion as historical movement: “In particular it [earlier Christianity] is far removed from considering the history of religion as history of religion.” (58)

Troeltsch continues by saying that the breakdown of national religions (in antiquity) lead to the habit of thinking in unhistorical generalizations (presumably because everything historical was being uprooted). Thus, ideas of religious reform became highly rationalistic and syncretistic, and, in this environment, Christianity became the most successful religion. Christianity became an unhistorical supernatural revelation that interrupted the normal causal processes of history; it was the divine revelation of the divine Logos which became incarnate in Jesus Christ. This conception of Christianity made it impossible to attribute positive value to anything outside of Christianity; Christianity was supernatural revelation from God and other “religions” were merely human:

To Christianity the non-Christian religions were by no means religions in the true sense of the word, and it was utterly devoid of any concept of religion as a species. Christianity itself was revelation and not religion. Other religions were sporadic and distorted philosophical systems based on a natural knowledge of God. But in the clarity of the divine light these systems were fully comprehended, it was believed, in Christianity, though here they were set free of their otherwise natural instability because of the foundation provided by the miracle of revelation. (59)

Troeltsch thought this rationalistic and syncretistic view of religion was understandable for the times, but he stresses that had little to do with the evolutionary apologetic’s way of thinking. He even says that this view of religion, within the

supernatural apologetic, has been sublimated into “religious drives and needs that are found in many universally and that play a part in every religion. It is sunk to the level of a set of questions that find their aim though only in the Christian revelation.” (59)

In its modern form, the supernatural apologetic relies on the *inner miracle* of conversion to prove that Christianity is absolutely true, or “on the absolute miracle of an inner renewal that transcends all natural powers.” (59) In contrast, the evolutionary apologetic sees in Christianity the realization of the essence of religion, and on this basis asserts its absoluteness. (59-60)

At this point, Troeltsch argues against the more modern form of the supernatural apologetic that seeks to prove the absolute truth of Christianity by reference to the inner miracle of conversion. He says that it is impossible to claim that Christianity is uniquely true on the basis of a purely personal inner experience, and so the supernatural apologetic must always turn to the great external archetypical miracles connected with the origin of Christianity – the incarnation and the miracles performed by Jesus of Nazareth. But when it does this it introduces a dichotomy between the sacred and profane that is unacceptable to the modern historical way of thinking. Thus, for Troeltsch, the evolutionary apologetic, which is at least historically minded, is the more credible of the two traditional theories. (60)

But he then asks if the idealistic and evolutionary theory of religion is a tenable answer to the great modern religious problem of how to establish religious norms in the face of bewildering religious diversity, or “How can we pass beyond the diversity with which history presents us to norms for our faith and for our judgments about life?” (61) Troeltsch would go on to answer this question negatively, but he does argue that it is

possible, on the basis of a study of the history of religions, to determine which religion is *normatively* true.

The difference between the absolute truth of the evolutionary apologetic and Troeltsch's normative truth is primarily one of method. For Troeltsch, historical knowledge is unique because history is "the sphere of the individual and nonrecurrent," but within this transiency there is something "universally valid" that makes itself known. The problem with the universal apologetic, for Troeltsch, is that it tends to focus exclusively of the universal and valid with little regard to actual historical multiplicity. Indeed, it vainly tries to control multiplicity with its grand metaphysical systems, and this, says Troeltsch, leaves it open to the "the unlimited relativism of the present day." (106) He believed that the Enlightenment's essentialist understanding of religion stood closer to the "basic urgings of the human ethos" (the desire for absoluteness) and was better at discerning the "main tendencies of history" than the microscopic modern study of history. On the other hand, there is something paradoxically profound about studying actual religions in all of their textured richness; indeed, such studies seem to ring truer than studies guided by religious essences that practically predetermine what one is going to see. For Troeltsch the secret to the study of religion is to combine these two tendencies:

Thus the problem is to define the scope of the relative and individual with ever increasing exactness and to understand with ever increasing comprehensiveness the universally valid that works teleologically within history. Then we will see that the relative contains an indication of the unconditional. In the relative we will find a token of the absolute that transcends history. (106)

Troeltsch's historical study of religions – which was a search for the universal or the “absolute that transcends history” within history – led him to the conclusion that Christianity is, at least so far, the most perfect historical manifestation of the religious universal. But, he insisted that this conclusion that Christianity is the truest religion is not the result of hanging historical facts on a religious history template that would predetermine it; this conclusion is derived from the evidence offered by a study of religious history.

Despite Troeltsch's (Aristotelian) bottom-up approach to truth, opposed to the (Platonic) top-down approach to truth of the essentialists, his results – especially as seen in Chapter 4 of *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, called “Christianity: Focal Point and Culmination of all Religious Developments” – are remarkably similar.

In Chapter 4, Troeltsch says that historical thinking does not preclude the possibility of discovering that Christianity is the highest religious truth; the question is whether or not it does include this. For Troeltsch, the answer involves a personal conviction but not one that is “determinative from the outset” the way the answers of essentialist historicizing are; it is a conviction derived from comparative “observation and absorption in hypothetically adopted values.” It thus steps beyond being a mere “confession” of faith, and is able to satisfy the scientifically minded. (107-108)

Authenticating the truth of Christianity scientifically was a major problem for the theologians of Troeltsch's day, but Troeltsch was calm and assured that the challenge could be met, so long as Christianity was recognized as the “completely historical phenomenon it is.” (108) Troeltsch saw Christianity as a religion that combined many religious and cultural religious elements, including the following:

Israelite prophecy, the preaching of Jesus, the mysticism of Paul, the idealism of Platonism and Stoicism, the integration of medieval European culture in terms of a religious conception, the Germanic individualism of Luther, and the conscientiousness and activism of Protestantism. (108)

As for challengers to the crown of the focal point and culmination of all religious developments, Troeltsch dismisses the various “polytheisms and polydemonisms” and says that it is only necessary to consider “the great world religions with their clearly supra-sensual world of absolutely transcendent religious values which enters into the world of the senses.” (109) The great virtue of these religions is that they transcend the blind reality of material existence, and allow the senses to be turned to higher spiritual reality:

It is these religions that free themselves from the natural confinement of religion to state, blood, and soil, and from the entanglement of divinity in the powers and phenomena of nature. It is in them that the world of the senses is solidly confronted by a higher, spiritual and eternal world, and it is in them, therefore, that the full, all-embracing power of religion first arises. (109)

Having distinguished the great world religions from the rest, Troeltsch makes a further distinction amongst these: the religions of law are inferior to the religions of redemption. The religions of law – such as Judaism and Islam – are unable to make a profound distinction between the world of the senses and the “world of higher, transcendent value.” This ability is primarily an almost exclusive skill of the religions of redemption:

The religions of redemption are the ones that consummate this distinction between the two worlds. They sever men inwardly from the whole of existent reality, even from the nature of their own souls, in order to confront reality with divinely empowered men. Thus they provide the whole of existent reality not only with an example of those values that overcome the world and constitute its only worth but also with the sure hope of victory and of living for a higher world.

(109)

The religion of Christianity was derived (like Judaism and Islam) from “the Israelite prophetic movement,” but surpassed it. Christianity was able to make a radical distinction between God and soul, on one hand, and the world on the other, and this engendered in it the capacity to recognize or realize unconditional value. Following is Troeltsch’s description of this loftiest of religious states:

Here we find a complete and radical disengagement of God and of souls from the world; the elevation of both into the sphere of personality where nature is shaped and overcome and where unconditioned value is realized; and the overcoming of all that is merely given, merely existent, by an infinite and intrinsic value that bursts forth from the depths of the world and finds expression in practical conduct. (110)

Having closed the door on the matter-bound religions of Judaism and Islam, Troeltsch realizes that he has left open the door for the Indian religions, which seem to assert an even more rarefied form of spiritual consciousness.

Troeltsch’s first move here is to claim that the Indian religions of redemption are very much like Neo-Platonism, and the religious movements of late antiquity known as

Gnosticism. Thus, he sees the Indian redemptive religions, on one hand, as growing out of natural religion and, on the other, as smothering the personalized and ethnicized religions of India that were grounded in polytheism. The Indian redemptive religions did this because they took the idea of pure spirit too far, and thus sought the annulment of the world in their peculiar form of religion:

Divinity now comes to mean pure, highest being, or the supreme order of the world, in relation to which the world process signifies that this being, this order, is made obscure and finite. Redemption means, accordingly, the annulment of the world process and the obliteration of everything personal in pure being, since the existence and value of the personal constitute no problem for this type of religious apprehension. (110)

In this argument Troeltsch is preparing the way for the appearance of the religion that is neither hidebound to material existence nor obliterated in pure divinity – Christianity. But, first, he needs to account for Buddhism, which coincidentally, was the first religion that was recognized by Christians as another “world religion.”¹⁴ Buddhism – which Troeltsch calls “Buddhist quietism” – is one form of Indian redemption religion, but one that is different from “Brahmanic acosmism” which seeks the dissolution of the world – even though Buddhist quietism shares with Brahmanic acosmism “ethical introspection” and likewise originated as a critical response to natural religion. (111)

In Brahmanic acosmism (Advaita Vedanta), the divine is conceived as the Absolute One, and the only Reality. All else is finite, transitory, and ultimately illusory. But finite reality has a means of redemption; namely, absorption into the Absolute,

¹⁴ For a discussion of the process whereby Buddhism came to be regarded as a “world religion,” by Western scholars of religions, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, especially Chapter 4.

wherein the soul and the Absolute become an “absolutely indistinguishable unity.” (111) In Buddhist quietism, the divine is the ordering power behind the sequences of cosmic cause and effect, and beyond this is “the void of bliss that lies behind the world.” (111) In Buddhism, the path to redemption is twofold and involves; 1) the practical submission of the will; and 2) understanding the illusory nature and impermanence of finite reality. Both paths, like other forms of redemptive religion, use ethical ideas as a means of mastery over the self and world, and religious perception as a means of deeply comprehending the difference between the material and spiritual worlds, or the true and illusory worlds. But in contrast to Brahmanic acosmism – where the divine is a “barren One, an ultimate abstraction from the existent,” and the only means to redemption are meditation and asceticism – Troeltsch conceptualizes redemption in Buddhism as “sheer order, sheer fate” that is made possible by subduing the will in order to attain the true understanding of the nature of cosmic reality, and is fulfilled by participation in the void. (111)

At this point, Troeltsch turns his attention to what is lacking in these Indian forms of redemption religion; specifically, he says, they lack “the truth, power, and vitality of the higher world,” and therefore the higher world is not capable of “uprooting and transforming men” and so redemption has to come from the bottom up, through self-assertion or one’s own natural spiritual endowments. (111) This, of course, is a lead into the great world religion that is not lacking in a similar regard – Christianity.¹⁵

Christianity does not have the defects of the Indian religions of redemption that effectively destroy the person – let alone the defects of the religions of Judaism and Islam

¹⁵ Troeltsch and his famous student Karl Barth are often juxtaposed as polar opposites, but in this notion of Christianity being a case of the Absolute reaching down to transform human life, the two are profoundly similar and show their common Lutheran heritage.

that don't quite comprehend the distinction between spiritual and material reality – because Christianity is the “strongest and most concentrated revelation of personalistic religious apprehension.” (112) Moreover, Christianity is unique in that it has worked out “in a radical way the distinction between the higher and lower worlds,” a distinction wherein the personal transcends the material to become an expression of the divine:

It alone, by virtue of a higher world deriving from its own reality and inner necessity, takes empirical reality as actually given and experienced, builds upon it, transforms it, and at length raises it up to a new level. It makes this achievement possible by redemptively uniting souls that are ensnared in the world and in guilt with the outgoing and embracing love of God. Christianity represents the only complete break with the limits and conditions of nature religion. It represents the only depiction of the higher world as infinitely valuable personal life that conditions and shapes all else. It renounces the world, but only to the extent that its superficial, natural significance clings to it and the evil in it has become dominant. It affirms the world to the extent that it is from God and is perceived by men of faith as deriving from and leading to God. And renunciation and affirmation, taken together, disclose the true higher world in a power and independence that are experienced nowhere else. (112)

For Troeltsch this conception of personalistic redemption demands a choice between it and the impersonal Indian forms redemption, and Troeltsch's own choice is clear:

It is necessary to make a choice between redemption through meditation on Transcendent Being or non-Being and redemption through faithful, trusting

participation in the person-like character of God, the ground of all life and of all genuine value. This is a choice that depends on religious conviction, not scientific demonstration. The higher goal and the greater profundity of life are found on the side of personalistic religion. (112)

As indicated in the passage above, it is at this point in the “argument” that Troeltsch abandons the scientific study of religion that has lead him to see aspects of universal truth in the various great world religions, and rest his final claim on religious conviction. His final claim is that “faithful, trusting participation in the person-like character of God,” or personalistic redemptive religion, offers the highest religious goal. And, thus, Christianity as the “strongest and most comprehensive revelation of personalistic religious apprehension” is the focal point and culmination of all religious developments. (112) But, again, it is normatively true opposed to absolutely true, insofar as its truth is discerned within the history of religions, rather than in a metaphysical religious conception that practically predetermines the absoluteness of Christianity.

One of the most striking features of Troeltsch’s theory of religious diversity is how much it resembles the evolutionary apologetic that it seeks to replace, especially the evolutionary apologetic of Friedrich Schleiermacher. As said above, Friedrich Schleiermacher is widely cited as being the father of modern liberal Protestantism, and the first theologian to conceptualize religion as an ideal or a philosophical concept, rather than use religion as a signifier of Christianity. This approach allowed Schleiermacher, and those who followed him, to ascribe positive value to religions other than Christianity. But, in the end, the ideal of all religions, as conceived by Schleiermacher, was transparently Christian; the teleological end for all religions was the ideal of Pauline

theology wherein the body is spiritualized and God is “all in all,” or God is the living presence in all *persons*. Because Schleiermacher was so influential on later Christian thinking about religious diversity, we will now briefly review his early thinking about religious diversity in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.¹⁶

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher: The Essence of Religion

Schleiermacher understood religion, and therefore Christianity, in terms of “intuitions of the universe” of which there are as many varied forms as there are true individuals.

Intuitions of the universe are rooted in feeling but are not vague; every intuition has its own particular content and its own particular relationship with other intuitions.¹⁷ An intuition of the universe is at root an intuition of the infinite in the finite; in other words, religions are instances when finite forms reveal something true about the infinite:

...the basic intuition of a religion can be nothing other than some intuition of the infinite in the finite, some universal element of religion that may also occur in all other religions – and, should they be complete, must be present – but not placed in the centre of them. (210)

Schleiermacher presumes the plurality of religions and finds them all rooted in this essential form of religion. (191) He says that if we want to understand what religion really is we must see the work of the “world spirit progressing into infinity” and the “eternally rich womb of the universe” in its various forms in the course of human history. (192) But the essence of religion is not diffuse and ubiquitous; it can only be found in the “determinate forms in which it has actually already appeared.” In short, we find religion

¹⁶ The following is a modification of work that appears in my Master’s Thesis; see Martin, “*Making Sense of Religion and Religions*,” 46-53.

¹⁷ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 207; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

in the religions. (193) He makes a distinction between positive religions which are well formed, specific, determinate and consequently reveal something about the nature of the infinite and natural religions which are ill formed, vague, indeterminate and consequently reveal very little about the infinite. For Schleiermacher, the more determinate a religion is the more it is worthy of our attention. (193) Natural religions are vague feelings that precede real religion; they are “dim imitations that precede that living intuition that opens up the religious life to a person.” (206)

Every intuition of the universe that bursts forth out of its eternal womb appears in individuals, to become the focal point of a personal religion around which all subsequent religious feelings and views revolve. (202; 204) However, such personal religion can become collective if other persons revolve all of their religious feelings around this same intuition. Specific forms of religion (or determinate forms of religion) however are susceptible to corruption; over time the flame of the eternal that once shone forth in it can burn out:

If you investigate them [religions] at their source and their original components, you will find that all the dead slag was once the glowing outpouring of the inner fire that is contained in all religions, and is more or less the true essence of religion as I have presented it to you. Each religion was one of the particular forms eternal and infinite religion necessarily had to assume among finite and limited beings. (194)

Schleiermacher uses the idea of corruption to dismiss Judaism, as he also uses the idea of progress to dismiss it, by relegating it to the childhood of religion. (211) Christianity, on the other hand, while suffering its fair share of corruption stands as the

most advanced, or evolved, religion to have appeared within the history of religion. In contrast to Judaism he writes:

The original intuition of Christianity is more glorious, more sublime, more worthy of adult humanity, more penetrating into the spirit of systematic religion, and extending farther over the whole universe. (213)

Beyond this rhetoric Schleiermacher identifies the basic intuition of Judaism as “universal immediate retribution”; of the infinite reacting against the finite through another finite instruments, or of God punishing and rewarding persons for their free acts through other persons or things that in this respect are not acting freely. As for the basic intuition of Christianity Schleiermacher describes it as follows:

It is none other than the intuition of the universal straining of everything finite against the unity of the whole and of the way in which the deity handles this striving, how it handles the enmity directed against it and sets bounds to the ever greater distance by scattering over the whole individual points that are at once finite and infinite, at once human and divine. Corruption and redemption, enmity and mediation are the two sides of this intuition that are inseparably bound to each other, and the shape of all religious material in Christianity and its whole forms are determined through them. (213)

Or, more simply:

...it [the infinite] sends its ambassadors in whom its own spirit dwells in order to pour divine powers among humanity. (214)

The infinite manifests itself in finite form so as to be present to other finite forms. These mediators of the infinite are infinite *and* finite, or divine *and* human. They redeem

the finite by linking it again to the infinite; which is to say they redeem corrupt finitude that is estranged or separated from the infinite. The enmity between the finite and the infinite is overcome through their mediation (through their coming together in the middle). But this is an ongoing, albeit progressive, struggle as mediations of the universe are corrupted by the word:

Even while the finite wishes to intuit the universe, it strains against it, always seeking without finding and losing what it has found; ever one-sided, ever vacillating, ever halting at the particular and accidental, and ever wanting more than to intuit, the finite loses sight of its goal. Every revelation is in vain. Everything is swallowed up by earthly sense, everything is carried away by the indwelling irreligious principle, and the deity makes ever new arrangements; through its power alone ever more splendid revelations issue from the womb of the old; it places ever more sublime mediators between itself and the human being; in every later ambassador it unites the deity more intimately with humanity so that through them and by them we might learn to recognize the eternal being; and yet the old lament is never lifted that we do not perceive what is the spirit of God. (214)

To look upon all aspects of the finite and see the infinite is the “highest goal and virtuosity” in Christianity.” (217) Schleiermacher describes the mood accompanying the capacity to see the holy mixed with the profane and transitory as a “holy sadness.” (219) He further says that this mood accompanies every other feeling in Christians and was present in its founder through and through. (217)

To be able to see the infinite in the finite requires “higher mediation.” In Schleiermacher’s precise words, “...everything finite requires higher mediation in order to be connected with the divine.” (218) This, argues Schleiermacher, is the basic intuition of the universe that came to clarity in Christ’s soul. Moreover, if everything finite requires higher mediation so as not to stray even further from the universe, then that which mediates must not be only finite. It must be both finite and infinite: “it must be a part of the divine nature as much and in the same sense in which it is a part of the finite.” (219) Christ not only recognized that the finite was in need of higher mediation, but that he was in the best position to mediate the infinite to the finite beings in his world. In other words, he was also conscious of himself as a mediator, and this found expression in his affirmation that he was the son of God. (219)

But even though the idea of Divine mediation is in Christ and applied to his own being, it is not limited in application to him only: There could be other mediators of the Divine. (219) Schleiermacher argues that all who take the intuition of mediation as the basis of their religion are Christians, but that Christians rooted in this basic intuition can be themselves mediators and thus produce new Christian scriptures because “...not all that can be said within Christianity has been said.” (220)

Nonetheless, Schleiermacher says that *all* religions do run their course; the “childish religions evaporate.” (221) Schleiermacher, as shown above, applied this principle to Judaism, but also to Christianity; it too was transitory, and even aware of this fact. When would Christianity evaporate? Schleiermacher answers using Paul’s teleology:

...there will come a time, it [Christianity] declares when there will be no more talk of a mediator, but the Father will be all in all. (221)

As to when this will happen, Schleiermacher says that he fears it lies beyond time because of the pervasiveness of the other half of the basic Christian intuition i.e., the corruption of the divine in finite things or human beings. Schleiermacher actually guarantees that this corruption will be endless by affirming as a truism that nothing finite can wholly contain the infinite. Thus, only in an eschatological vision such as Saint Paul's can corruption be overcome entirely.

Schleiermacher hopes that perceptions of the infinite in the finite would progress at such a steady pace that the occasional setback, wherein the finite corrupts the infinite, would hardly be noticed. He desires such a situation and says that at that point he would "gladly stand on the ruins of the religion I honour." (222) In any case, corruption comes upon everything earthly and, consequently, Christianity is reborn in every generation with "new messengers of God"; to draw finitude to the infinite and thus purify what has been corrupted. In this sense there will always be Christianity. Again, the truism that nothing finite can contain the infinite in its entirety assures this.

Schleiermacher asks, if Christianity – or the "religion of religions" – will always exist does it not make sense that it should be "universally disseminated" and rule all of humanity. He answers negatively saying that "Christianity disdains this despotism" (222) Christianity cherishes each of its elements to the degree that it would wish to affirm each of them as its very centre. But more than seeking an endless array of variations within itself, it also seeks to recognize (intuit) religion outside of itself. *Humbled* by its own long

history of corruption, it is able to watch gladly as new forms of religion develop outside of this corruption:

The religion of religions cannot gather enough material for the truest aspect of its innermost intuition, and just as nothing is more irreligious than to demand uniformity in humanity generally, so nothing is more unchristian than to seek uniformity in religion. (222)

He goes on to add that all forms of worshipping and intuiting the universe must be allowed, including ever new formations of religion. In one sense Schleiermacher abhors religious uniformity in religion, in another his theory of religions demands it since higher religion is always an expression of the truest aspect of Christianity's innermost intuition. If there is nothing deeper than Christianity's innermost intuition than there is nothing deeper, or beyond, Christianity – except, of course, the Christian ideal of the kingdom of God wherein “God is all in all.”

For Schleiermacher, intuitions of the universe or the essence of religion, and Christianity's intuition of the universe that finite reality mediates infinite reality is conceived as the loftiest expression of the essence of religion. This loftiest expression of the essence of religion bears an uncanny resemblance to Troeltsch's highest religious norm discovered through an historical study of the world religions – the norm of personalistic religion that blends the divine and the worldly such that the world becomes an expression of the divine.

Briefly, for comparative purposes, it can be noted that Paul Tillich uses a similar idea when he conceived the inner aim of all religions to be the realization of the “religion of the concrete spirit.” Tillich also followed Troeltsch in his pattern and mode of

typological thought. He saw religions such as Judaism and Islam placing too much emphasis on the finite or the concrete; religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism placing too much emphasis on pure spirit; and, Christianity uniquely combining the finite and infinite, the divine and the world, the concrete and spirit, and so on, into the highest type of religion. We will examine Tillich's theory of religious diversity more closely in a moment, but first we will end this review of Troeltsch by discussing his significance for the development of religious pluralism, and for understanding religious pluralism.

As discussed above, Troeltsch would eventually reject the idea that Christianity is normatively true. This did not demand a complete rejection of his thinking about Christianity, but it did demand its circumspection. For the later Troeltsch, Christianity was very religious truth, but only for Europeans and Americans, or the culture in which Christianity grew up. It was not true for everyone, and so Troeltsch's final stance was that religious truth is relative rather than normative or absolute. But neither the early Troeltsch, nor the later Troeltsch, was a pluralist. In fact, the task he set before himself was not the same as the pluralist's task.

Troeltsch's task was to prove the truth of Christianity scientifically, and in the end he decided that this could not be done. The task of pluralists is to prove the collective truth of what Troeltsch had called "the great world religions." So, in this respect, Troeltsch was never on the same page as later pluralists. But, as suggested, and shown above, Troeltsch is invaluable for understanding what religious pluralism is not – it is not the supernatural apologetic and it is not the evolutionary apologetic. Pluralists have never tried to argue that there is one exclusive religion (the supernatural apologetic), and they have never tried to argue that there is an absolute essence of religion (the evolutionary

apologetic). Indeed, these two positions represent the main foes of religious pluralists, just as they do for Troeltsch.

In the modern polemics of pluralists – against what is now called exclusivism and inclusivism – Karl Barth and Karl Rahner are respectively the foes most frequently chosen. In the modern debate, Barth is well known for his idea that Christianity is revelation (i.e., true religion) whereas everything else is just religion (i.e., false religion); and, Rahner is equally well known for his idea that those of good faith in other religious traditions are actually Christians without knowing it, or are anonymous Christians. Thus, we will now review how these two prominent twentieth century Christian theologians thought about religious diversity, as a way of further clarifying the positions of exclusivism and inclusivism.

3. Karl Barth: The Supernatural Apologetic in the Modern Era

Karl Barth was a student of Ernst's Troeltsch, but despite his teacher's dismissal of the supernatural apologetic felt that it was defensible and so updated it for the modern era. The new element, in Barth's form of religious exclusivism, is that it is not only critical of non-Christian religions but is also highly critical of historical Christianity; nonetheless, he doesn't waiver on his position that non-Christian religions are categorically excluded from being recognized as *true* religions on account of not being revelation.

According to Karl Barth, the revelation of God is both the *judging* and *reconciling* presence of God in the worlds of human religion, which is man's attempt to justify and

sanctify himself before a self-created picture of God. And the Church, insofar as “though grace it lives by grace,” is the locus of true religion.¹⁸

Although God’s revelation is wholly in the being and action of God, it also encounters man and it is here that the problem of human religions arises.

Barth accepts that man is innately religious, or innately aware of something greater than himself to whom he owes reverence. He also accepts that all of the world’s Holy books are “Bibles” in exactly the same way as the Old and New Testaments because they all deal with the same themes. He even places Christian piety on the same level as all other forms of piety. What then separates Christianity from these other religions? Barth answers that it is God’s revelation which is the “presence of God and therefore the hiddenness of God in the world of human religion.” (282)

For Barth, religion is *unbelief* and unbelief is the exact opposite of *faith* which is the disposition in which one receives God’s revelation.

Revelation singles out the Church as the locus of true religion but this does not mean that Christianity as such is the fulfilment of human religion. In fact, it is not and it is only through grace that the Church distinguishes itself in the world of human religions. As such, its proper attitude towards other religions should be a “strong forbearing tolerance, informed by the forbearance of Christ.”(299) And such tolerance should never be confused with tolerance in the sense of *moderation*, *superiority* or *scepticism* which are the worst kinds of intolerance.

Again, human religion is unbelief and Barth even describes it as the “one great concern of godless man.” (300) The judgement that religion is unbelief – which must be considered from the standpoint of revelation – has two different elements. First,

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I.2, 280; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

revelation is God's self-manifestation: It "encounters man on the presupposition and in confirmation of the fact that man's attempts to know God from his own standpoint are wholly and entirely futile." (301) In revelation God tells man that he is God and that as such He is his Lord. Second, man is placed towards God so that he can know Him. And again, the activity which corresponds to revelation is faith, which is the recognition of the self-offering and self-manifestation of God.

Revelation informs us that in ourselves we are in no position to apprehend the truth. In faith we should be willing to let the truth be told to us and therefore be apprehended by it. However, this is not our tendency, but rather it is towards unbelief even if our "attitude and activity" is religious. In faith, man's religion is shown by revelation to be resistance to it. Faith is man's openness to and acceptance of the truth which is given to him; Unbelief is closure to God's self-offering and the effort to know God by one's own efforts.

Yet this self-effort remains futile and the most that man can produce is a fiction but, of course, it is only recognized as a fiction when the truth comes. Revelation, when it comes, does not link up with religions that are already present; instead it replaces them as *mistaken* faith.

The religious efforts of man are always *self-contradictory* and *impossible* per se. Religion recognizes this of itself but its "critical self-turn" always becomes just another moment in the religious life. The two forms in which religion criticizes itself are *mysticism* and *atheism*. We will now look at how Barth saw religion taking form and then criticizing itself (but only such that it could re-create itself).

Human religion takes form as 1) the conception of the deity and 2) the fulfilment of the law. In these two forms *religious need* seeks its satisfaction, (which it already has). In a “bold” bid for truth man creates the Deity in his own image, and then undertakes to sanctify and justify himself in conformity with what he takes to be the law. Both of these acts of course are completely unnecessary because they basically amount to making an outward idol in the form of one’s inner self, or a “law” out of one’s own habits. Consequently, there is a “definitive weakness” in all external satisfaction of the religious need, owing to the inward satisfaction which precedes it. Barth writes: “At bottom, the external satisfaction will never be anything more or other than a reflection of what the man is and has who thinks he should proceed to the external satisfaction of his need.” (316) Thus, all attempts to create God in one’s image or justify oneself before one’s own standards, i.e., all attempts to be religious suffer, on one hand, from non-necessity and, on the other, from weakness.

The critical self-turn of religion against itself recognizes its own non-necessity and weakness. It thus abandons all efforts to form itself while still hanging on to “the formless conception of God already present in the soul.” (316) It no longer externalizes itself but it still holds on to its “religious possession.”(316) All the energy and effort that was formerly turned outwards to the production of religious forms is now turned inward as religion now prefers to live without expression or manifestation. The same non-needy religious need now seeks satisfaction in cessation of the soul, silence, and renunciation of self-expression. What is renounced is the effort to produce religious forms but what is not renounced is the will to make these forms. The critical turn of religion against itself,

which nonetheless still remains possessed of itself, eventually becomes a twofold path – in one direction it becomes mysticism and the other it becomes atheism.

Mysticism is most basically the renunciation of religion with respect to its expression, externalization, and manifestation. We no longer think that we find God in our own conceptions of God or salvation in obedience to the law. However, in its relationship to religion mysticism is conservative. It does not openly attack religion, it subjects itself to prevailing doctrine and observances and even respects these. But, it also interprets all the outward forms of religion according to their inward or spiritual meaning; everything external gets reduced to parable.

The mystic will even say dangerous things that seem to contradict the tradition; however, the mystic never seeks to supersede the tradition and only wishes to be free to interpret it. The mystic is aware that he lives parasitically upon the outward forms of religion and is therefore often careful to preserve them.

Barth describes atheism as the “artless and childish form of the critical turn” (320) because it fails to notice that it is entirely dependent on religion. It hurls itself against religion in an effort to destroy it without recognizing that it would thereby destroy itself because the entire reality of atheism is the denial of God and its law. Atheism however does not deny the reality of nature, history, civilization, or man’s rational and animal existence. In fact, the atheist usually subscribes to these authorities, and thus atheist almost always means secularism. Moreover, in its efforts to undermine and destroy the authority of religion atheism often leaves the door open for new (disguised and not disguised) religions to arise behind its back and even with its help if possible.

Again, the critical turn in religion comes with the discovery of the weakness and non-necessity of religion. In mysticism the denial of religion comes with an implicit affirmation and if the critical turn tries to avoid this implicit affirmation of religion in its atheistic form it simply opens up the field for new religious constructs. Mysticism and atheism both want to negate God and his law but neither knows how to, even in theory. Therefore, if a religion has ever died this has not been because of either an atheistic or mystical negation, but because it was replaced by another religion. But what if atheism or mysticism really were able to complete its work? What would the great positive on the side of liberation from God and his law be?

It would be only man's own power; man's own power to create gods and justify and sanctify himself. This power is the great positive behind all negation and therefore pure atheism and pure mysticism are never a real threat to religion. At most they can clear the ground for ever new religious constructions. Barth says that this power belongs to "the magic circle of religion" which is its creative and formative centre and real point of departure." (324)

What then can break through the magic circle of religion? Only revelation which must "rush into that inner chamber" and expose man's power to make gods for what it is. Only revelation can break the magic circle of religion and only from the outside, i.e., from outside man. Thus, only true religion or God's revelation to man is a real threat to religion.

Barth says that we can only speak about true religion in the way we speak about a "justified sinner." Religion is never true in itself and revelation denies that any religion is true or that it is "in truth the knowledge and worship of God and the reconciliation of

man with God.” (325) Religion in and of itself is only falseness and lying. Revelation comes as a judgement against the world of human religion; it condemns it as unbelief. But revelation is also able to sanctify religion, by adopting it and marking it off as true religion. Moreover, not only can it do this but it does. Just as there are sanctified sinners there is true religion, and the true religion is Christianity.

Barth’s discussion of religion as belief is not, however, meant to distinguish Christianity as the true religion from all other religions. It is first and foremost a self-criticism of Christianity itself, for the Christian religion is *only* true insofar as it listens to Divine revelation. Moreover, he says that the statement that Christianity is the true religion can only be a statement of faith – “a statement which is thought and expressed in faith and from faith, i.e., in recognition and respect of what we are told in revelation.”

(326)

As for Barth’s attitude to other religions this would be characterized by the aforementioned strong forbearing tolerance, but also by the hope that they too will be led beyond their unbelief into faith. But again, his judgement that faith is unbelief is intended primarily for Christianity. On Christianity’s need for this judgement he writes: “What we have here is in its own way – a different way from that of other religions, but no less seriously – unbelief, i.e., opposition to the divine revelation and therefore active idolatry and self-righteousness.” (327)

And regarding the negative implication that his theology of religions didn’t allow for a positive theological evaluation of other religions, Barth apparently wasn’t too

concerned. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, God created this problem and, therefore, it was God's problem to solve.¹⁹

Paul Tillich was Barth's contemporary who, likewise, had a profound influence on twentieth century, English-speaking, academic, Christian theology. But unlike Barth he took a relatively benign approach in acknowledging the truth of other religions. Paul Tillich is widely recognized as the first "full-blooded Protestant theologian" to take the problem of non-Christians seriously in the twentieth century; he engaged in a very public dialogue with a prominent Buddhist; and, Alan Race, in his classic study on religious pluralism uses Tillich as a representative of the "pluralist" point of view. I believe, though, that Tillich is better understood as an inclusivist and will now try to show this.

4. Paul Tillich: The Evolutionary Apologetic in the Modern Era (Protestant Version)

Paul Tillich called his approach to religious diversity, or the history of religions, *dynamic-typological*. This dynamic typological approach found its first popular expression in *Dynamics of Faith*; however, its genesis can be traced back as far as Tillich's very early work on Schelling, particularly, *Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development*. Moreover, it was an evolving approach and didn't take its final form until the last public lecture of Tillich's life called, "The Significance of the History of Religions." In Tillich's early work on Schelling, "mysticism" and "guilt consciousness" are presented as opposing religious tendencies, the former grounded in a consciousness of identity with the Absolute or God (God-consciousness) and the latter in a consciousness of distinction from the Absolute or God

¹⁹ W. C. Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 320.

(creature-consciousness).²⁰ Indeed, Tillich argues that these are *the* two opposing religious tendencies and that all forms of human religiosity fall somewhere between these two poles. He also argues that the antinomy (between the two) is never fully overcome because neither *complete* identity nor *complete* distinction is possible in the Divine-human relationship. Complete identity with the Absolute negates the human identity and complete distinction negates the Divine identity (at least insofar as it could be relevant to human beings). Tillich says these antipodes of religion find their fullest expression on one hand, in Greek religion (mysticism) and, on the other, in Jewish religion (guilt consciousness and morality).

In *Dynamics of Faith* Tillich works out a *dynamic typology* based on the same basic antinomy of God-consciousness and creature-consciousness.²¹ In *Dynamics* the opposing religious tendencies are worked out as *types of faith*; specifically, as the *ontological* and *moral* types of faith. For Tillich, *all* types of faith are grounded in the “experience of the Holy” which is felt and experienced when the Divine breaks through and appears within, and through the medium of a particular piece of, existence – or, when the Infinite appears as the finite. The appearance of the Holy within ordinary reality has two different dimensions; the *holiness of being* and the *holiness of what ought to be*. The Holy stands both for and against human beings; on one hand, it represents the essence of our being and, on the other, it represents judgement against us, because it is what we ought to be. Tillich calls faiths (or religions) grounded in the holiness of being *ontological* types of faith and those grounded in the holiness of what ought to be *moral* types of faith.

²⁰ See Tillich, *Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness*, 27-33.

²¹ See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 55-73.

Among the ontological types of faith are the *sacramental* and *mystical*. To repeat, for Tillich, every piece of existence is capable of becoming a bearer of the Holy; these pieces of existence, as bearers of the Holy (or God), become sacred realities and focal points for worshipping the Holy (or God). The sacramental type of faith is, most basically, the worship of the Holy through one of its concrete mediums. (For Tillich, all religions contain sacramental elements.) The great danger of the sacramental type of faith is “demonization” which is the act of taking that which is a medium of the Holy to be the Holy Itself. Mysticism, as the attempt to locate pure divinity beyond any of its appearances within existence, is an attempt to overcome the demonization of the Holy in the sacramental type of faith.

The other type of faith, the moral type, is experienced in terms of divine law which is both a gift and a demand. According to Tillich there are three types of moral faiths; the juristic, the conventional, and the ethical. Talmudic Judaism and Islam are most representative of the juristic type. These faiths contain ritual laws which point to the sacramental *stage* of religion, but they also have social laws which transcend the ritual ones, creating a holiness of what ought to be. The conventional type of moral faith is characterized by a minimum of sacramental elements and a maximum of moral elements. Confucianism is an example of this type of faith, which is largely secular on account of its very few sacramental elements. The third and most influential of the moral types of faith is the ethical type of “Old Testament Judaism.” In this type of faith there is a strong sacramental basis but this never overwhelms the holiness of what ought to be, and obedience to the law of justice always remains the way to God. The Jewish Prophets would criticize any reliance on the sacramental element of religion if it denied the moral

element. Tillich sees the “world historical mission” of the Jewish faith as ensuring that the moral element, or justice, is a part of every faith. The great danger of the moral types of faith is complete secularization or the loss of the experience of the Holy.

For Tillich, the *unification* of the two antipodal tendencies of religion (God-consciousness and creature-consciousness), or of the ontological and moral types of faith represents the highest form of religion. This unification of the types of faith is the *telos* or inner aim towards which the history of religions is moving; the types of faith are in a dynamic play against one another as they move towards their ultimate unification. In *Dynamics*, Tillich cites St. Paul’s doctrine or description of the Spirit as a conspicuous example of the union of the types of faith.

In Paul’s doctrine of the Spirit, the body is spiritualized or, in reverse, the Spirit is concretized. In the final version of his dynamic typology, Tillich (reluctantly) calls the highest form of religion towards which the dynamics of faith are driving, “The Religion of the Concrete Spirit.”²² This final version of his typology is simpler than the one in *Dynamics*. In it there are four types of faith; the sacramental, the mystical, the ethical, and the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. The sacramental type of faith stands as the basic form of all religion, as the felt and experienced presence of the Holy in ordinary reality. It is the universal form of faith which is ultimately transcended in the higher types of faith which overcome its tendency towards demonization. The two higher types of faith, which transcend the sacramental type of faith, are the mystical and the ethical; and the highest type of faith, which unites the two higher types of faith (and in fact all three types) is the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. As expected, the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is the goal or inner aim towards which all religions are dynamically driving.

²² Tillich, “Significance of the History of Religions,” 87-88.

In this final version of the typology Tillich remains enthusiastic about Paul's doctrine of the Spirit, calling it the highest expression (in the history of religions) of the unification or synthesis of the sacramental, ethical, and mystical elements of faith.²³ Nonetheless, he maintains that such fulfilment of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is fragmentary and thus no religion, including Christianity, can claim to fully be the highest type of faith. We will now look more closely at the ways in which Tillich tried to apply his evolving typology.

Some contend that Paul Tillich underwent a dramatic change in his thinking about other religions as a result of his "encounter" with living Buddhism; however, it is probably more accurate to say that in the last few years of his life he finally *began* to think more seriously about religions other than Christianity and Judaism – particularly about Buddhism. Terence Thomas has pointed out that even though Tillich did, at the end of his life, express a wish that he could have given more time to the study of "world religions" did not say that he wished to change anything about his life's work.²⁴ This is not surprising. Tillich's understanding of religion (and religions) was formed in the context of his own Western religiosity, and by the time he did start thinking seriously about non-Western religions, his thinking amounted to trying to fit these into his already well-formed religious concepts. If Tillich expressed no wish to change anything about his work, in light of his exposure to living Buddhism and other world religions, this is probably because the force with which he met them (or his capacity to meet them) was such that it could not significantly change the trajectory of his own life's thought or work.

²³ Ibid., 88.

²⁴ See Terence Thomas' introduction to Tillich's *Encounter of Religions and Quasi-Religions*.

There is, however, some evidence to suggest that Tillich was, at least, beginning to question his own “Christocentric” understanding of religion. In *Systematic Theology* Tillich presents Jesus (as the Christ) as the “New Being” who has conquered sin or estrangement (from God) by maintaining union with God under *all* conditions of existence. As such, Christ is the central event in the history of religions and all religions are either preparation for, or reception of, this event. Those who have received Christ are understood as the *manifest* “Spiritual Community” whereas those who have not yet received him are understood as the *latent* Spiritual Community. Thus, all religions eventually become Christian.²⁵

In his very last lecture, “The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian,” Tillich identifies a number of presuppositions which must be accepted if the history of religions is to have any significance for theology. These include 1) the presupposition that revelatory experiences are universally human; 2) that revelation is received by man in his finite human situation and is therefore prone to distortion; 3) that there is a “revelatory process” in which these “limits of adaptation” and “failures of distortion” are open to criticism – namely the *mystical*, *prophetic*, and *secular*; 4) that there *may* be a central event in the history of religions “which unites the positive results of those critical developments in the history of religion and under which the revelatory experiences are going on – an event which, therefore, makes possible a concrete theology that has universalistic significance.”²⁶ Thus, the assertion in *Systematic Theology* that Jesus as the Christ is the central event in the history of religions is replaced by the

²⁵ This theme is developed in Tillich’s *Systematic Theology II*.

²⁶ Tillich, “Significance of the History of Religions,” 81.

assertion that there *may* be a central event in the history of religions.²⁷ But, of course, this late question mark was never able to translate into a real change in Tillich's understanding of other religions and I will now look at some of these particular understandings.

As said, Tillich understood Judaism's world historical mission as ensuring an ethical element in every type of faith. However, in *Systematic Theology* he also understands Judaism as the religion which provided the direct historical preparation for the central event in religious history, i.e., God's self manifestation in Jesus as the Christ. Thus, given Tillich's position that all religions are either preparation for, or reception of, Christ the importance of Judaism in the history of religions is second only to Christianity. Tillich understood Islam as a "religion of the law" like Judaism whose historical purpose was, and is, to prepare another human culture for the reception of Christ. Although Tillich may have implicitly regarded Buddhism and Hinduism as preparatory religions he also explicitly criticized them for being almost exclusively mystical. Tillich claims that Christ maintained his unity with God under *all* conditions of existence – both subjective and objective – whereas the "enlightenment" of the Buddha, and the mystical experiences

²⁷ It is somewhat confusing as to whether Tillich thought of the Christ event or the appearance of "The Religion of the Concrete Spirit" as typified by Paul's doctrine of the Spirit as the central event in the history of religions. On one hand, Jesus as the Christ is conceived as overcoming the ambiguities of life and remaining one with God under the conditions of existence – as thus revealing God – but, on the other, this revelation of God still requires proper human reception which is the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. The Religion of the Concrete Spirit is clearly the final (and presumably perfect) form of revelation, but it is unclear as to whether the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is necessarily tied to a central (and perfect) revelatory event. In other words, is Christ's revelation the necessary precursor for the appearance of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit? Can other revelatory events lead to the Religion of the Concrete Spirit? In some respects this is a moot point because the real question now becomes whether or not the Religion of the Concrete Spirit – understood as the reception of the Infinite under the conditions of finitude – is the ultimate form of religion. Tillich thought it was.

of Hindus and Buddhists, are *merely* subjective experiences. Thus Christ's union with God - and hence his offer of salvation – is more authentic or complete.

In these judgements of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity the shape of Tillich's dynamic typology clearly emerges. Christianity as the *complete way* fulfills, and literally fills out, the other religions. Judaism and Islam are merely legalistic or ethical religions in need of God's gracious self-offering; Hinduism and Buddhism are merely mystical religions in need of God's concrete presence in objective reality. The "underpinnings" of Tillich's earliest conceptual antinomy between "mysticism" and "guilt consciousness" are very apparent in this distinction between the mystical Eastern religions and the Western ethical religions. However, Tillich also uses these same lines to distinguish between, and ultimately to criticise, Catholicism and Protestantism. In *Dynamics of Faith* he contends that in Catholicism the sacramental elements of faith have predominated over and against the moral-personal ones, whereas in Protestantism the reverse has been the case and the mystical and sacramental elements of faith have been largely lost. Thus, both Catholicism and Protestantism have lost the "Pauline experience" of the unity of all types of faith. Tillich maintains that unless Christianity can "regain in real experience" the unity of the types of faith it will not be able to claim to fulfil the "dynamics of the history of faith in past and future."²⁸

Dynamics of Faith and the second volume of *Systematic Theology* were both published in 1957 and this generally marks the beginning of a more serious effort on Tillich's part to understand "world religions." In fact, during the Fall of 1957 Tillich participated in an "East-West Dialogue" with Dr. Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (a Buddhist) at Harvard University. Tillich's interest in Buddhism persisted, and this led to a trip to

²⁸ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 73.

Japan which precipitated a number of lectures later published in 1962 as *Christianity and the Encounter of the World's Religions*.

In this small booklet there is a lecture/essay entitled “A Christian-Buddhist Dialogue” – wherein Tillich creates a dialogue in order to articulate his “new” positions on Buddhism and Christianity. As mentioned, this work has been pointed to as representative of the great turn in Tillich’s thinking about religions other than Christianity; however, a quick review of Tillich’s new position on Buddhism reveals that it is basically the same old position. In *A Christian Buddhist Dialogue* Tillich once again sorts out different types of faith in terms of ethical and mystical elements which are found in every type of faith and ultimately united in the highest type of faith. It is no surprise that in this structure Buddhism is classified as a type of faith in which the mystical elements predominate over and against the ethical ones; however, it is somewhat surprising that Tillich classifies Christianity *generally* as a type of faith in which the ethical elements of faith predominate over and against the mystical ones. This is surprising because Tillich had hitherto found in Christianity *all* types of faith: in its Protestant form Christianity was largely ethical, in its Catholic form it was largely mystical and sacramental, and in its highest form it was a combination of these two types of faith.

In some respects this *does* represent a significant change in that Tillich was willing to polarize Christianity with Buddhism and thus see these two types of faith as equal or, more precisely, as equally unbalanced and inadequate types of faith. And, perhaps, it is significant that a major Christian theologian was willing to put Buddhism (on the whole) on par with Christianity (on the whole) – even if this “equality” remains

limited because the only example of the highest type of faith that Tillich can point to is Paul's doctrine of the Spirit, i.e., a form of Christianity.

Still, Tillich's whole enterprise might be criticized as an attempt to "put new wine into old skins." Tillich's typology is clearly rooted in his own "Pauline Christianity" wherein the moral "Jewish" elements and the mystical "Greek" elements are "united." In fact, Tillich's typology might best be understood as an argument for the ultimacy of "Pauline Christianity" over against the more exclusively mystical and moral forms of Christianity. As such, it offers a reasonably good typology for three different forms of Christianity, but not necessarily for the "history of religions" altogether.

This, I think, becomes most apparent when Tillich seriously tries to apply his typology to the case of Christianity and Buddhism. In order for Tillich to "polarize" Christianity in relation to Buddhism he has to typify (or generalize) it as one of the polarized types of faith. And when he does this his assessment of the Christian situation becomes impoverished: Christianity becomes an ethical type of faith and is no longer appreciated in its own polarity of Catholicism and Protestantism. Buddhism suffers from this same over-generalization. It seems to me that Tillich abstracts a religious typology from his own Western/Christian religious situation and then uses this typology to try to make sense of a religious situation which is more expansive than this one. This is a negative "move," on one hand, because it deprives the old situation of a reasonably good typology and, on the other, because it provides the new situation with an inadequate one.

Whether or not this is an accurate assessment, it is clear enough that Tillich did not evolve any new concepts in his handling of Buddhism. He continued to understand religion as universally based in the experience of the Holy, or the appearance of the

Infinite in the finite; he continued to understand this universal religious experience as corruptible through human reception and, therefore, in need of critical purification; he continued to polarize two major forms of this critical element in similar terms; and, finally, he continued to posit as religion's highest form (or inner aim) the unification of these two critical elements. Moreover, Tillich's assessments of major world religions did not change – except for in the case of Christianity – which he became willing to include more fully in the domain of “unfulfilled religions” wherein one element of faith predominates over the other. And, of course, it is this lowering of Christianity that makes Tillich's “later approach” to religious diversity seem more egalitarian/pluralist and less absolutist/inclusivist than his earlier ones.

But, in the end, Tillich developed a theory of religions based on a concept of the essential form of religion (The Religion of the Concrete Spirit) that all of religious history was driving towards. His position was very much the same as Schleiermacher's except insofar as his essence had a different name, and the pathway towards it was more dynamic. This dynamism is actually foreshadowed in Troeltsch's thought, where the Indian religions (that put too much emphasis on the idea of pure spirit) and the Semitic religions (that are too bound to material reality) are fulfilled in Christianity which has a unique way of blending these two realities. This is Troeltsch's idea of personalistic redemptive religion; which is similar to Schleiermacher's idea of mediation of the Infinite within the finite; which is similar to Tillich's idea the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. All of these ideas about religion are, of course, Christian (even Lutheran), although not explicitly acknowledged as such.

We will now examine ideas, on religious diversity, of a prominent 20th-century Catholic theologian, who changed the way Catholic Christians think about “non-Christians”; namely, Karl Rahner.

5. Karl Rahner: The Evolutionary Apologetic in the Modern Era (Catholic Version)

Karl Rahner, who is well known for his idea of the “anonymous Christian,” is frequently cited as the quintessential inclusivist, or evolutionary apologist.²⁹ Yet, with respect to Troeltsch’s terminology, it is much easier to see Tillich as an evolutionary apologist than Rahner. Tillich employs the pattern of essence and content; the religion of the concrete spirit is the essence of religion, and Pauline theology is the content that realizes this essence most fully. Rahner, on the other hand, does not employ the language of essence and content, but the language of form, which Troeltsch links with supernatural exclusivism. This begs two different questions: 1) Is Rahner’s position really exclusivist; 2) are inclusivism and the evolutionary apologetic the same thing? I answer negatively to the first question and positively to the second. Nonetheless, Rahner’s evolutionary apologetic does not employ the logic of essence-content used by the Enlightenment theologians, but it does employ a similar logic; namely the logic of religion as a “means to an end.” Before saying more about this, however, it will be helpful to review Rahner’s idea of the anonymous Christian.

In this section we will review an address made by Karl Rahner to the Second Vatican Council in 1966, which discusses the problem of religious pluralism.

²⁹ See, for example, D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*; Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*; Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*.

Rahner's starting point is the assertion that Catholics can no longer ignore the outside world; certainly much of it is bad but not all can be dismissed as "worldly," and these things need to be incorporated into the world-view of the Church. And, among the things that must be incorporated into Catholicism, religious pluralism or other religions is the most difficult thing. Moreover, for Rahner, pluralism is not just a difficult problem for Christianity, it is a positive threat. And it is a threat, especially to Christianity, because no other religion makes such a strong claim to absoluteness: "...no other religion— not even Islam—maintains so absolutely that it is *the* religion, the one and only valid revelation of the one living God, as does the Christian religion."³⁰

Rahner finds the threat of pluralism particularly acute in the modern era on account of a sea change in the way different religions and cultures now interact with one another. In the past, Christians didn't have to think about alien religions and cultures because these literally were not in their world. But now, things are different and everyone belongs to the same world:

Today everybody is the next-door neighbour and spiritual neighbour of every one else in the world. And so everybody today is determined by the intercommunication of all those situations of life which affect the whole world. Every religion which exists in the world is – just like all cultural possibilities and actualities of other people—a question posed, and a possibility offered, to every person. (290)

But, despite his awareness of this new historical situation, Rahner has no interest in approaching the problem of religious pluralism as a scientist within the history of religions school. He is upfront that his approach of that of a Catholic dogmatic

³⁰ Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 289; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

theologian; therefore, his interpretation of pluralism is grounded in a self-understanding of Christianity. (290-291)

Rahner builds his interpretation with four theses. His first thesis is that Christianity is the absolute religion and nothing stands beside it as an equal. Unlike Troeltsch, Rahner feels no need to prove the absoluteness of Christianity empirically: “This proposition is self-evident and basic for Christianity’s understanding of itself. There is no need here to prove it or to develop its meaning.” (291) Rahner’s initial understanding of what constitutes valid religion is, is strikingly similar to Karl Barth’s; religion is not human reflection on human existence, but God’s self-revelation to humanity:

Valid and lawful religion for Christianity is rather God’s action on men, God’s free self-revelation by communicating himself to man. It is God’s relationship to men, freely instituted by God himself and revealed by God in this institution [i.e., the Church]. (291)

Ever since Jesus Christ, the Word of God, entered the world and united humanity with God through his death and resurrection, he and his continued presence in the world (the Church) has been *the* religion for *everyone*. This thesis creates some problems for making sense of religions that existed before Christ’s revelation and religions that came into existence after Christ’s revelation – short of the traditional means of consigning them to the garbage heap of human sin and error. But, finding an alternative approach, while maintaining this thesis, is the task that Rahner sets himself. (291)

As a prelude to his next second thesis, Rahner challenges the traditional position that the starting point for judging non-Christians to be guilty of their non-Christianity

should be the Apostolic age or Pentecost (marking the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the first followers of Christ). Instead, he suggests that this moment of judgment should not come into play until the non-Christian religions are confronted with Christianity as a concrete historical reality. This was the rule for those who first encountered Christ; they could not be judged guilty for rejecting God's self-revelation until they actually encountered this as a concrete historical reality. Thus, it seems reasonable, to Rahner, to extend the same courtesy to all non-Christians. (292) With this argument Rahner is not attributing anything positive to non-Christian religions he is just saying that it is not reasonable to preclude this possibility right from the start by making the erroneous assumption that all non-Christian religions are, by definition, guilty of rejecting Christ.

Rahner's second thesis is that non-Christian religions have, apart from natural knowledge of God mixed up with corrupting elements, supernatural elements as a gift from God, i.e., as a result of Christ's death and resurrection – and, on this basis, can be deemed lawful:

It contains [the non-Christian religion] also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it. This thesis requires a more extensive explanation. (293)

Thus, Christians can assert that the non-Christian religions are valid or lawful—in varying degrees –and still affirm their depravity! Every abomination of the heathen still stands, and these must be protested against, but again this unlawfulness only comes into play

once the religion of the “God pleasing pagan” comes into contact with the Christian Faith as a concrete historical reality. (293)

Rahner continues by hanging his theses on a proposition that all Christians must accept; namely, that God’s offer of salvation, through the sacrifice of Christ, was made for all human beings:

But God desires the salvation of everyone. And this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ, the salvation of supernatural grace which divinizes man, the salvation of the beatific vision. It is a salvation really intended for all those millions upon millions of men who lived perhaps a million years before Christ – and also for those who have lived after Christ – in nations, cultures and epochs of a very wide range which were still completely shut off from the viewpoint of those living in the light of the New Testament. (294)

This proposition is important because it identifies a unity beyond religion – salvation, defined as the divinization of man and attainment of the beatific vision (the vision of God) – that allows Rahner to bifurcate religion. Or, said differently, it creates a situation in which religion can be seen to have two different elements or manifestations – and we will see shortly how Rahner employs this idea.

But at this point, he continues by arguing that if Christians accept (1) the traditional view that there is no salvation except through Christ and (2) that God intends salvation for all human beings, then, they must accept that God makes Christ’s offer of salvation available to every human being: “every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of divine, supernatural grace which offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself.” (294) Following this Rahner moves on

to address an easy to anticipate objection; the objection that the truly wicked and those bound up in primitive superstitions must be excluded from this offer. Rahner stands his ground by reaffirming that if Christians really believe in the power of God's universal salvific will then they must conclude that salvation is available to all human beings, no matter how wicked or corrupted their present, chosen religious vehicle. (295-96)

Next, Rahner develops his second thesis even further by arguing that – not only is God's salvation through Christ made available to every human being – but that the “pre-Christian” religions³¹ are, in varying degrees positive vehicles for providing this salvation³²:

A lawful religion means here an institutional religion whose “use” by man at a certain period can be regarded on the whole as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation. (296)

Rahner's first example of a pre-Christian religion that can be deemed valid – despite its numerous theological and practical errors – is “the Old Covenant” (i.e., Judaism). The understanding of this situation, however, is only available to Christians. Rahner's reasons here that because the Church is instituted by God it contains a permanent norm for determining what is right and what is wrong in the religious sphere; this feature is both a “permanent institution” and an “intrinsic quality” of Christianity. (296)

No other religion has this feature, including Judaism; Rahner is intent on making this point. He concedes that the Prophets were able to distinguish the lawful God-given

³¹ Remember that, for Rahner, this means religions that have not come into contact with Christianity as a concrete historical reality.

³² Part of this is based on Rahner's earlier qualification that religion is necessarily social.

elements of religion from depraved elements born of human corruption, but the Prophets functioned charismatically rather than institutionally and so “no permanent, continuing and institutional court of appeal” that could serve this same function developed. (296-297) So, in short, Judaism (like all other non-Christian religions) is an admixture of truth and corrupting elements and has no institutional capacity for distinguishing one from the other.

Nonetheless, this marks a sharp contrast from an exclusivist position, such as Karl Barth’s, that makes a radical distinction between Christian revelation from God, and other religions constructed by human beings. Rahner is even dogmatic about rejecting the “prejudice” of exclusivism:

We must therefore rid ourselves of the prejudice that we can face a non-Christian religion with the dilemma that it must either come from God in everything it contains and thus correspond to God’s will and positive providence, or be simply a purely human construction. If man is under God’s grace even in these religions – and to deny this is certainly absolutely wrong(297)

Before moving on to his third thesis, Rahner continues by addressing potential objections to his novel idea. For example, what if a religion takes one of its false elements to be an essential part of its nature that must be explicitly declared as true? Rahner attacks this problem by suggesting that in reality this situation hardly ever obtains. This is so, first, because few religions have the power to elevate falsehood to truth the way the Catholic Church (in theory) does; and, second, because the followers won’t always really assent to the interpretations of their leaders. But Rahner’s real reason for rejecting the idea that non-Christian religions are unlawful is because this would

necessitate rejecting the idea that God makes salvation available to everyone. And Rahner won't do this because he is a "universalist":

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 a serious and also actually effective salvific design of God for all men, in all ages and places. (298)

Moreover, Rahner stresses, once again, that the non-Christian religions will necessarily be the loci of Christ's grace outside of Christianity because religion is not a private affair. (298-99)

Continuing with the same theme Rahner stresses that Christians must be able to see elements of grace (lawful religion) in the non-Christian religions, and suggests that failure to do so may stem from Christians looking at other religions too superficially and with too little love. And, he insists that these religions must be seen as the bearers of supernatural revelation, and not just human philosophizing about God or, in Rahner's words, they must not be seen "...new conglomerates of natural theistic metaphysics and as a humanly incorrect interpretation and institutionalization of this natural religion'."

(299-300)

After some qualifications as to why the Old Testament constitutes a purer form of religion than others – i.e., because of the Prophets and because it served as the immediate prehistory for Christ's part is salvation history – Rahner insists, once again, that the other religions are contexts for salvation and that human beings even have an obligation to take up these offers of salvation in their concrete historical context:

...by the fact that in practice man as he really is can live his proffered relationship to God only in society, man must have had the right and indeed the duty to live this his relationship to God within the religious and social realities offered to him in his particular historical situation. (300)

Next, Rahner moves on to his third thesis; the famous one in which he develops the second in order to conclude that all non-Christians should not be regarded as non-Christians but as anonymous Christians:

If the second thesis is correct, then Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian. (300)

Today, in our more pluralistic environment, this sounds remarkably arrogant and Rahner, himself, was aware that his thesis might be viewed as “presumptuous”; nonetheless, his intent was not to place other religions on par with Christianity, it was to include them in the realm of the religious so that the Christian mission might proceed less arrogantly. Thus, when approaching others with the news of Christ’s revelation, the Christian missionary is not bringing something new; in fact, Christ’s revelation in the anonymous Christian could already be developed quite profoundly. (301)

Rahner continues to deepen the implications of this concept by claiming that the anonymous Christian might not only be someone on the way to salvation but someone who has actually found it. But even so it is still necessary for the missionary to try to convert this person’s anonymous Christian faith into an explicit affirmation of Christian faith with its accompanying social expression in the life of the Church:

...proclamation of the gospel does not simply turn someone absolutely abandoned by God and Christ into a Christian, but turns an anonymous Christian into someone who also knows about his Christian belief in the depths of his grace-endowed being by objective reflection and in the profession of faith which is given a social form in the Church. (301)

In this, the anonymous Christian is participating in the development of their Christianity, moving from a higher form. (301)

With the addition of this developmental element, Rahner anticipates and cuts off the obvious question: why should anonymous Christians become explicit Christians if they have already found salvation in their own religion? Rahner says that this is like dismissing the significance of the sacraments of Baptism and Penance because a person can be justified through subjective acts of faith and a contrite heart even before the sacraments are given. Apart from this there are two positive reasons that demand conversion to an explicit form of Christianity. These are,

...(1) the incarnational and social structure of grace and of Christianity, and (2) because the individual who grasps Christianity in a clearer, purer and more reflective way has, other things being equal, a still greater chance of salvation than someone who is merely an anonymous Christian. (301)

The first reason, here, we take to mean that Christ's incarnation in historical time, and the perpetuation of his presence in historical time through the Church, demands a historical recognition of Christ by non-Christians when they encounter Christianity as a concrete historical reality. The second reason is clear enough, but suggests another element of Rahner's theology of salvation; namely,

that although salvation is offered to all, and received by some, it is guaranteed to none. In any case, the practical upshot of the idea of the anonymous Christian is that it should, more accurately, orient Christian missionaries in their dealings with others. (301)

Finally, Rahner advances his forth thesis, which is the classic expression of religious inclusivism: Christianity is not the only religion but it is the best one. This conclusion is based on the pessimistic fact that religious pluralism is likely to last a very long time, and the more optimistic fact that, in this context, it is permissible for Christian missionaries to try to covert implicit Christians into explicit ones; thus,

the Church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church. (302)

Moreover, this is the situation that will obtain until the end of time. Even though Christians deeply long for the unity of all human beings in the one true Church they know that this will not happen in historical time. And the Church knows this not through an historical analysis of religious diversity but because it knows that it is destined to suffer opposition until its final victory at the end of time. Rahner even expects that opposition to the Church will increase in the future. (302)

Continuing, he argues that if this opposition moves beyond the social reality of individuals, then it will take on a universal rather than localized nature, owing to the fact that world history is now a unity. And this emergence of planetary unity has profound

significance for Christianity in itself, because if this unity can't be reversed then the Church in its current state of development as a homogeneous (medieval) culture can't continue to exist. Rahner, of course, doesn't think that this new historical context can be reversed and, hence, his deep interest in evolving the Church into the modern era. (302)

In the same way that Rahner gives pride of place to the explicit Christian, opposed to the merely anonymous Christian, he regards the Church as having a special place within salvation history. It is not just one more religion, but it is the religion in which opposition to Christ's revelation has been overcome. As such, the Church is not the community that has received Christ's revelation, as opposed to those who have not, but it is the location where Christ's revelation has become fully conscious; it is "the communion of those who can explicitly confess what they *and* the others hope to be." (302)

Rahner recognizes that seeing a non-Christian as "one who has not yet come to himself reflectively" may be seen as presumptuous. But he thinks it is the opposite. For Rahner, this is recognition that God is greater than man and, thus, the greatest source of humility for individual Christians and the Church. Rahner's position would be sharply criticized by pluralists for producing the wrong sort of attitude towards non-Christians, but he saw it as exactly the right one: "humble tolerant and yet firm." (303)

Rahner's position is clearly not exclusivist. Rahner explicitly rejects the exclusivist position that (God's/Christ's) revelation is the exclusive property of the true Christian Church. Christ's revelation is in all religions and therefore all religions are included within the domain of religion/revelation. Rahner's position is inclusivist. And, yet, it also remains within the realm of supernatural form, rather than philosophical

essence and content (not to mention historical analysis and religious normativism). Other religions are religions by virtue of bearing *Christ's supernatural* revelation. Still, Rahner does make a philosophical or conceptual move, which allows for different forms of Christ's revelation – or, really, only two of these. Rahner does this by conceptualizing revelation or supernatural grace as a means to an end; namely, the end of Christian salvation, which he substantively defines as attainment of the beatific vision. Thus, with religion conceived as a means to an end it is possible to consider the theoretical possibility that there are different means to the same end. And, here, Rahner suggest that there are in fact two paths to salvation: (1) explicit Christian faith and (2) implicit Christian Faith as received in another religion. Rahner, though, is not willing to say that explicit and implicit Christian Faith are equally salvifically effective, even though both may lead to salvation. Explicit faith is better and implicit faith is worse; therefore, Rahner, employs a development model for understanding the relationship between these two types of faith. Implicit faith is the less developed form of faith that, hopefully, will come to *fulfillment* in explicit faith since this gives one a better shot at salvation.

6. Inclusivism: My Religion is the Best Religion

It is now possible to compare the “evolutionary apologetic,” as exemplified by Tillich, and inclusivism as exemplified by Rahner. Tillich conceives religion philosophically as an essence; the “religion of the concrete spirit.” Ostensibly this essence is observed within the history of religions, but the fact that Tillich's best example of this ultimate form of religion is found in Saint Paul's doctrine of the spirit suggests something more substantive and Christian and less essential and universal. In any case, the important

thing is that Christianity can now be theoretically represented as different from religion as such, which allows for the possibility of different types of religion. Rahner comes to the same possibility via a different route. Rahner does this by placing salvation above religion; specifically by conceiving salvation as the goal of religion. But Rahner feels no need to convert the final goal or teleology into a quasi-religious philosophy that is meant to look universal rather than Christian. Rahner has the security of a dogmatic theologian who knows that the beatific vision is the teleological hope of every human being under the sun.

Tillich is philosophical in identifying the thing above Christianity and all other religions, that all human beings are striving for via these vehicles, and Rahner is theological in identifying this. But both have the totality of the history of religions or the totality of salvation history enfolded within their essence or end. And this willingness to include Christianity and other religions in the same framework of understanding is what separates religious inclusivism from religious exclusivism.

Another way to distinguish these two thinkers is to say that both posit a universal teleology, or a universal end; but that Tillich's teleology is fulfilled within history and Rahner's is fulfilled outside of history. Thus, it is easier to see Tillich's framework of understanding as a logic of content and essence, because the essence is becoming the content in time. This gives Tillich more capacity to ascribe positive value to the content or to particular religions; and he does this by seeing them as components that unite to constitute a greater truth. In contrast, Rahner's teleology, which is fulfilled outside of history or outside of time, lends itself better to the logic of means to an end, wherein the

means have no inherent value in and of themselves. These means are not combined to constitute the fulfilment, they are left behind in the fulfilment.

Let us now review how both Rahner and Tillich arrive at the quintessential inclusivist view that Christianity is the best religion, bearing in mind that one was working with a historical teleology and the other an ahistorical teleology, or that one was using the logic of content and essence and the other the logic of means to an end.

For Rahner, the goal of religion is the beatific vision; this particular end is the only ultimate end for all human beings. Christianity is the only means for attaining this specific and only end. But, there are two Christian paths—the path of the Christianity’s explicit form and the path of Christianity’s implicit form. Of these two forms, explicit Christianity is the higher, more developed form, and offers a higher probability of attaining salvation. In other words, Christianity is not the only religion but it is the best religion.

For Tillich, the goal of religion is the perfect realization of the essence of the religion of the concrete spirit; this particular realized essence is the inner aim of all religions and all human beings. The religion of the concrete spirit unites the two great religious tendencies of the mystical type of faith (as best exemplified by Buddhism) and the ethical type of faith (as best exemplified by Christianity). It thus stems from a dynamic evolutionary process that unites less complete and more fragmentary forms of faith into one complete, whole, and perfect form. As shown above Tillich was not willing to identify Christianity, on the whole, with the religion of the concrete spirit, but he did see its highest expression, so far, in Pauline Christianity. Thus, a particular expression of Christianity represents the apex of religious evolutionary development, so far. In this

regard, Tillich's position is identical to Schleiermacher's. Schleiermacher identifies mediation of the Infinite by the finite as the highest expression of the essence of religion, i.e., as the highest intuition of the universe. Mediation is the genius of Christianity and, therefore, Christianity is the highest form of religion, or the best religion (so far).

Inclusivism always leads to the conclusion that one religion is the best religion or at least the best religion so far. Its logical structure guarantees this. What it doesn't guarantee is what religion will be deemed the best religion or the best religion so far. But evidence, so far suggests that it will usually be the religion of the religious person conceiving the ultimate religious end, or absolute religious essence.

The different forms of Christian inclusivism, articulated by Tillich and Rahner, did not come to an end with the advent of religious pluralism. In 2001, S. Mark Heim articulated a rich dynamic-typological inclusivism in the mode of Tillich, and a year earlier Gavin D'Costa articulated a rich theological inclusivism in the mode of Rahner. Nonetheless, the exclusivism of Karl Barth, the inclusivism of Karl Rahner, and to a lesser extent the inclusivism of Paul Tillich provided the theological backdrop for the emergence of religious pluralism, and we will now create an historical *sketch* of the emergence of religious pluralism.

2

A Historical Outline of the Emergence and Development of Religious Pluralism

Again, what follows is necessarily a sketch, and that main characters in this historical outline will come to life more fully in Part 2.¹

1. Defining the Category: Alan Race’s Threefold Typology of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

Alan Race’s, 1983, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, is responsible for putting religious pluralism on the map, as a viable philosophical and theological option for Christians to understand religious others.² He did this in two ways. First, he detected a pattern in a number of recent theological and philosophical responses to non-Christian religions that appeared to be distinctly different from the patterns of the supernatural apologetic and the evolutionary apologetic – which Race respectively called exclusivism and inclusivism. Second, he gave this new pattern a name – pluralism.

Race’s term exclusivism was already in circulation at this point³ and people seemed to know what it meant. The term inclusivism was unfamiliar, but the idea of the

¹ This historical sketch of religious pluralism will be limited to Christian thinkers, since these have dominated the conversation in the West. In the conclusion of the dissertation I will discuss the issue of whether or not theories of religious pluralism are exclusive to Western Christianity.

² See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

³ Remember, from Chapter 1, that Troeltsch also called the supernatural apologetic “exclusive supernaturalism” (Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 53), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith referred to Karl Barth as a theologian in an “exclusivist tradition” (W. C. Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 320).

evolutionary apologetic was not;⁴ and, so, inclusivism which seemed an apt description, was also easy to understand. Pluralism was a different story; pluralism at this point was usually just a name for the fact that there were many different religions,⁵ so early pluralists had to make the point of saying that pluralism was about more than just asserting that there was religious diversity.⁶ But what exactly was it? Race tried to explain pluralism (as well as exclusivism and inclusivism) by showing representative biblical and theological positions for each approach.

According to Race, exclusivism – which sees Christian revelation as the locus of truth and salvation and everything else as a mass of human error – has the strongest biblical roots (see Acts 4:12 and John 14:6), and has dominated Christian history. Race sees the summary expression of this attitude in the Catholic Church's (19th century) doctrine of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church); and, its strongest expression in the theologies of the Neo-Orthodox Protestants, Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, and Emil Brunner.⁷

According to Race, inclusivism is predominantly found in Catholic post-Vatican II thought, but is also present in the Orthodox and Christian traditions. And, like exclusivism, inclusivism also has deep biblical roots, which can be seen in Paul's efforts to come to terms with his Jewish and Greek heritage. Paul did not simply dismiss his Jewish and Greek roots but saw these as respectively preparatory and not fully conscious. (39-40) This captures the inclusive perspective from the start; other traditions are on their way to true religion – i.e., Christianity – but not yet there. Race cites Karl Rahner as the

⁴ It was the new conciliatory language of the post Vatican II era.

⁵ See Rahner's use above.

⁶ See Diana Eck, *Encountering God*, for an argument against the idea that pluralism is a mere affirmation of pluralism, or simply relativism.

⁷ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 2-3; cited in the text by page numbers hereafter.

preeminent post-Vatican II inclusivist, but also notices the same approach in the later Hans King, and in some less well-known Protestant and Catholic thinkers who were able to draw on their actual experience from living among different cultures when formulating their views of other religions; for example, J.N. Farquhar, Ramundo Pannikar and Bede Griffiths. (57-59)

As for pluralism, Race identifies two defining characteristics: 1) *tolerance* of other faiths, and 2) *relativism*, by which he means a commitment to the view that knowledge of God is only partial in all religion. To understand these two related ideas it is first necessary to understand the distinction Race makes between moral tolerance and theological tolerance. Moral tolerance is a willingness to let others adhere peacefully to their own religion, while theological tolerance is recognition that religions are coworkers in the task of seeking common truth. Race notes that those who embrace religious exclusivism – such as Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer – while opposed to the very idea of theological tolerance are still morally tolerant. Thus, for Race, relativism necessarily follows *theological* tolerance because it is logically impossible to seek religious truth, with those from other religious traditions, while believing that one's own tradition embodies the only truth. Race saw pluralism as a movement that emerged out of the Liberal stream of Protestant Christianity in the twentieth century, and so his prototypical pluralists are Ernst Troeltch, Arnold Toynbee, and William Hocking; followed by Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Hick⁸. (72)

⁸ John Cobb is also mentioned in connection with the pluralist camp and is credited for the term “debilitating relativism” – i.e., having no norms whatever to evaluate religious traditions – which Race takes as a potential danger of pluralism (Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 156).

2. Embracing the Category of Religious Pluralism: John Hick, Paul Knitter and the Myth of Christian Uniqueness

Race's typology met with instant success and was soon being adopted by, or confirmed by, others – most especially by those now identifying themselves as “pluralists” such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Dianna Eck.⁹

Race's new term pluralism and the threefold “typology” seemed to galvanize those who were struggling to articulate a new Christian response towards other religions. “Pluralists” embraced their new identity as pluralists, and were quick to name their foes exclusivists and inclusivists. One of the more dramatic examples of this can be seen in John Hick's “A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism,” in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, which is largely a rewrite of an article that Hick published over a decade earlier called, “The Copernican Revolution in Theology”; the only substantial difference being that the later article employs the terms exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

In 1985, Knitter wrote *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*.¹⁰ This book was similar to Race's *Christians and Religious Pluralism*; indeed, Knitter notes that Race's types of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and his models “evinced an amazing and confirming similarity.”¹¹ The difference in Knitter's mind was that he offered more nuanced accounts of the theological content of each type, and of the theologians who represented them. But despite these more nuanced accounts, it was still fairly easy to locate Knitter's models within Race's types.

⁹ See especially, Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 28-45; Knitter, *No Other Name?*; Eck, *Encountering God*.

¹⁰ Knitter, *No Other Name?*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

Even one self-identified inclusivist embraced, and contributed to the popularity of Race's threefold typology. In 1986, Gavin D'Costa published *Theology and Religious Pluralism* which gives an account of the "pluralists paradigm," the "Exclusivist Paradigm," and the "Inclusivist Paradigm."¹² It follows the same pattern of Race's work insofar as it shows the types with representative thinkers, but it departs from Race in the order of the "paradigms." For Race, pluralism, which is the best position, comes at the culminating end; for D'Costa, inclusivism, which is the best position, comes at the culminating end.

Race's typology gained momentum a somewhat clearer, and somewhat more consistent, view of the three types started to emerge. According to this view, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism were characterized as responses to a cluster of problems related to religious diversity – most notably the problems of salvation, truth, and the religious other. Moreover, it became assumed that the three types would respond to the particular questions in this cluster, in ways that were always consistent with their types; thus, broad paradigms formed.

Exclusivism became an intolerant view of other religions, maintaining that only the "home religion" housed truth and delivered salvation.¹³ Inclusivism became a moderately tolerant view of other religions, maintaining superiority but not monopoly for the home religion with respect to truth and salvific efficacy; Pluralism became an open and tolerant view of other religions, maintaining that all of the great religions provide truth and equally effective pathways to salvation.

¹² See D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*.

¹³ I will use Paul Griffin's term "home religion" to connote a religion to which one belongs (Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, xiv).

This description of the three types blends together different aspects from a relatively formal description of the types by S. Mark Heim, and a more substantive description by Gavin D'Costa. Heim explicates the types as follows:

Exclusivists believe the Christian tradition is in sole possession of effective religious truth and offers the only path to salvation. Inclusivists affirm that salvation is available through other traditions because the God most decisively acting and most fully revealed in Christ is also redemptively available within or through those traditions. Pluralists maintain that various religious traditions are independently valid paths to salvation.¹⁴

And D'Costa says the following:

Roughly speaking, pluralism is the position which claims that all religions, more or less are equally valid ways in helping men and women find their way to God. Pluralists are usually critical of exclusivists, who hold that only Christianity (and often, a particular denominational version) is true, and exclusively capable of helping men and women to a full relationship with God. Pluralists usually argue that exclusivists have no grounds for real openness and tolerance towards other religions, nor have they anything to learn from these religions. The resultant attitude is politically translated into empire, imperialism, and aggressive mission. ...Inclusivism is often characterized as holding to the definitive truth of Christianity, but recognizing that other religions may be "lawful religions" (Rahner), even if in a provisional manner.¹⁵

¹⁴ Heim, *Salvations*, 4.

¹⁵ D'Costa, *Meeting of Religions*, 1.

These passages indicate a number of interesting things about the typology: 1) it was usually applied to Christianity (where it developed among its theologians and philosophers); 2) it typically revolved around the problem of “salvation” or the highest religious end; 3) when truth entered in to the equation it did so as a means to salvation which, in effect, conflated the terms; and, 4) it suggested that the propositions held about truth and salvation in other religions conditioned attitudes towards other religions, some of which (such as religious intolerance) deserved moral condemnation.

As said above, the threefold typology was especially popular with pluralists, perhaps because it afforded them a clear conscience with respect to their relations with religious “aliens.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, those who were now being labelled as exclusivists and inclusivists were not so sanguine about this new classification system, but did not mount a strong opposition to it until the mid 1990s, and so the early 1980s to the mid 1990’s may be seen as something of a “honeymoon” period for religious pluralism.

During this period John Hick and Paul Knitter emerged as the dominant representatives of religious pluralism. Hick and Knitter championed the cause of religious pluralism with vigour, calling on all religious persons to make a *paradigm shift* – away from exclusivism and inclusivism, towards pluralism:

A pluralistic model represents a new turn – what might be called a “paradigm shift” – in the efforts of Christian theologians, both past and present, to understand the world of other religions and Christianity’s place in that world.¹⁷

The above passage is taken from *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. This volume, edited by Hick and Knitter, is based

¹⁶ “Alien” is another term of Paul Griffiths that I will adopt; it signifies those who do not belong to the home religion (Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, xiv).

¹⁷ Hick and Knitter, *Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, vii.

largely on papers presented at a conference held at Claremont Graduate School, March 7-8, 1986. The conference and subsequent volume were something of a coming out party for religious pluralism, as a legitimate theological option for Christians in their relations with religious others. In an effort to underscore this point the authors of the volume were asked to revise their conference talks, for publication, with the following four questions in mind:

why...the contemporary context was pressing Christianity toward a new pluralistic approach toward other religions, how such an approach might be best elaborated, whether it was in line with past tradition and present Christian experience, and what might be its implications for other areas of Christian doctrine and practice.¹⁸

Clearly the editors wanted the contributing authors to think seriously about how pluralistic theologies would impact traditional Christian doctrines and practices, and whether or not this could be done *legitimately* within the tradition itself. But, they also felt that the changing times *necessitated* the paradigm shift and, indeed, saw a failure to make this shift as morally reprehensible.

This message comes out loud and clear in Hicks' contribution to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* called "The Non Absoluteness of Christianity," wherein he discusses some of the "large scale ways in which Christian absolutism has lent itself...to the validation and encouragement of political and economic evil."¹⁹ Specifically he identifies Christian absolutism as a contributing factor to 1) European anti-Judaism and eventually anti-Semitism; 2) colonial exploitation in "Africa, India, Southeast Asia,

¹⁸ Ibid., ix.

¹⁹ Hick, "Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," 17.

China, South America, and the Pacific Islands” by European nations; and, 3) racist attitudes that have persisted even after the collapse of supporting colonial political structures.²⁰

Even so, the editors of *The Myth of Christianity* – despite their conviction that it was imperative for Christians to move to a pluralistic framework – did not insist that a particular pluralistic framework had to be adopted by all; they recognized that there were several variants of the “pluralist move” or that there was a plurality of pluralisms. In the end, though, the editors saw fit to organize the main contributions to *The Myth* in terms of three main approaches: 1) the historico-cultural, 2) the theological-mystical, and, 3) the ethico-practical. And, here, they evoked the image of the Rubicon such that each of the approaches was seen as a bridge to help one cross over from exclusivism and inclusivism to pluralism.

For the most part, the “bridges” identify different commonalities – be they historical, theological, or ethical – that are, according to pluralists, present in all of the great religious traditions. These bridges or points of commonality became as, we will see shortly, focal points for the critics of religious pluralism.

The polarizing rhetoric of pluralists, such as Hick, which cast exclusivism and inclusivism in a very dark light may have helped pluralists feel justified in the radical theological moves they were making, but it did very little to strengthen the conceptual foundation of religious pluralism and, so, it eventually came under attack by those refusing to “cross the Rubicon” or adopt the pluralist paradigm.

²⁰ Ibid., 17-19.

3. Critical Responses to Religious Pluralism: Gavin D’Costa, S. Mark Heim, Paul Griffiths, and John Cobb

The first serious challenge to the pluralist paradigm came in 1990 with the publication of *Christian Uniqueness: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*.²¹ There are four articles in this volume of particular interest because they would continue to evolve into more serious challenges to the idea of religious pluralism

The first, by editor Gavin D’Costa, called “Christ the Trinity and Religious Plurality” argues that the doctrine of the Trinity can be used to construct an inclusivist approach to religious plurality that meets the concerns of pluralists with regard to openness and tolerance for other religious traditions. D’Costa would even suggest that pluralist theologies of religions aren’t even that good at what they propose to do, i.e., at affirming the equality of all (authentic) religions. In 1995, D’Costa would develop this idea that pluralists aren’t really doing what they claim to be doing, by making the surprising claim that pluralists are really exclusivists because they use specific truth criteria as the organizing principle of their theories of religions – just like exclusivists and inclusivists.²² The most significant ramification of this is that the traditional threefold criteria is incoherent because exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists all use truth criteria to decide what is and what is not religious and therefore exclude some phenomena; if they did not do this they would have to include violent “cults” such as Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple in the category of religion. Thus, pluralists are exclusivists and there really is no such thing as pluralism – and no coherent threefold typology.

²¹ See D’Costa, ed., *The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*.

²² See D’Costa, “Impossibility of a Pluralist View.”

Second, an article, by J.A. DiNoia called “Pluralist Theology of Religions: Pluralistic or Non-Pluralistic?” questions how pluralistic pluralistic theologies of other religions really are.²³ DiNoia shows how pluralistic theologies tend to downplay or even obliterate the particulars of religions, by reducing them to a common denominator. He questions the legitimacy of reducing all religious ends to one religious end, and asks if all religions really have the same end. For example, is Christian salvation the same things as Buddhist Enlightenment, and can this be reduced to one substantive form without doing violence to one or the other?²⁴ This article may have inspired D’Costa’s later idea that pluralists are really exclusivists, but the more thoroughgoing extension of DiNoia’s critique is found in S. Mark Heim’s *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. In *Salvations*, Heim critiques the pluralist theologies of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter. In each case he attacks the supposed common denominator of all religions. For Smith, this is the universal quality called faith that is put into the hearts of all men by God and expresses in various ways the different religious traditions of humankind; for Hick, this is salvation in the form of turning from self-centredness to God-centredness; and, for Knitter it is effectively contributing to the “Kingdom of God” through positive social action. In each case, Heim asks the same difficult question – is this what all religions (or even all of the great world religions) are really about or really aiming for? Picking up on DiNoia’s work, Heim proposes the idea that maybe different religions actually have deeply different religious ends or “salvations” – and, possibly, different *authentic* salvations. After critiquing what he takes to be the superficial and distorting nature of pluralist theories of religion, Heim sets himself the task of developing

²³ See, DiNoia, “Pluralistic Theology of Religions.”

²⁴ See also, DiNoia, *Religious Diversity*.

a more pluralistic theory of religious pluralism – one that would save the particularities or “thick” diversity of religions. In this constructive work, Heim maintains that his position is inclusivist rather than pluralist, even though he also claims that it is “more pluralistic” in the sense that it is better at authenticating actual religious *diversity*.

Third, Paul Griffiths contributed an article called “The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended.”²⁵ Later, Griffiths would say that the contributors to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* “argue that claims to uniqueness are deeply woven into the grammar of religious discourse, and that a philosophical defence of some aspects of them can be given.”²⁶ This is an apt description of Griffiths’ contribution to the volume, and in the future he would go on to make an even more profound defence of exclusivism/inclusivism.

Fourth, John Cobb Jr. contributed an article called, “Beyond ‘Pluralism’” that expresses dissatisfaction with popular theories of religious pluralism.²⁷ In this article, Cobb notes the irony of him contributing to a book meant to oppose a book in support of religious pluralism (i.e., *The Myth of Christianity*) since he had always seen himself as something of a defender of religious pluralism. But Cobb, chose to contribute to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* – just as he chose not to contribute to *The Myth of Christianity* – because he was opposed to the “narrow” and “erroneous” way in which pluralism was being represented in *The Myth*. In 2003, in what was billed as a sequel to the conference at Claremont Graduate School in 1986, a second conference, at Claremont, was held on religious pluralism. This conference would lead to the

²⁵ See Griffiths, “The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended.”

²⁶ Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 170.

²⁷ See Cobb, “Beyond ‘Pluralism’.”

publication of *Deep Religious Pluralism*, edited by David Ray Griffin.²⁸ None of the participants of the original conference participated in the second one. Presumably they didn't participate because they were not invited since this conference, and the subsequent publication of *Deep Religious Pluralism*, revolved around John Cobb's religious pluralism. Cobb's pluralism is grounded in the pluralistic metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead who conceived of the totality of Reality as God, Creativity, and Cosmos; for Cobb, religious differences are rooted in these three different "Ultimate Realities."

At this point, I will continue this history of religious pluralism by interjecting some of my own history with the topic.

In 1998, I completed a master's thesis called "Making Sense of Religion and Religions: The Value and Limitation of Religious Unity and Diversity."²⁹

The starting point of my argument was a very broad definition of religion that was capable of enfolding a lot of specificity; I defined religion as "relationship with God." From this point, I defined pluralism as a claim that there are many forms (or at least more than one form) of true human relationship with God. And, I defined exclusivism as a claim that there is only one form of true human relationship with God.

I then moved on to rename both exclusivism and pluralism. I renamed exclusivism as *universalism* because it seems like a more natural descriptor of a position that was the opposite of pluralism; and, I introduced and renamed inclusivism as *universal pluralism*, because I saw this as a middle ground between universalism and pluralism. I dismissed the term inclusivism because this seemed to connote the opposite or exclusivism.

²⁸ See Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism*.

²⁹ See Martin, "Making Sense of Religion and Religions."

Next, I reintroduced the terms exclusivity and inclusivity as qualities of universalism, universal pluralism, and pluralism. With respect to universalism I argued that it was strongly exclusive; I wrote that “universalism asserts that there is one, and only one, true form of religion (i.e., relationship with God). Thus, all other forms of religion are necessarily not true, or false. This means that all other forms of religion are excluded from religious truth, or that religious truth is exclusive to only one form of religion. The universalist’s religious truth is *absolute*.” At the other end of the spectrum, and with respect to pluralism, I wrote: “Pluralism asserts that there is more than one true form of religion. But more than this, it denies that there is one absolutely true form of religion and, consequently, affirms a plurality of *partially true* religious forms. All partially true forms of religion are *included* in religious truth. Pluralism affirms that religious truth is the *inclusive* possession of all.” The middle ground “universal pluralism,” claims absolute truth for one religion but partial truth for many others and, thus, an “exclusive inclusivity.”

Continuing, I suggested there is no such thing as “pure pluralism” or “pure exclusivism.” By this I meant that no religions hold the view that *all* (partially true) religions are included in religious truth. All pluralisms circumscribed the category of religion such that only *some* religions are deemed to be true religions. Likewise, there is no such thing as “pure universalism.” And, here, I meant that no religions claim that their tradition is the only one with any semblance to what is called religion. For example, even the staunchest universalist admits “false religions” into the category of religion – albeit only nominally. Indeed, without this admission there is no basis to compare the two types of religion.

Finally, I argued that universalism and pluralism are both better understood as different forms of what can be called “unity and diversity,” since both posit a religious unity and understand all diversity of religion in terms of this unity. Universalists see only one “true” instance of what is taken to be true religion, and pluralists see multiple instances of this – but both admit a category which, on one hand, allows the possibility of diversity and, on the other, circumscribes the sort of diversity possibly. Thus, both pluralists and universalists include and exclude religions within their category of religion (whatever this may be). Likewise, those that I called “universal pluralists,” also include some and exclude other religions with their category of religion. This group was different only insofar as it tended to see one religion as the embodiment of true religion *plus* many religions as the partial embodiments of this, and in this respect appeared a little more balanced.

Nonetheless the main point I was making, with respect to pluralism, was that pluralists are not free – as many seemed to supposed themselves to be – from the exclusion that is inherent to any process of category making. In this regard, pluralists employ the exact same logical structure as exclusivists and inclusivists, despite employing a different strategy within this logical structure. Having established this, I also wished to point out that there was both “upside” and “downside” to the specific strategy employed by pluralists within their “inclusive exclusionary logic.” On the upside, pluralism is broadly egalitarian and so seems to provide a solid foundation for positive interfaith relations. On the downside, no pluralism seems to have a strong reality base for its proposed foundational unity. One did not, for example, have to be a great comparative religionist to see that John Hick’s definition of the religious common denominator – i.e.,

the “turning from self-centredness to God-centredness” – might have troubles gaining a foothold outside of liberal Protestant circles.

Just after completing my thesis, I found a copy of Gavin D’Costa’s “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions.” I was delighted to have found someone else that had seemed to notice the same thing about pluralism that I had just noticed; namely, that it collapses all real religious diversity, and therefore isn’t very good at authenticating the equal validity of religions with respect to their actual differences. Pluralism requires religions to be converted into something that they are not in order to say that they are equal. Certainly it achieves equality but is this an equality of the religions as they really are?

The original version of my Master’s Thesis had a second part, called “Beyond Religious Unity and Diversity.” It had two subsections that were called “Beyond Unity and Diversity: A Radical Approach to the Problem of Religious Diversity,” and “Religion is Three: a Radical Theory of Religion.” I was using the word radical here in the more traditional sense of “down to the roots” rather than the colloquial sense of “way out there.” In these preliminary constructive efforts to develop a theory of religious diversity that was more pluralistic than traditional theories I grounded religious diversity in a pluralistic metaphysics based on the mathematics and metaphysical work of George Spencer-Brown. As such, I was developing a theory of religions much like John Cobb’s.

I didn’t include this constructive element in my thesis, but after reading D’Costa was convinced that I was on to something, and so entered a PhD. program with the intent of constructing a genuine theory of religious pluralism – one that could authenticate religious diversity without reducing it to a commonality that would destroy true diversity.

I completed this theory of religious pluralism in June 2000. It was called “Understanding Religious Unity in Diversity in terms of Non-Dualism, Divine Unity, and Trinitarianism Together: A Tripartite Theory, Philosophy and Theology of Religions.” I made a historical argument, a philosophical argument, and a theological argument that it was possible to see non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarianism (my names for three broad religious types) as equally valid religious truths, since each of these truths is about the same tripartite ultimate reality, from one of the three possible points of view within ultimate reality.

I saw non-Dualism as the great truth of Hinduism and Buddhism; I saw divine unity as the great truth of Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Baha’i, and I saw trinitarianism (or “the religion of divine relationship”) as the great truth of Judaism and Christianity (with some obvious qualifications). Thus, I believed that the most intractable religious truth claims could be accounted for, and affirmed, as equally true, because each was knowledge about the same Ultimate Reality from a different point of view within the same Ultimate Reality. I was elated because I was convinced I had solved *the* problem, of religious diversity. I had found a way to affirm a multiplicity of true religions with respect to their actual differences. But, as mentioned in the Introduction, I received little positive response to my solution, whether religious or academic.

In any case, we will now return to the more public history of religious pluralism, which at the turn of the century saw a flurry of activity directed at the renewal of Christian inclusivism – perhaps driven by millennial hopes?

4. Three Consequences of the Critique of Pluralism

The Rebirth of Religious Inclusivism

In 2000, Gavin D'Costa put together his final critique of pluralism and his own positive efforts to construct a Trinitarian theology of other religions in *The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity*.³⁰ Even though he called his effort exclusivist it is better understood as inclusivist, and it is an inclusivism that almost looks pluralistic. Here the world religions are the embodiments of the Holy Spirit, as distinct from the Church which is the embodiment of Christ or the Logos. It is Christ that is ultimately leading everyone to the Father (salvation) but the religions (through the Holy Spirit) are leading the Church and everyone else to a fuller and more explicit knowledge of Christ, making salvation more effective. Thus, the religions and the Church are co-equals in leading humanity to salvation – an interesting twist on Rahner. This is what makes D'Costa's position look like pluralism. But, in the end, all is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God, and this is what makes his position inclusivist. The Kingdom of God is the singular ideal that stands above the religions and the Church.

In 2001, Mark Heim published *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* – a theory of religious inclusivism that appears to be even more pluralistic than D'Costa's.³¹ Here, the religions are providing true and authentic knowledge about different aspects of God, which lead to different encounters with God. Since God is triune there are three possible profound encounters with God: “one marked by impersonal identity, one marked by iconographic encounter, and one marked by personal

³⁰ See, D'Costa. *The Meeting of the Religions*.

³¹ See Heim, *Depth of the Riches*.

communion.”³² Advaita Vedanta is one of the best examples of an encounter marked by impersonal identity; Islam typifies iconographic encounter; and, Christianity typifies personal communion. But even though each is an authentic encounter with God, Christian communion is the ultimate end because it unites all three aspects of the Trinity in communion. Thus, Heim is a pluralist almost to the end, where all religions are consummated in Christian communion.³³

In 1991, Paul J. Griffiths published a book called *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* in which he argues that apologetics is a reasonable mode of communication for interreligious dialogue.³⁴ Ten years later Griffiths would use apologetics to profoundly defend exclusivism/inclusivism. In 2001, Griffiths published *Problems of Religious Diversity* which is ostensibly about the various options available with respect to different questions related to religious diversity, but may more accurately be thought as a comprehensive philosophical apology for religious exclusivism/inclusivism and simultaneously a critique of religious pluralism.³⁵

Griffiths deals with 1) the question of religious truth; 2) the question of how awareness of religious diversity affects the epistemic confidence one has in one's religious truth; 3) the question of the religious “alien” (the religious other); and, 4) the question of salvation (which combines the other questions). On all fronts, Griffiths is critical of the pluralist responses, and defends exclusivist/inclusivist responses. His arguments will be discussed in the next chapter, but I will briefly talk about his criticism of pluralism with respect to the question of salvation. Griffiths says that the central claim

³² Ibid., 210.

³³ Heim's inclusivism is remarkably similar to my pluralism; the only difference being that I say Christian communion is just one perspective on the “Trinity,” not *the* uniting perspective.

³⁴ See Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*.

³⁵ See Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*.

of pluralism is that one does not have to belong to the home religion in order to be saved – this is the opposite of exclusivism which says that belonging to the home religion is necessary (although not necessarily sufficient) for salvation. From here he says there are two versions of pluralism; negative pluralism which says there is no connection between religious membership and salvation, and positive pluralism which says it is necessary to belong to some religious community in order to be saved (The latter is the more common option for religious people who choose to be pluralists.) Positive pluralists will thus circumscribe the conditions of religious life that are conducive to salvation, usually claiming that this condition obtains in all religions. But when they do this they are doing two things that they don't generally acknowledge; 1) they exclude certain religions from the category of what is religious or what is salvific, and 2) they strip down their own tradition so that it fits into the category of religion – and demand that other religions do likewise. Thus, like exclusivists, they exclude others from the category of religion on a religious basis – the only difference being that their religious basis is relatively uninteresting and half-blooded.³⁶

Thus, the millennium ended with a bold and comprehensive philosophical defence of religious exclusivism/inclusivism (Griffiths); a profound typological inclusivism in the Protestant tradition of Tillich (Heim); and a profound Catholic inclusivism in the tradition of Rahner (D'Costa). In other words, inclusivism had been renewed, in response to the rise of religious pluralism, and, thus, I will refer to this movement that culminated at the end of the twentieth century as “neo-religious inclusivism.”

The Birth of “Deep Religious Pluralism”

³⁶ Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 148

Another alternative to religious pluralism started to emerge around the same time. The central figure in this movement was David Ray Griffin. Griffin spearheaded the 2003 Claremont conference and edited *Deep Religious Pluralism*. The first part of this volume, written by Griffin, is especially important for the emergence of this alternative to pluralism because it philosophically defends the idea of a different kind of religious pluralism; namely, deep religious pluralism. And, it provides an impressive exemplar of this type of pluralism – the venerable John Cobb Jr. whose reputation as a Christian theologian is impeccable, and whose dedication to problems of religious diversity is well recognized. Thus, he created a new category and legitimized it with a well respected representative.

Griffin argues that religious pluralism, in the generic sense, rejects religious absolutism and affirms the value of other religious traditions. All forms of pluralism have this generic base, but from here there are two variations. One, identist pluralism, which says there is a commonality in all religions, and participation in this commonality is what legitimizes a religion. Two, deep religious pluralism, which roots religious difference in a pluralistic metaphysics; religious differences are deep because they are rooted in the very structure of ultimate reality.³⁷ As discussed earlier, John Cobb (Griffin's exemplary pluralist) based his religious pluralism on the idea that there are three Ultimate Realities, which he grounds in the tripartite metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead consisting of God, Creativity, and Cosmos. Religions are different because they are grounded in different aspects of Ultimate reality; for example, Christianity is

³⁷ See Griffiths, "Religious Pluralism."

primarily grounded in the reality of God, Buddhism in the reality of Creativity, and native spiritual traditions in the reality of Cosmos.³⁸

In 2002, another version of deep religious pluralism was published – *Different Paths, Different Summits, A Model for Religious Pluralism* by Stephen Kaplan.³⁹

Kaplan’s main concern is with the theoretical problem involved in asserting the truth of multiple absolutes. In the end, Kaplan is satisfied that his model makes this a theoretical possibility, even if it does nothing to authenticate the actual truth of the truths it accommodates. Kaplan proposes a threefold typology that allows one to affirm as true the theistic notion of communion with God, the Advaitan notion of identity with an impersonal Absolute, and the Buddhist notion that recognizes the interconnectedness of all Reality.

John Cobb Jr. reviewed Kaplan’s book in 2005, and the important thing for Cobb about this work, is that it allows for the affirmation of different ultimates, and so overcomes relativism: “The real importance of his model is to show that reality as a whole can have multiple features each of which is just as ultimate as the others.”⁴⁰

This idea of multiple Ultimate Realities, or at least multiple ultimate religious truths, is the basic idea of deep religious pluralism. These multiple ultimates, because they are the ground of religious diversity, allow the deep pluralist to overcome the superficiality of traditional pluralist theories; deep pluralism is rooted in the depth of Ultimate reality, because Ultimate Reality is itself pluralistic.

The religious pluralism of my own *Understanding Religious Unity in Terms of “Non-Dualism,” “Divine Unity,” and “Trinitarianism,” Together* is a version of deep

³⁸ See, Griffin, “John Cobb’s Pluralism.”

³⁹ See Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits*.

⁴⁰ Cobb, “Review of *Different Paths, Different Summits*,” 368.

religious pluralism. What is different now, as compared to when it was completed in 2000, is that now it can be seen as belonging to a school of thought. This “school” is small, but it does exist now. It has been given a profound philosophical defence by a highly credentialed theologian; it is represented by preeminent religious pluralists in John Cobb and Raimundo Pannikar⁴¹, and it has a published book-length argument in *Different Paths, Different Summits*.

Thus, two similar movements have appeared as a critical response to the first versions of religious pluralism. The neo-inclusivism of D’Coata, Heim, and Griffiths, wherein non-Christians are validated as true and valuable in and of themselves –and at a very deep level – but wherein all are finally consummated in an explicitly Christian end. And the deep religious pluralism of Griffin/Cobb, Panikkar, Kaplan, and myself, wherein different religions are affirmed equally and ultimately true *with respect to their differences* – but never merge into one because Ultimate Reality (the terminal of all religions) is itself diverse.

The aim of neo-inclusivism and deep religious pluralism is the same, and this is the same as the aim of traditional religious pluralists; to affirm the equal validity of multiple religions or to affirm that there are multiple true religions. Both neo-inclusivists and deep pluralists don’t like the way that traditional pluralists try to do this, and both think they have a better way. From this perspective, the problem of traditional religious pluralism is that it reduces all forms of diversity to one form, which has the effect of validating all of the religions, but only denuded forms of the ones it is willing and able to validate. The solution of both neo-inclusivists and deep pluralists is to ground religious

⁴¹ See Chapter I of Panikkar’s, *The Trinity and World Religions*, for what might be his most definitive expression of “deep pluralism.”

diversity in the deepest structure of ultimate reality. Neo-inclusivists use the Trinity to do this and deep pluralists use something very similar in a tripartite metaphysical concept of Ultimate reality. Both neo-inclusivists and deep pluralists affirm that different religions are true and valuable, despite, and even because of, their deep differences. But neo-inclusivists finally dissolve the true and valuable non-Christian religions – and, indeed, Christianity itself – into a Christian end. In contrast, there is no single end for the deep pluralist; the end is itself diverse, so there is no structural possibility for uniformity in the end.

The Reaffirmation of Traditional Religious Pluralism

Traditional pluralists did not roll over in the face of neo-inclusivists who were saying that the pluralism wasn't real and deep pluralists who were saying that this pluralism was superficial and a wrong turn. Thus, in 2003 Hick and Knitter rallied the troops again for another conference on religious pluralism, as the legitimate successor to the first Claremont Conference of 1986. This conference took place in Birmingham, England, September 6-9, and resulted in a publication called, *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, that was edited by Paul Knitter.⁴² The main difference between the first and second conferences of the traditional pluralists is that the second was self-consciously multi-faith rather than intra-Christian. The intent here was to show that religious pluralism is not just a way for Christians to affirm the legitimacy of non-Christian religions but a way for all of the great world religious traditions to validate each other; indeed, if it could not do this it had little practical value.

⁴² See Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority*.

The first part of *The Myth of Religious Superiority* lays down the “foundational perspectives” of religious pluralism – and, somewhat ironically, the foundational perspectives are laid by three white, Western, Christian academics.⁴³ In the second part, we see pluralist perspectives from representatives of the great world religions (Hindu and Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim). The order of these perspectives follows the typical pattern of a world religions text; the “eastern traditions” appear first in chronological order followed by the “western traditions” in chronological order. The non-great world religions are excluded from the conversation.⁴⁴

The three “foundational perspectives” offered by John Hick, Perry Leukel-Schmidt, and Paul Knitter are all apologies for traditional religious pluralism. Of these, Hick’s is the least accommodating to the critics – he simply can’t see any reasonable alternatives (and he doesn’t see this as blindness). Paul Knitter, in contrast, shows a deep understanding of what the critics find problematic about religious pluralism and sincerely tries to defend pluralism against these criticisms. Perry Leukel-Schmidt offers a rigorous philosophical defence of religious pluralism – and specifically its bulwark, the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism – by reinterpreting the classic threefold typology.

⁴³ Paul Knitter does take note of this obvious fact.

⁴⁴ For a thought provoking thesis on the connection between on the idea of world religions and religious pluralism see Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*. For Masuzawa, the term world religions is an expression of the language of religious pluralism; there are world religions because religions are conceptualized pluralistically. She links the emergence of the language of pluralism and the idea of world religions with Ernst Troeltsch and the beginning of the twentieth century. And, her thesis is that the idea of world religions was a way for Christians to continue affirming the universality of Christianity – doing so on its own was no longer tenable, but doing so as a representative of a “great world religion” was.

Continuing, John Hick was incredulous in response to Gavin D'Costa's idea that exclusivism and pluralism share the same logic,⁴⁵ but his apology in the *Myth of Religious Superiority* is aimed at Heim. Hick's response to the challenge of what he calls "ultra-pluralism" (deep pluralism) is not so much an argument as an expression of shock at how such a preposterous idea could be taken seriously; he just can't see it as plausible alternative to his own position. For Hick, the idea that there are multiple Ultimates, that ground religious diversity, is simple polytheism – he even coins a new term and calls it "polyabsolutism."⁴⁶ As said, Hick's criticism of "ultra-pluralism" is directed specifically at Heim's trinitarian theology of religions in *The Depth of the Riches*, but shows a poor understanding of Heim's position, which is trinitarian rather than polytheistic, and (therefore) inclusivist rather than "ultra-pluralist." We don't know if Hick has responded directly to deep pluralism but suspect that he would, similarly, likewise dismiss it as polytheism. In any case, Hick does not seem to have a good grasp of the positions that have emerged as alternative to his own and, therefore, his ability to respond to his critics is limited.

Paul Knitter, in contrast, in his contribution to *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, called "Is the Pluralist Model a Western Imposition?" shows a profound understanding of what the critics of pluralism find problematic about religious pluralism. Specifically, they object to the notion that all religions can be reduced to a common language; that they can be "boiled down to a system, or common essence, or common ground."⁴⁷ And, not only this, but that the language pluralists want to reduce everything to – and *impose* on everyone else – is a Western language; some critics, such as D'Costa, Heim, Griffiths

⁴⁵ See Hick, "Possibility of Religious Pluralism."

⁴⁶ Hick, "Next Step beyond Dialogue," 12.

⁴⁷ Knitter, "A Western Imposition?," 29.

would even say it is the language of Western Christianity capitulated to the Enlightenment's critique of religion. Knitter takes these criticisms seriously, but in the end thinks they are "warning signs rather than road blocks"; and, thus, the main objective of his apology is to defend the idea that pluralism is a Western imposition. This defence is critical to the success of *The Myth of Superiority* because otherwise all of the other "supposedly" Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu/Sikh, Jewish and Christian perspectives on religious pluralism are necessarily based on grossly reduced and distorted versions of these religious traditions. This is a theme that we will reflect on in the Conclusion, but now will discuss another work, by Knitter, that clearly shows that he was affected by the critics of religious pluralism; *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.

Introducing Theologies of Religions (2002) may be thought of as an update of Knitter's *No Other Name?* As discussed earlier, the organizing pattern of *No Other Name?* does not follow the exact pattern of Race's threefold typology, but it is close and Knitter's material could easily be fit into Race's typology. *Introducing Theologies of Religions* is a new typology for understanding theologies and theories of religious diversity. It is largely Race's threefold typology with new names and a fourth type added. This change came about as a direct result of the critical and constructive work of Mark Heim, who was Knitter's principle representative of the new type of pluralism that he calls the "acceptance model."⁴⁸

Here are Knitter's four types: (1) "the replacement model: only one true religion"; (2) "the fulfillment model: the one fulfills the many"; (3) "the mutuality model: many true religions called to dialogue"; (4) "the acceptance model: many true religions, so be

⁴⁸ See Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.

it.”⁴⁹ The replacement model, the fulfillment model and the mutuality model are clearly new names for exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism respectively; and, the new model is, as said, based on Heim’s work. That Knitter was willing to add a new model to the traditional three models shows that he was willing to take seriously the critics of religious pluralism, acknowledge an alternative to traditional religious pluralism, and move away from the traditional threefold typology.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel, on the other hand was satisfied that the traditional threefold typology could be salvaged, and in his contribution to *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, called “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology – Clarified and Reaffirmed,” he reworks and defends the traditional threefold typology. Schmidt-Leukel is of the view that the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism exhaust the religious possibilities for understanding religious diversity.

Schmidt-Leukel defines religion as having – at least but not exclusively – the property of *mediating a salvific knowledge of ultimate reality*,⁵⁰ and he argues that there are logically only four possible answers to the question of whether or not religion does, in fact, mediate salvific knowledge of ultimate reality.⁵¹ The first possible answer is “no” that it does not and this position is called (1) *atheism/naturalism*. The next three answers are all variations on a positive response to the question. The first of these affirms that

⁴⁹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, vii-x.

⁵⁰ Schmidt-Leukel, “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism,” 18-19; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

⁵¹ Some thinkers have adopted a “family resemblance” approach to the definition of religion such that something is not classified a religion by virtue having *all* of the common characteristics of religion have, but by having some characteristics of religion taken from a longer list of characteristics of religion, that no religion fulfils completely. This works on the same principle as using a cluster of symptoms associated with a disease to diagnose it. In this case, the patient need not have all of the symptoms to be diagnosed with the disease, and most patients with the disease will not have the same symptoms. See, Oxtoby, “The Nature of Religion,” for a typology along these lines. But, as far as I can tell, even if pluralists employ a looser working definition of religion like this one, they will always end up boiling it down to one thing that religions must have or must do – even if they have and do other things – and this one thing becomes the criteria for evaluating which phenomenon are religion and which are not.

“religions” do mediate salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality but further claims that there has been (and can be) only one instance of this. This view that there is only one religion is called (2) *exclusivism*. The final two positions are variations on the position that holds (a) that religions mediate salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality and (b) that there is more than one instance of religion. The first of these positions further claims that there is “one *singular maximus*” or one ultimate form of religion. This position is *inclusivism*. The second of these positions further claims there is no *singular maximus*. This is pluralism. (19)

Schmidt-Leukel also discusses and rejects various criticisms of the threefold typology, including Heim’s criticism that the threefold typology “does not do justice to the radical diversity of religions. (This is actually Heim’s criticism of pluralism; his criticism of the typology is that it is incoherent because everyone is an inclusivist.) In any case, Schmidt-Leukel criticizes Heim for making the faulty assumption that all of the types, including pluralism, rest on an “unequivocal” concept of salvation. Paul Griffiths makes this point most clearly when he criticizes John Hick’s pluralism for using a substantive rather than a formal definition of salvation. Hick says that salvation is turning from self-centredness to God-centeredness; a formal (or a more formal) definition would say that salvation is an ultimate religious end, however conceived. Schmidt-Leukel overcomes this problem in his reworking of the threefold typology by defining salvation, more formally, as salvific knowledge of ultimate reality. It is, however, disingenuous of Schmidt- Leukel to criticize Heim on this point because pluralists have typically employed substantive, or unequivocal, definitions of salvation, and didn’t seem to realize this until Heim and others pointed this out to them. Nonetheless, Schmidt-Leukel is right

in saying that pluralism does not need to hang its hat on a highly substantive definition of “salvation.” Compare Hick and Schmidt-Leukel on this point: For Schmidt –Leukel, pluralism is the claim that there is no “singular maximus” with respect to salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality (however this is defined.) Hick says that pluralism affirms that all of the great world religions are equally effective at turning people from self-centredness to God-centredness. Schmidt-Leukel’s religious end is more formal.

Schmidt-Leukel goes on to criticize Heim for ultimately claiming that Christianity supplies the superior religious end: “Thus, despite being real, the soteriological goals of other religions remain deficient and inferior, being at best related to some particular aspects of the comprehensive reality of the Trinity.” (26) Here, Schmidt-Leukel *accuses* Heim of being an inclusivist, and a rather mean-spirited one at that, and consequently feels justified in reaffirming the threefold typology: “He himself holds an inclusivism of the less generous sort, not allowing the non-Christian religions to lead their adherents to the highest eschatological fulfillment, or in total to a sort of hell, but to a new, post-modernist kind of pre-modern limbo.” (27)

In Part 2, we will review Heim’s Trinitarian theology of religions, where we will see that he bends over backwards to ascribe positive religious value to other religions; the other religious traditions know things about God better than Christians do, and Christians had better attend to this knowledge if they hope to attain salvation which is communion with all of the aspects of the Triune God. Heim never refers to these deep and rich religious traditions as “deficient” or “inferior” – these are being (falsely) attributed to Heim by a polemical pluralist for whom the very idea that there is a “singular maximus”

is, not just the defining characteristic of an alternative take on religious diversity, but a terrible error.

The pluralist critic, in this case, seems unwilling to admit any sense of degree. Heim's affirmation that other religions have knowledge of God that Christians need for salvation, is just as bad as Hegel saying that Hinduism, Buddhism and Persian religion (Zoroastrianism) are natural religions which are transcended in the spiritual religions of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews, which, in turn, are transcended by the consummate religion – Christianity. For Hegel, the non-Christian religions were simply inferior and transcended by Christianity; for Heim, the non-Christian religions are essential for salvation. Both are inclusivist but Heim clearly places a higher value on non-Christian religions than Hegel does. But for Schmidt-Leukel, the new inclusivism is just the old inclusivism.

In any case, in the minds of pluralists, they had stood their ground against the attacks of the neo-inclusivists. The neo-inclusivists were simply inclusivists, or worse, polyabsolutists; the threefold typology was on solid conceptual ground; and, pluralism was not an imposed Western language but the universal language of open and tolerant interfaith dialogue.

David Ray Griffin, likewise, envisioned deep religious pluralism – and specifically Whitehead's pluralistic metaphysics – as the common language of religious traditions. Thus, *Deep Religious Pluralism* includes Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish versions of deep religious pluralism. And, like, traditional pluralism, deep religious pluralism is polemical towards other languages: identist pluralism is a

superficial wrong turn and neo-inclusivism is a conceptually confused state, unable to distinguish itself from traditional inclusivism.⁵²

Both traditional pluralists and deep pluralists see themselves as the vanguard of the pluralism movement; they are critical and dismissive of each other,⁵³ and use their own language as the common language of future interfaith interactions.

Similarly, the neo-inclusivists harbour negative feelings towards their main competitors, and contend that their language is the most conducive to open and tolerant interfaith relations. Neo-inclusivists continue to dismiss traditional pluralism as unreal and not very pluralist, and presumably will follow D'Costa's pattern in criticizing Panikkar's work for not being properly Trinitarian, i.e., not properly Christian.⁵⁴

We will for now move on to the final chapter of Part 1 where we will argue in favour of a "new" fourfold typology for theories and theologies of religious diversity. This typology will include the following four types: 1) exclusivism, 2) (neo) inclusivism, 3) traditional pluralism, and 3) deep pluralism.

⁵² See Griffin, ed. *Deep Religious Pluralism*.

⁵³ I am assuming that traditional pluralists will respond to deep pluralism, the same way they have responded to Heim's "ultra-pluralism."

⁵⁴ D'Costa criticised Panikkar for "chopping up the Trinity" (communicated to the author in a personal email).

3

A Fourfold Typology for Theories of Religious Diversity

1. The Idea of “True Religion”

The idea of true religion is at the base of the classic threefold typology. For Race true religion is salvific religion; for Schmidt-Perry true religion is salvific knowledge of ultimate reality. Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are truth claims about true religion. In Race's typology, exclusivism claims that there is only one true religion, inclusivism claims that there are many relatively true religions but only one absolutely true religion, and pluralism claims that there are multiple true religions. In Schmidt-Leukel's typology, exclusivism claims that only one religion has the property of mediating salvific knowledge of ultimate reality; inclusivism claims that many religions have this property but there is only one religion that mediates salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality maximally or absolutely; and, pluralism claims that no one religion mediates salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality absolutely and, therefore, there are many instances of equally valid religion.

Paul Knitter uses the idea of true religions explicitly in his new fourfold typology in *Theologies of Religions*. His four types or four models are summarized as follows: 1) The replacement model: only one true religion. 2) The fulfillment model: the one [true religion] fulfils the many. 3) The mutuality model: many true religions called to dialogue. 4) The acceptance model: many true religions, so be it. In each case a different answer is formed about the commonly understood theme of true religion.

The fourfold typology that I will now propose adopts the idea of true religion as its base.¹ I will do this in order to capture religious forms, religious essences, religious ends, religious universals and religious norms. These notions are often conflated by those who produce theories and theologies of religions – but this does not matter so long as it is understood that the essence, the end, the universal, etc. is taken to be “true religion.” It will be assumed that all theories of religions – or all answers to questions about true religion – have a common understanding about what is meant by true religion, even if all will have a different take on how exactly true religion should be understood.²

Thus, when a pluralist says that there are many true religions and an exclusivist says there is only one true religion, these differences cannot be reconciled by saying that they are working with a totally different sense of what is meant by true religion – even if they change its “common” sense in framing their positions. It is never the case that exclusivists don’t understand what pluralists mean when they say that there are many true religions, or that pluralists don’t understand what exclusivists mean when they say that there is only one religion; they understand each other but reject each others claims about true religion (which, again, will likely involve modifying exactly what this means).

The notion of true religion is the common language of the dominant players in the pluralism drama that emerged in the twentieth century in the Christian West – the players that will be discussed in Part 2. All of these Christian authors employ an understanding of true religion even if they employ different dialects; the main dialects being true religion as form, essence, end, universal, and norm.

¹ In making this designation I am not linking true religion with making true propositional statements – even though someone might claim that a true religion as one that makes only true propositional statements.

² I don’t know if some concept of true religion is necessary for a theory of religions, but such an idea is present in all of the theorists examined in this work.

In making this decision we are fully aware that some perspectives are being excluded from this particular discussion of religious diversity. For example, the latter Ernst Troeltsch, who gave up on the idea of true religion, will be excluded. When I say that Troeltsch gave up on the idea of true religion, I mean he gave up on the idea that a particular understanding of religion could be recognised as true by *everyone*. In the end, Troeltsch gave up on this idea even if the common understanding of religion was derived from historical study of religions rather than metaphysical reflection or dogmatic theology. Religious truth is just too culture specific to identify one particular form of religion as universally normative; Troeltsch didn't even think about the possibility that all of the "great world religions" might be validated as equally true.

Religious relativism is simply a different language from the language of true religion adopted by traditional pluralists, neo-inclusivists, and metaphysical pluralists, and therefore this typology – which assumes the idea of true religion as its base – does not account for relativistic approaches to religious diversity.

The idea of true religion also excludes several post-modern thinkers who reject, not only the idea of true religion but also, the very idea of religion. For example, religious studies scholar Russell T. McCutcheon, says that religion (as a communicable reality) does not have a transcendental referent and, therefore, cannot be regarded as a sui generis reality radically distinct from other cultural realities or constructs.³ Similarly, Timothy Fitzgerald argues that religious studies as an academic discipline is indefensible because there is no identifiable reality called religion that can ground it.⁴ Such thinkers would not

³ See McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*.

⁴ See Fitzgerald, *Ideology of Religious Studies*.

involve themselves in a project that involves making truth claims about true religion, and consequently are not serious participants in this particular conversation.

Pluralism has rarely been linked with post-modernism, and its frequent corollary naturalism which denies transcendental reality or at least the possibility of using it as a meaningful referent. Moreover, those in the pluralism discourse - traditional pluralists, neo-inclusivists, and deep pluralists consciously reject the deeper insights of some post-modernists who challenge the very idea of religion. John Hick identifies his position as religious rather than naturalist; David Ray Griffin, rejects forms of naturalism that are sensationalist, atheist, and materialist; and Paul Griffiths has written several articles that are positively hostile to this post-modern idea.⁵

This does not mean that those who are not willing to speak the language of “true religion” have nothing valuable to say about religious diversity or that their insights would not lead to better interreligious understandings – it’s just that they are speaking a different language from the one spoken by Christian pluralists, and the discussion here is primarily about different ideas about true religion.

Likewise, it does not mean those who are employing the notions of “true religion” in radically different ways – different from the Christian and Western notions of true religion as form, essence, end, universal, and norm – have nothing to add to a richer conversation about religious diversity.

In any case, the new fourfold typology that I will now develop is self-consciously grounded in the idea of true religion in the same way that Race's threefold typology is, Schmidt-Leukel's threefold typology is, and Paul Knitter's fourfold typology is.

⁵ See Griffiths, “The Very Idea of Religion”; Griffiths, “Review of Manufacturing Religion”; Griffiths, “Offer Declined.” All post-modernists are, of course, not also naturalists - Emmanuel Levinas for example.

2. The Argument of Religious Exclusivism

Gavin D'Costa believes that religious pluralism and religious inclusivism share the same logic as religious exclusivism. I disagree with this but do believe it is important to understand the premises, conclusion, and logic of religious exclusivism – or, really, its argument. Both religious inclusivism and religious pluralism reject the conclusion of religious exclusivism that there is only one religion; consequently, neither of these positions can accept the argument of religious exclusivism either.

The presumed argument (premises, conclusion, and logic) of religious exclusivism is captured by John Hick in his preface to *the Metaphor of God Incarnate*:

The traditional Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth is that he was God incarnate, who became a man to die for the sins of the world and who founded the church to proclaim this. If he was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions.⁶

It is not, however, possible to see the full argument, until we see the unstated premise that Hick simply takes as true and understood; namely that God is one. Hick has never felt the need to defend the idea that God, or to use his preferred term “the Real,” is one or singular, and did not do so until he responded to Mark Heim after the turn of the century:

I suggest that the best religious account we can give of the global situation is that of a single ineffable Ultimate Reality whose universal presence is being

⁶ Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, IX.

differently conceived and experienced and responded to within the different human religious traditions.⁷

Denying that Ultimate Reality is single leaves only one incoherent option – claiming that all of the “God-figures and non-personal absolutes” are equally real. Such would be polytheism and “polyabsolutism.” Hick doesn’t elaborate on why this is a bad thing, but it clearly is in his mind.

In any case, when we see Hick's assumed premise we can see the argument of religious exclusivism – or at least the argument of exclusivists as perceived by Hick. The two premises of religious exclusivism are as follows: 1) God is one, and 2) a particular form of religion is God. And, by the force of simple transitive logic – if A=B and B=C then A=C – it comes to the conclusion that a particular form of religion, like God, is one. Or more accurately, this particular religion is, like God, one and only (exclusive). The idea of oneness according to this mode of thought excludes the possibility of seeing the one religion identified with God as one among others: *The* religious form identified with God is wholly other and wholly exclusive to all else, just as God is. Troeltsch provided a useful insight when he distinguished this position from absolutism – which assumes the reality of relative religions in contrast to the absolute religion – by calling it *supernatural exclusivism*.

This is one way to look at the argument of religious exclusivism, and it is evident that this is how John Hick understood “the logic” of exclusivism, or the exclusivist argument. The other way to look at Christian exclusivism is in explicitly trinitarian terms.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity states that God is both one and three, and that the Persons of the Trinity are God the Father, God the Son (the divine Logos), and

⁷ Hick, “Next Step beyond Dialogue,” 12.

God the Holy Spirit. Trinitarians reject the idea that God can be reduced to one aspect of the Trinitarian God, and they also reject the idea that trinitarianism is tri-theism.⁸

Within the trinitarian framework there is absolute identity between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Within the Christian tradition Jesus Christ is conceived as the incarnate form of God the Son, and his church is conceived as his body. Thus, the church (or Christianity) is a part of the Holy Trinity which, although three, is also singular and exclusive.

In both arguments, a particular form of Christianity is conceived as the only or exclusive religion.

Karl Barth, our representative exclusivist from above, can be understood in terms of either argument. Barth was a trinitarian: Christ is the incarnation of the Logos; the true church is his body. The true church is identified with the life of the Triune God and, therefore, is the only religion. The transitive argument can also be employed: God is one; Christ and his body are God; therefore, Christ and his body are one.

3. The Differences between Religious Exclusivism and Religious Inclusivism

I will now try to show that Christian inclusivism does not employ the same argument as Christian exclusivism. Here I will follow the insight of Ernst Troeltsch who said that exclusivism (the supernatural apologetic) follows the logic of “absolute” form (the incarnation of the Logos), and inclusivism (the evolutionary apologetic) follows the logic of essence and content.

Inclusivism, like pluralism, is an attempt to escape the argument of religious exclusivism; its way of doing this is by conceptualising an idea of religion that transcends

⁸ Oxtoby, “The Christian Tradition,” 227-230.

all particular forms of religion. It is similar to exclusivism insofar as it employs a very similar argument; but instead of seeing true religion as a particular form of religion it sees true religion as an idea of religion – specifically the idea of true religion as essence. For Hegel this is the idea of the consummate religion; for Schleiermacher it is the idea of mediation as the highest intuitions of the universe; for Tillich it is the religion of the concrete spirit. In all three cases, no particular religion is true religion except insofar as it conforms to the idea or the essence of religion; and, conversely, every particular religion is true religion to the extent that it conforms to the essence of religion. The religion that conforms perfectly to the essence of religion is absolutely true, as compared with other religions that are only relatively true. Or, in cases where it is admitted that no one particular religion conforms perfectly to the essence, the religion that comes closest to the essence is conceived as being the relatively best religion.

Thus, inclusivism, by abstracting religion from all particular forms of religion, introduces an element into thinking about religious diversity that is absent in religious exclusivism. Exclusivism thinks in terms of the only religion; inclusivism thinks in terms of the absolute religion opposed to the relative religions, or of the best opposed to lesser forms of religion. Other notions, that are born of this idea include: the superior religion as compared to the inferior religions, the highest religion as compared to the lower religions; the most evolved religion as compared to the more primitive religions, the ultimate religion as compared to the penultimate and elementary religions, and so forth.

A variation on the logic of essence and content is the logic of means to an end. This is the logic employed by Karl Rahner. For Rahner, Christianity, like other religions, is a means to the end of salvation which he conceives as the attainment of the beatific

vision. Here the religious end is explicitly Christian, but it does the same work as an essence, in that it allows different particular forms of religion to be conceived as religion. And, like content-essence logic, means-end logic allows for the possibility of thinking about religiosity in degrees. There is lower implicit Christian faith as compared with higher explicit Christian faith; there is unconscious faith opposed to fully conscious faith, and so on. Here too, the ultimate religious end, functions in the same way as *the* particular religious form in religious exclusivism; it is one and only; the difference being that this one and only is the endpoint for all particular religions, and not a particular religion.

The main difference between exclusivism and inclusivism, then, is that the former identifies a particular form of religion with God and the latter identifies a particular idea of religion with God or absolute religious fulfilment. Exclusivism creates the sense that the particular form of religion identified with God is exclusively religious; inclusivism creates the sense that all religions have relative worth, up to the point of absoluteness, to the degree that they manifest the essence or lead to the ultimate end of religion. Thus, inclusivism employs the exact same argument as exclusivism, but what it sees as exclusively religious is not a particular form of religion, but an idea of religion that can enfold multiple particular religions.

In the same way that Karl Barth can be identified as an exclusivist within this emerging typology, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner can be identified as inclusivists within it. Tillich employs the logic of essence-content, and Rahner employs the logic of means to an end. Tillich's essence of religion is the religion of the concrete spirit, and though he could not see an absolute fulfilment of the essence in the history of religions, he was able

to see a highest form of this in St. Paul's doctrine of the Spirit. Karl Rahner's ultimate religious end is the beatific vision. Christianity, in implicit forms and explicit form, is the means to this ultimate religious end, (even if explicit Christian faith gives one a better chance of realizing the end).

It can also be argued that the same transitive argument used by exclusivists is also used by inclusivists; the only difference being that a concept of religion rather than a particular form of religion is being identified with God. In this case, the ultimate form of religion is one and only because it is identified with God, and God is one and only. But in the case of Christian inclusivism, I suggest that "Trinitarian logic" is more helpful for understanding what is going on. In all forms of Christian inclusivism that we have examined, and will examine, the ideal of communion with God – be it in explicitly Christian and triune terms or more philosophical terms – is the essence of religion or the ultimate end of religion. We see this explicitly in Mark Heim's ideal of communion with the Triune God, in Gavin D'Costa's ideal of the Kingdom of God, and in Rahner's ideal of the beatific vision. And we see it implicitly in Paul Tillich's ideal of concrete spirit, in Schleiermacher's ideal of mediation; in Hegel's ideal of the consummate religion as "consciousness of essence," and even in Troeltsch's ideal of personalistic religion.

In all cases, religious fulfilment is realized in communion with the Trinity or participation in the trinitarian structure of Reality. And in all cases fulfilment is, in the end, one and only in the same sense that the Trinity is one and only.

4. The Differences between Religious Inclusivism and Religious Pluralism, and between the Different Types of Religious Pluralism

Pluralists and inclusivists, alike, are willing to concede that exclusivism and inclusivism are close relatives – even though they frequently miss or don't acknowledge the conceptual move made by inclusivists to avoid the harshest implications of exclusivism. Troeltsch, of course, noticed, and this is why he is still relevant to this discussion. But, in contrast, pluralists see pluralism as something radically distinct from inclusivism/exclusivism – as a bold shift to a new paradigm. While neo-inclusivists argue that there is really no such thing as pluralism at all; pluralisms are just religiously anaemic versions of inclusivism or exclusivism.

As mentioned in the historical outline in Chapter 1, pluralists have fired back at this dismissal of religious pluralism by the neo-inclusivists. Thus, before trying to articulate the differences between religious inclusivism and religious pluralism, we will review the two most thorough-going attempts to defend the idea of religious pluralism. Specifically we will review David Ray Griffin's "Religious Pluralism: Generic Identist and Deep," and Perry Leukel- Schmidt's "Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism the Tripolar Typology – Clarified and Reaffirmed."

David Ray Griffin's Defence of Religious Pluralism

David Ray Griffin argues that the acceptance of religious pluralism requires two affirmations. The first of these is negative and is the rejection of religious absolutism which he says entails an a priori assumption that one's own religious tradition is "the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents, that it alone is divinely inspired, that it has been divinely established as the only legitimate religion, intended to

replace all others.”⁹ The second affirmation, in contrast, is positive and is the idea that religions, apart from one’s own, provide saving truths and values to their adherents. For Griffin, this is the essence of religious pluralism in the generic sense, meaning that all forms of religious pluralism are built upon this foundation even though there are different types of religious pluralism. (3)

Griffin believes that religious pluralism is vitally important to the future of humanity, insofar as it is able to promote mutual respect and cooperation among the religions of the world, which in turn can motivate the peoples of the world to transform human civilization in a positive way. He also believes that the embrace of pluralism is especially important for Christians, since Christianity has traditionally tended towards absolutism, and this tendency combined with the current economic, military, and cultural strength of those who are Christians creates a situation that is especially ripe for violence and exploitation. And this, in part, explains why most of Griffin’s discussion of religious pluralism revolves around Christianity, even though his arguments would presumably hold in different religious contexts. (3-4)

Griffin argues that in order for Christians to embrace religious pluralism - in the generic sense - they must reject Christian absolutism, and he identifies two forms of Christian absolutism: exclusivism and inclusivism. According to absolutism only Christians can be saved, and according to inclusivism, those in other traditions may be saved in the context of their own tradition but only because salvation has been effected in this tradition by Jesus Christ. (5)

As discussed, at the beginning of this chapter, David Griffin suggests four main bases for the emergence and growth of Christian pluralism: sociological, theological,

⁹ Griffin, “Religious Pluralism,” 3; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

ethical, and ontological. For Griffin, the ontological shift from supernaturalism to naturalism was the most significant of these, and so I will continue here with Griffin's discussion related to naturalism as distinct from supernaturalism. (12-13)

Griffith is reluctant to make a strong correlation between naturalism and pluralism without first qualifying what exactly he means by naturalism. Griffin distinguishes the naturalism embraced by pluralism from another type of naturalism that he calls Naturalism SAM. The S here stands for sensory perception or the belief that non-physical or non-sensory perception is impossible; the A stands for an atheistic worldview; and, the M stands for a materialistic world view that identifies the brain with the body and therefore rejects any possibility of life after bodily death. Griffin does not accept that rejecting the idea of supernaturalism, in the sense of a divine being interrupting the causal processes of the world, is dependent on accepting sensationism, atheism, and/or materialism. He contends that it is possible to be a naturalist in the more limited sense of rejecting the idea that the world's natural causal processes are susceptible to being interrupted, and he calls this form of naturalism NS, (wherein NS stands for nonsupernaturalist). (13-14)

Griffin goes on to say that naturalism NS is a negative ontological doctrine insofar as it asserts that events of certain types never take place – for example natural miracles – but more important for our concerns here he also maintains that naturalism NS serves as the foundation for religious pluralism. And even though he does not go so far as to claim a necessary relation between pluralism and naturalism NS, he does maintain that there is a very strong correlation between the two. Griffin provides proof of this

correlation by showing its presence in the work of several prominent pluralists including John Hick, Paul Knitter, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Cobb.

Hick, for example, has reinterpreted traditional Christian doctrines, especially the Incarnation and Trinity, to make Christianity compatible with pluralism (i.e., with naturalism NS). For Hick, these doctrines suggest “that Christianity, alone among all the religions, was founded by God in person,” (34) and, according to Griffin, these represent a supernaturalistic Christology that guarantees the *a priori* superiority of Christianity. In addition, Hick has also reinterpreted the supernaturalistic doctrine of salvation (or Christianity’s soteriological supernaturalism) whereby Christian salvation “involves a divine decision, based on arbitrary standards, that saves one from eternal damnation.”

(16) For Hick, salvation entails the human act of turning one’s attention from the self to The Real and being morally transformed by this. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has likewise moved away from supernaturalism and towards naturalism as epitomized in his view that to believe God constructed or authored Christianity or the Church is idolatry; instead, it is more accurate to think of religious traditions (and not just Christianity) as constructed by humans who were inspired by God. (59) Likewise, Griffin cites Paul Knitter’s, very explicit rejection of the supernatural foundation of religion and his affirmation that all religions are necessarily limited by their historical specificity as an example of the naturalistic foundation of pluralism: “Although each religion is a manifestation of the Absolute, there can be no absolute religion. This is of the very nature of historical process: it allows no absolutes, it admits only individual, concrete and therefore relative realities. No religion can affirm that it stands above this all-embracing relativity...No religion can entirely step outside history.” (26) In other words, Christianity did not

descend directly from God in perfect form, which would justify the claims of exclusivists. John Cobb, likewise, rejects supernatural Christologies – wherein Jesus is viewed as the transcendent, all-powerful ruler of the world walking about the earth in human form – and encourages Christians to embrace and integrate (into Christianity) universal scientific truths, including the truth of naturalism that says the normal causal processes of the world are never interrupted.

But despite his belief that it is very important for religious communities to embrace naturalism NS and religious pluralism, Griffin also believes that pluralism has gone down the wrong path in its development. Thus, he introduces S. Mark Heim's critique of pluralism and largely concurs with the main points of Heim's critique of pluralist theologies of religions: 1) that they presume a false neutrality when they are really Christian theology capitulated to the modern Western critique of religion; 2) that they are not really Christian on account of their modernist reinterpretation of fundamental Christian doctrines; 3) that they are not really pluralist since they presume a quintessential form for all religions; and, 4) that they entail a "debilitating relativism."¹⁰ (21-35)

However, he also argues that this critique only applies to one type of pluralism, or one genus of the species pluralism and not the entire species. And, here, he introduces a distinction between identist/superficial pluralism and differential/deep pluralism. Identist and differential pluralism are both grounded in the rejection of absolutism and naturalism NS, but both forms of pluralism have different ontological and soteriological theses about how the various religions are related to one another.

¹⁰ John Cobb defined conceptual relativism (which he deemed to be "debilitating") as a situation in which "each tradition is best judged by its own norm and there is no normative critique of norms" (Cobb, "Beyond 'Pluralism'," 85).

According to identist pluralism, all religions are oriented towards the same religious object, even if this object goes by different names in different traditions; moreover, all religions are oriented towards the same religious end (or the same form of “salvation.”) In other words, there is a quintessential form of religion – with the same origin and the same terminal – that all religions participate in, albeit in different forms. Thus, the religious plurality in this form of pluralism is relatively superficial because all religions are simply different forms of the same thing. Griffin notes that Hick, Smith, and Knitter are all identist pluralists. (24)

According to differential pluralism, different religions promote or seek different ends or different forms of salvation. And, they may also be directed towards different religious objects, possibly thought of as different ultimates. Thus, differential pluralism is pluralist soteriologically and perhaps also ontologically, and suggests that religions are different at a very deep level. (24)

Thus, Griffin does not entirely agree with Heim in his contention that identist pluralists are not really pluralist; instead, his point is that they are pluralist insofar as they reject absolutism and supernaturalism and promote the value of religious traditions other than their own, but their pluralism is relatively superficial on account of the claim that all authentic religions are essentially the same in their ontology and soteriology. For Griffin, identist pluralists are real pluralists, and are even to be lauded for their efforts to move Christianity away from absolutism, but they also represent the “wrong turn” mentioned earlier. For Griffin, differential or deep religious pluralism represents the vanguard of the pluralism movement, since it is a deeper more pluralistic form of religious pluralism.

For Griffin, Heim's own efforts to construct a pluralistic theology of religions apparently belong within the deep pluralism movement, (24) even though Heim was evidently not able to conceptualize the nature of his efforts. Nonetheless, for Griffin, John Cobb stands out as the prime representative of deep religious pluralism. As mentioned, Cobb was originally asked to contribute to the *Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, but declined this offer on account of his reservations about the idea (held by other contributors to the volume) that religion has a "normative essence," that can be used to evaluate religions. Cobb was not convinced that all religions had the same end, or even the same origin. Consequently, he contributed to the critical volume that followed *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. Cobb's critique, again, was not against pluralism per se but against the narrow way in which it was being defined.¹¹

Griffin's critique of pluralism, and his re-conceptualization of it, stems from the same misgiving about "traditional" forms of religious pluralism that Cobb had. And, I believe it is largely successful in making a case for pluralisms such as Cobb's which ground religious pluralism in both deep soteriological differences and deep ontological differences in religions.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Defence of Religious Pluralism and its Threefold Typology

As discussed above, Schmidt-Leukel defines religion as having the property of *mediating a salvific knowledge of ultimate reality*,¹² and he argues that there are logically only four possible answers to the question of whether a religion does in fact mediate salvific knowledge of ultimate reality. The first possible answer is "no" that it does not and this

¹¹ Cobb, "Beyond 'Pluralism'," 81.

¹² Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," 18-19; cited in text by page number hereafter.

position is called (1) *atheism/naturalism*. The next three answers are all variations on a positive response to the question. The first of these affirms that “religions” do mediate salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality but further claims that there has been (and can be) only one instance of this. This view that there is only one religion is called (2) *exclusivism*. The final two positions are variations on the position that holds (a) that religions mediate salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality and (b) that there is more than one instance of religion. The first of these positions further claims that there is “one *singular maximus*” or one ultimate form of religion. This position is *inclusivism*. The second of these positions further claims there is no *singular maximus*. This is pluralism.

(19) Following is Schmidt-Leukel’s account of the four types:

(0)¹³ *Atheism/Naturalism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by none of the religions (because a transcendent reality does not exist).

(1) *Exclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion (which naturally will be one’s own).

(2) *Inclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), but only one of these mediates it in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one’s own).

(3) *Pluralism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them whose mediation of that knowledge is superior to all the rest. (19-20)

For Schmidt-Leukel, each of these positions says something about true religion which is defined in terms of having the property of mediating salvific knowledge of

¹³ Schmidt-Leukel identifies atheist/naturalism as the “0” position to emphasize that there are only three *religious* responses to the question of whether or not religion mediates salvific knowledge of Ultimate Reality; it also helps to preserve the traditional threefold quality of the typology.

ultimate reality. Naturalism says there is not religion in this sense, and is therefore dismissed as a nonreligious response. Exclusivism says there is only one true religion; inclusivism says there are many true religions but one that is uniquely superior to the rest; pluralism says there are many true religions. Leukel- Schmidt continues his argument by showing what each of these positions looks like in the context of Christian theology:

Christian exclusivism, would mean saving revelation is found only within Christianity and not within any other religion. This does not necessarily entail that all non-Christians are lost. Soft or moderate exclusivists could hold that there are ways by which God could save non-Christians *as individuals* (for example, through post-mortem encounter with the gospel).

Christian inclusivism would hold that non-Christian religions sometimes entail elements of revelation and grace that are capable of supporting salvific life. But since – according to Christian inclusivism – all salvation is finally through Christ, the revelation to which Christianity testifies is in a unique sense superior to any other form of knowledge of God, which in comparison with the Christian revelation remains necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, implicit, obscure.

Christian Pluralism would entail that some other religions – usually the major world religions (but perhaps only one other religion) – are in a theological sense on par with Christianity. According to Christian pluralism these other religions testify to the same ultimate transcendent reality despite the different forms this testimony takes, and they do so with the same genuine authenticity and equal salvific potential. (21)

In this tradition- specific version of the typology, Christianity, as the home religion, is identified with true religion; as the only religion (exclusivism), the best religion (inclusivism), and one among many true religions (pluralism).

Insights from David Ray Griffin and Perry Schmidt-Leukel

Schmidt-Leukel differentiates inclusivism and pluralism on the basis of a claim that each makes with respect to true religion. Inclusivism says that there are many forms of true religion but, among these, there is a singular maximus. Pluralism, like inclusivism, says that there are many forms of true religion but, among these, there is no singular maximus. Moreover there are implications following from these claims.

The claim that there is a singular maximus – which according to Schmidt-Leukel will always be identified with the home religion – leads to the conclusion that the home religion is the uniquely superior, or the best religion. The claim that there is no singular maximus, in contrast, leads to the conclusion that at least some other religions are on par with the home religion with respect to being true; which here means being productive of salvific knowledge of ultimate reality. (It is assumed here that the home religion is a true religion.)

I am in superficial agreement with Schmidt-Leukel that inclusivism and pluralism can be differentiated in terms of the former postulating a singular maximus, and the latter in rejecting the idea of a singular maximus – and, here, I understand a “singular maximus” to be the same thing as a singular absolute religious essence or an ultimate religious end.¹⁴ But Schmidt-Leukel does not adequately explain how the pluralist gets

¹⁴ Later on, I will make it clear where Schmidt-Leukel and I differ in distinguishing between inclusivism and pluralism.

from rejecting the idea of a singular maximus, to the positive idea that there are many true religions. It seems just as plausible that one could come to the conclusion that there are no true religions. Thus, pluralists must necessarily be taking another step in order to arrive at the conclusion that there are many true religions; and, for understanding this step Griffin's defence of pluralism is more helpful than Schmidt-Leukel's.

If we begin by limiting our discussion to identist pluralism, Griffin says that this form of pluralism involves the (generic) rejection of absolutism and affirmation of the value of other religious traditions. But, the means for validating the truth of other religions is, for identist pluralists, the identification of a religious commonality. This religious commonality allows (identist) pluralists to affirm the truth of at least some other religions, and avoid the undesirable consequence of a "debilitating relativism." But this is the sticking point on which the neo-inclusivists have argued that pluralists are just like exclusivists or inclusivists; the religious commonality excludes certain religions from the category of true religion (like exclusivism), and it includes religions in the category of true only so long as they conform to the religious commonality (like inclusivism).

Griffin argues that the identification of a religious commonality is what makes pluralism superficial. It doesn't acknowledge the truth of different religions with respect to their deep differences, only their shared commonality; something like recognising the differences between a chocolate ice cream cone and a strawberry ice cream cone. Deep religious pluralism overcomes this problem by grounding religious diversity not, in a religious commonality, but in the deep structural differences inherent to Ultimate reality.

I agree with Griffin that a pluralistic metaphysics is at the heart of what he calls deep religious pluralism and what I will, henceforth, call *metaphysical religious pluralism*. But I am only in partial agreement with his analysis of identist pluralism.

First, I suggest that the rejection of the idea that religion can be identified with God, or even with a divine concept of religion – an absolute religious essence or ultimate religious end – is a defining characteristic of identist pluralism. The idea of strong identity between God and religion is present in forms of Christian exclusivism wherein Christ is identified with God as one person of the Triune God, and by extension the Church as the body of Christ is also identified with God. And, it is present in forms of Christian inclusivism wherein religion is fulfilled in an ultimate end or an absolute essence – an end which is ultimate because it is communion with the Triune God, or an essence which is absolute because it is the consummation of the trinitarian movement of existence.¹⁵ Let us briefly consider the case of John Hick as representative.

John Hick is not a Trinitarian but a Unitarian, and though he gave some theological attention to rejecting the idea of God as Trinity, he was more concerned with rejecting the idea of the incarnation of Christ. Returning to the passage quoted above, if God founded Christianity, then there is no question for Hick that Christianity is the one and only religion. Hick comes to this conclusion by assuming that God or Ultimate Reality is one. If God is one and Christ is God, then Christianity as the body of Christ must be God – and, like God, exclusive and wholly other. Therefore Hick must reject the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ in order to avoid the conclusion that Christianity is exclusively true.

¹⁵ See Lai, *Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, especially Chapter 9, and Tillich, *Systematic Theology III* to see how Tillich understood “the Trinity” as a way of thinking about the movement from essence to existence rather than as “stagnant” Persons.

In other words, John Hick must reject the idea that religion can be identified with the Real, or with some sort of ultimate/absolute participation in the Real; otherwise, religion like the Real is one and only. I will call concepts of religion that posit a strong identity between religion and God, “divine religion.” Hick rejects the idea of divine religion – that is the ground of all forms of exclusivism and inclusivism – and posits, instead, a humanistic concept of religion. A humanistic concept of religion rejects the idea of strong identity between God and religion. For Hick, religion is *human* perception and conception, of Ultimate Reality that can never be identified with Ultimate Reality as such. The referent of religion is the Real but it never becomes the Real.

Thus, we can say that the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and humanity – and a humanistic concept of religion – is characteristic of “identist” pluralism. And, thus, we will call identist pluralistic *humanistic religious pluralism*.

Second, I also disagree with Griffin’s characterization of humanistic religious pluralism as superficial because it reduces all religions to a commonality – or, at least I suggest that we can say something more precise about this commonality.

I believe Perry Schmidt-Leukel is right in his assertion that pluralists reject the notion of a singular maximus, or a singular ultimate religious end or essence. Thus, we can conclude that the common religious reality identified by humanistic religious pluralists is not a singular maximus. A singular maximus is a particular religious end or essence that is not exclusively identified with any particular religious tradition, but is the singular fulfilment for all religious persons and all religions.

Humanistic religious pluralists reject, in principle, the idea that there is a *singular* fulfilment for all religious persons and all religions; and the accompanying idea of divine

religion. Thus, the religious commonality identified by humanistic religious pluralists cannot be the singular fulfilment of all religious persons and all religious traditions; it cannot be an absolute essence and it cannot be an ultimate end.

What is it then? I suggest that that it is best understood as a religious *universal* that takes shape in multiple forms in the various religious traditions. This is the main difference between inclusivists and humanistic religious pluralists: the religious commonality for inclusivists is an absolute essence or an ultimate end, and the religious commonality for humanistic pluralists is a universal that is the ground of multiple particular religious expressions.

The inclusivist's religious commonality is the divine and singular end point of religion; the humanistic pluralist's religious commonality is the "origin" of religion. Religious diversity comes to an end in the inclusivist's commonality; religious diversity has its beginning in the humanistic pluralist's commonality.

To be sure, a religious universal excludes some things from the category of being religious by limiting what can be counted as a religion (by virtue of participating in the universal). But all religions are not collapsed into one fulfilment the way they are with an ultimate end or an absolute essence; rather, they simply express the universal in a diversity of ways. Thus, true religion, or the religious commonality, functions similarly to universal virtues such as kindness – kindness is something that we only see in particular acts and every act of kindness no matter what it looks like is equally an act of kindness.

Humanistic religious pluralism rejects the idea of a supernaturally revealed and exclusive religion, as well as the idea of a singular absolute essence or a singular ultimate end; instead, it employs the idea of a religious universal which finds equal expression in

the various religions of the world. Thus, we will also refer to humanistic religious pluralism as *humanistic-universalistic religious pluralism*.¹⁶

As for the other type of religious pluralism – metaphysical religious pluralism – it also rejects the idea of a supernaturally revealed and exclusive religion, and the idea of a *singular* absolute essence or a *singular* ultimate end; instead it employs the idea of a pluralistic absolute essence or a pluralistic ultimate end, which allows it to affirm the equality of different religions with respect to their deepest differences. Instead of rejecting the idea of divine religion, like humanistic pluralism does, it rejects the idea of a unitary metaphysics. Here, we are still in agreement with Schmidt-Leukel that pluralism rejects the idea of a singular maximus but, in this case, it is the idea of “singular” rather than “maximus” that is rejected. Humanistic pluralists reject the “maximus,” and so posit a religious universal which generates religious diversity, rather than bring it to an end. Metaphysical pluralists reject the “singular,” and so posit a “pluralistic maximus” that never collapses into a singular.

Metaphysical pluralists can conceive of a “pluralistic metaphysics” in different ways. Cobb and Griffin employ a Whiteheadian metaphysics that conceives of Ultimate Reality as having three different aspects, wherein each “Ultimate Reality” is capable of generating a different, but potentially equal, ultimate religious experience. Stephen Kaplan’s metaphysical model of Ultimate Reality allows reality to be seen from three different perspectives - each prospective is of the same reality and therefore equally true. My own version of metaphysical pluralism employs the tripartite metaphysics of British mathematician George Spencer Brown. Using this metaphysics, the totality of Reality is conceived as a tripartite structure that can be perceived, necessarily differently, from each

¹⁶ In most cases, I will use the short form of “humanistic pluralism.”

of its three different aspects. Each different perspective offers an equally true vision of the same Reality, but a different vision since each is constructed from a different vantage point within the same Reality.

If the problem of religious exclusivism is summarised as a transitive argument – wherein God is one and only, religion is God, and therefore religion is one and only – metaphysical pluralism attacks the problem from the opposite side of humanistic pluralism. Humanistic pluralism challenges the notion that religion can be God or that there can be strong identity between religion and God – and, it uses this idea to avoid the conclusion that religion, like God, is one and only. From the other side, metaphysical pluralism challenges the notion that God or Ultimate Reality is one. Its basic argument, expressed in similar terms, is that Ultimate Reality is plural, religion is identified with Ultimate reality, and therefore religion, like Ultimate Reality, is plural.

It might be asked if the positing of a tripartite Ultimate Reality, is not just a philosophical version of the Trinitarian God. This would account for the profound similarities that will be seen between, for example, my tripartite theory of religious diversity, and Mark Heim's Trinitarian theory of religious diversity. The main difference between these two is that the Trinitarian theology collapses all ends into a singular (Christian) end; whereas the tripartite philosophy insists that there is no ultimate perspective that unites all perspectives.

Both humanistic religious pluralism and metaphysical religious pluralism, make a radical departure from traditional Christian doctrine. Humanistic religious pluralism rejects the strong identity between Christ and his Body (Christianity) and God, i.e., it rejects the doctrine of the incarnation in order to avoid the conclusion that Christianity

like God is one and only. Metaphysical religious pluralism rejects the idea that Ultimate Reality is one, i.e., it rejects the doctrine of the Trinity in order to avoid the conclusion that religion finds its consummation in a singular essence or end, or in communion with the Triune God.

It is therefore not surprising that religious pluralism is rejected by traditional Christians. And not only by exclusivist Christians who claim that Christianity is the one and only religion, but also by old and new inclusivists who also reject exclusivism by rejecting the idea that religion as such is tied to a particular form of religion. Inclusivists, by submitting particular religion, to an absolute religious essence or an ultimate religious end, allow for the affirmation of religious diversity; indeed, they allow for a very positive affirmation of religious diversity. But all forms of religious inclusivism conceptualise the absolute religious essence or ultimate religious end in either explicitly Christian Trinitarian terms, or philosophical terms that are implicitly Christian – and more importantly, for this discussion, as participation in something that is *singularly* ultimate.

I will now try to state, precisely, where I disagree with Schmidt-Leukel in distinguishing between inclusivism and pluralism. For Schmidt-Leukel, inclusivists say that there are many religions and a singular maximus; pluralists, in contrast, say that there are many religions but no singular maximus. If a singular maximus is understood as a singular ultimate form of religion conceived as an essence or an end, then I agree that pluralists reject this idea. But if singular maximus is understood more broadly as the “ultimate” form of religion, then, I maintain that all pluralists affirm this idea, with the significant qualification that the ultimate form of religion is pluriform or multiform. For metaphysical pluralists, the ultimate form of religion may still be an end or essence, but

the end or essence is inherently plural. For humanistic pluralists, the idea of a religious universal replaces the idea of an end or essence altogether, as the ultimate form of religion, and the religious universal is inherently plural.¹⁷

In short, pluralists, like inclusivists, affirm the idea of an ultimate form of religion – but, unlike inclusivists, reject the idea that the ultimate form of religion is uniform, in favour of the idea that the ultimate form of religion is multiform or pluralistic.

Summary of Differences between Inclusivism and Pluralism

At this point it is possible to summarize the main differences between religious inclusivism and religious pluralism. First, inclusivism and pluralism are both grounded in the common idea that there is an “ultimate” form of religion. Second, inclusivism and pluralism make different claims about the nature of the ultimate form of religion: Inclusivism says that the ultimate form of religion is uniform or singular; pluralism says that the ultimate form of religion is multiform or plural. Third, pluralists never accept both the metaphysics and the concept of religion employed by inclusivists: Inclusivists employ both the concept of divine religion and a unitary metaphysics, and thus come to the conclusion that religion, in the end, is one; pluralists necessarily reject either the inclusivist’s concept of divine religion or their unitary metaphysics. Humanistic religious pluralists reject the concept of divine religion; they replace this with a concept of human religion, and then posit a religious universal in order to come to the conclusion that religion is plural. Metaphysical religious pluralists reject the unitary metaphysics; they

¹⁷ I realize that my use of “ultimate” in this context denudes it of its usual meaning as the fulfillment or final realization of a process of becoming; or, at least it does with respect to the religious universals employed by humanistic pluralists. In this case, it would be more accurate to speak of the universal form of religion that is inherently diverse.

replace this with a pluralistic metaphysics in order to come to the conclusion that religion is plural.

And, now it is also possible to summarise the fourfold typology of theories of religious diversity.

5. A Fourfold Typology: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Humanistic-Universalistic Pluralism, Metaphysical Pluralism

Religious exclusivism is an argument based on the premises that God is one and only, that religion is identified with God, and therefore religion like God is one and only. In Christianity, religious exclusivism takes form within a Trinitarian concept of God. The Triune God is Father Son and Holy Spirit. The Christian church is the body of the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Christian church is enfolded within the Triune Reality of the one and only God, and so is itself one and only.

Religious inclusivism rejects the idea that there is one exclusive religion; it therefore rejects the idea that a particular religious form of religion, as such, can be identified with God. It does this by relating particular religions to a religious ideal; particular religions are attempts to realize an absolute religious essence or the means to achieve an ultimate religious end. Thus, all religions are religions to the degree that they realize the essence or lead to the end. This logical structure creates the idea of degrees of religiousness, that move between the relative and the absolute, the incomplete and the complete, the elementary and the ultimate, the natural and the consummate, the inferior and the superior, the primitive and the evolved, and so on. Within Christianity religious inclusivism, the absolute religious essence, or the ultimate religious end is Christian,

whether explicitly acknowledged or only implicitly obvious. Specifically, the end is communion with the Triune God, or relationship with God that is characterized by neither complete separation from God nor complete dissolution in God. In either case, religions lead up to the singular end or essence, and all religious diversity ceases in the fulfilment of the final end or consummation of the absolute essence. The main idea is that “in the end” or in the “final consummation” religion is one because here religion participates in the absolute and ultimate reality of God; hence, religion, like God is one and only. Thus, inclusivism comes to the same conclusion as exclusivism – but unlike exclusivism which is rooted in a timeless moment – it (literally) takes time for inclusivism to reach this conclusion.

Neo-Christian religious inclusivism is different from traditional Christian religious inclusivism insofar as it places greater emphasis on the value of non-Christian religions, with respect to realising the absolute essence or attaining the ultimate end. Other religions are not begrudgingly recognised as mere way stations on the road to the ultimate end (similar to apes on the way to humanity) but are positively affirmed as necessary participants in the movement towards final salvation; or, their insights are not dismissed as irrelevant errors, but as building blocks of absolute and true religious understanding.

Both forms of religious pluralism reject the idea of a singular maximus, or the idea that there is a singular absolute religious essence, or a singular ultimate religious end. They do, however, affirm the idea that there is an ultimate form of religion – as an essence, end, or essence – and, importantly, that this ultimate form of religion is multiform.

Humanistic-universalistic religious pluralism, assumes the oneness of God or Ultimate Reality. It therefore, must reject, the idea of strong identity between religion and ultimate reality; in other words, it must reject the idea of divine religion. This means rejecting the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. If this idea is accepted along with the idea that God is one and only, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Christ and Christianity are also one and only. Humanistic-universalistic pluralism, likewise, must reject the idea of an absolute religious essence, because this too, when fulfilled leads to the conclusion that ultimately there is no religious diversity – in the end God is all in all; in the end is the Kingdom of God; in the end is consciousness of the essence of religion, and so on. All of these are singular realities that bring religious diversity to an end in one fulfilment. Nonetheless, humanistic pluralism is not simply about rejecting the idea of a singular religious essence or end. Positively, it is about affirming the plurality of true religion, and it does by employing the idea of a religious universal, that is only visible in its multitude of (equally authentic) manifestations.

Metaphysical religious pluralism, attacks the other premise of the exclusivist and inclusivist argument that now or eventually leads to the oneness of religion. It accepts the idea of strong identity between religion and Ultimate Reality or the idea of divine religion, but it rejects the idea that Ultimate Reality itself is one and only or a unitary metaphysics; thereby, it is able to avoid the conclusion that religion must also be one and only. It rejects the idea of one God, and it rejects the idea of a singular absolute religious essence or a singular ultimate end that is grounded in the idea of one God. It argues, instead that, Ultimate Reality is itself plural, and therefore there is a plurality of ultimate ends and a plurality of absolute essences. This metaphysical plurality guarantees religious

diversity at the deepest level, and the equality of different religions with respect to their deepest differences.

We will now use these typological definitions to categorise various theories, philosophies and theologies of religious diversity that emerged in the late twentieth century, which are difficult to classify using the traditional threefold typology.

As discussed, this difficulty has led some to the conclusion that the threefold typology is incoherent and needs to be abandoned. I believe that the foundation of the classic threefold typology is useful – but, this foundation needs to be strengthened, through a better understanding of its types, and it needs to be built upon to accommodate recent developments. It is my hope that I have now sufficiently fortified the foundation of the threefold typology and added a usable new fourth “floor” with the above distinctions between, and definitions of, exclusivism, (neo)inclusivism, humanistic pluralism, and metaphysical pluralism. And, now, we will put this new typology to the test by using it to try to better understand recent Western theories of religious diversity.

PART 2

LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY ALTERNATIVES TO EXCLUSIVISM AND INCLUSIVISM

4

Humanistic-Universalistic Religious Pluralism

1. Introduction

I have argued that the main idea of religious pluralism is that the ultimate form of religion is multiform or plural.

Both exclusivism and inclusivism are premised on the idea that one can speak of God or Ultimate Reality as one, and the idea that there is strong identity between religion and God – and, these two ideas necessarily lead to the conclusion that true religion, like God, is one or singular. It is logically impossible to hold both the idea that God is one and the idea that there is strong identity between God and religion, and come to the conclusion that true religion is plural. Consequently, pluralists – those who claim that religion is plural – must reject either the premise that God is one or the premise that there is strong identity between God and religion.

Those who I designate as humanistic-universalistic pluralists, are those who maintain the idea that God is one, and consequently reject the idea that there is strong identity between God in religion. Thus, humanistic-universalistic pluralists reject ideas – such as incarnation, supernatural revelation, and divine manifestation – that suggest strong identity between God and religion. Instead, they prefer to see religion as a natural or human construct, or as a human response to the Real/Transcendence, so as to avoid the conclusion that some religion is singularly true because it is “founded by God.”¹

¹ I am using the term “humanistic” in a very restricted sense. It is used to connote the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion, and nothing else typically associated with the term.

Also, I have argued that humanistic-universalistic pluralists do not employ the idea of a single religious end or a single religious essence; this is an idea that belongs to religious inclusivism. Instead, they employ the idea a religious “universal,” or a concept of religion that unifies multiple forms of religion without reducing them to a single form. A religious essence reduces all forms to one form; a religious end terminates all religions in one destination; a religious universal has no form or substance apart from its manifold instances and, thus, may be conceived as a point of origin for its manifold instances or multiple manifestations.

I suggest that, in most cases, the idea of a religious universal employed by humanistic-universalistic religious pluralists can be understood as an “Aristotelian” universal as opposed to a “Platonic” universal. An Aristotelian universal has no form, except insofar as it is “instantiated” in particular forms. A Platonic universal, in contrast, has a singular (and perfect) form above and beyond all particular instantiations. Thus, an Aristotelian universal is both inherently singular *and plural*, while a Platonic universal is inherently singular. The critics of humanistic-universalistic religious pluralism are fond of saying that (humanistic-universalistic pluralists – like exclusivists and inclusivists – reduce religion to one common end, one common essence, or one common universal form of religion and, thus, are no different from exclusivists and inclusivists. This is not accurate: these terms cannot be conflated. A religious essence and a religious end are similar in that they both reduce religious diversity to a single point – to a single perfect form, or a single final destination, (a “singular maximus,” in Schmidt-Leukel’s term). In contrast, the common universal form of religion, that humanistic-universalistic pluralists employ, is a form that has no content except insofar as it is instantiated – or except

insofar as it is seen in particular forms of religion. Thus, there is no formal content to a religious universal, meaning it is not an essence. And since there is nothing substantive in this “end” it is more typically conceived as a single point of *origin* for *its* multiple manifestations.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I will typically shorten humanistic-universalistic pluralism to humanistic religious pluralism. This does not, however, suggest that the rejection of the idea of strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion is the most important feature of this type of pluralism. Indeed, I maintain that the employment of a religious universal is just as important, and is perhaps in more need of emphasis, since this is the feature of humanistic-universalistic religious pluralisms that has typically gone unnoticed, by its critics, and led to misunderstandings about this type of pluralism.

Thus, the three main features of humanistic-universalistic religious pluralism are as follows: 1) the rejection of the idea of a singular maximus, and the affirmation of the plurality of true religion; 2) the affirmation that God (or Ultimate Reality) is one, and the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion; 3) the employment of the idea of a religious universal, as opposed to the idea of a religious end or the idea of a religious essence, as the ultimate form of religion.²

In addition to these three main features of humanistic religious pluralism, I would also like to suggest that contact with religious others is a contributing social factor to the emergence of humanistic religious pluralism.

² This first feature is shared with metaphysical pluralists; the second two features are unique to humanistic-universalistic pluralists.

We will now examine the pluralisms of three humanistic religious pluralists: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter. My presentations of these three authors will not try to give comprehensive accounts of their theologies/philosophies of religions; instead, I will simply try to show that their pluralisms have been influenced by contact with religious others, and that they exhibit the three main features of humanistic religious pluralism outlined above.

2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith: Religious Pluralism by Definition

Smiths's Encounter with the Religious Other

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's gateway to encounter with religious others was Christian mission.³ Smith was born (1916) and raised in Toronto, Ontario. The Toronto that Smith grew up in was unlike the cosmopolitan city that it is today. Called "Toronto the Good," the city was very British, conservative, observantly religious, and "clannish." It was clannish insofar as those not born in Canada (i.e., immigrants from the British Isles) tended to not form close social ties with Canadian born Torontonians. Citizens of the city exhibited "earnestness and seriousness of purpose, honesty and quality in workmanship, and a quiet courtesy and dignity in conduct."⁴ These characteristics were emphasised in Smith's household and consequently became a part of his own character. The only thing atypical of the Smith's household, with respect to its cultural setting, was a spirit of "internationalism" wherein guests from other cultures were warmly welcomed. Moreover, Wilfred himself was encouraged to embrace the world, as reflected in the year he spent in Spain and Egypt prior to attending university.

³ The following biographical material is taken from Willard Oxtoby's introduction to Smith, *Religious Diversity*.

⁴ Oxtoby, "Editor's Introduction," ix.

As for religion, Smith was raised as an active Presbyterian, and his religious commitment involved both belief and practice. Religious feeling also became significant for Smith, perhaps on account of his mother's Methodist background. Indeed, it could be said that feeling *as faith* – or the quality of an individual's personal relationship with God – is the core of religion for Smith. Smith would later go on to argue that belief is an expression of faith, of which many types of expression are possible. Such an attitude towards Christian beliefs and doctrines would allow Smith to form some relatively unorthodox beliefs of his own – particularly his belief that God's grace and salvation was not limited to Christians. But despite being unorthodox, Smith remained grounded in a constant orthopraxy that could be seen in his strict personal morality and regular church attendance.

Yet, despite being raised as a Presbyterian, Smith identified himself more strongly with the Christian community at large. Thus, as an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, Smith became involved in activities that crossed denominational lines. Smith was member of both major interdenominational groups on campus at the time; the Toronto branch of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, and the Student Christian Movement of which he became the president in 1937. As a result of this involvement, Smith's main social network while at the University of Toronto consisted of the children and grandchildren of Christian missionaries to Asia – including his future wife, Muriel MacKenzie Struthers.

In 1939, Smith went to Britain for post-graduate studies, where he pursued studies in both Christian theology, and Arabic and Islamic Studies. In 1941, Smith went to India to become the representative among Muslims of the Canadian Overseas Mission Council.

He was stationed in the Islamic city of Lahore where he taught Indian history at Forman Christian College. In 1943, while still in India, Smith was ordained as a minister to an interdenominationally supported assignment. This ordination was recognized by the Presbyterian Church of Canada and subsequently Smith was an ordained Presbyterian minister. In 1945, Smith returned to North America to complete a doctorate in the Department of Oriental Languages at Princeton University.⁵

Smith obviously received an elite Western education – from a year at the Lycee Champollion in Grenoble, France, to his high school years at Upper Canada College, to his undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, to his graduate studies at Cambridge University and Princeton University. Smith would eventually come to see the sort of humanistic education that he received as belonging to a tradition that could be traced back to ancient Greece; indeed, as one of the world’s great cumulative traditions that could be thought of as running parallel to other religious traditions such as Christianity.

Nonetheless, Smith’s living contact with religious others certainly influenced his thinking about religious diversity as much as his education. This experience, with religious others, influenced Smith’s thinking in at least two significant ways. First, it kept him from thinking about other religions (and Islam in particular) in terms of broad generalizations; Smith saw some of the diversity of the Islamic world firsthand and,

⁵ Smith’s academic career did take one unexpected detour when the work he submitted for his doctoral dissertation was rejected at Cambridge University. The work – latter published as *Modern Islam in India: a Social Analysis* – was rejected on account of being too Marxist (private conversation with Professor Sheila McDonough of Concordia University). According to Oxtoby, Smith had become attracted to Marxist thought in his late teens and twenties on account of his concern for social welfare and his training as an historian. After the war, Smith became more critical of Marxism but continued to view history as a process and maintained the moral concern that had originally drawn him to Marxism (Oxtoby, “Editor’s Introduction,” xii-xiii).

therefore, knew that Islam was not a uniform reality. Second, it allowed Smith to form relationships with religious others, and come to the conclusion that these others were not unsaved and without God, but had a religious quality to their lives just as Christians did. In the early sixties, Smith would reconcile these two observations about the religious other into a new definition of religion. This definition of religion would allow for the recognition of both religious diversity and the authentic religiosity of the religious other.

In 1949, Smith returned to Canada to accept a teaching position at McGill University. Smith was the first W.M. Birks Professor of Comparative Religion – a new non-ecclesiastical position that came into being with the formation of McGill’s Faculty of Divinity in 1949. In 1951, Smith, while continuing to hold his divinity chair, organized McGill’s Institute of Islamic Studies, and served as its first director. In this role, Smith was able to put his stamp on the study of religion. The Institute was structured, by Smith, such that half of the faculty members and half of the graduate degree candidates would be Muslims. The idea here was that through dialogue, and their common commitment to the Western academic tradition, the Western and Islamic students would come to mutually acceptable representations of Islam.

When Smith took up his position at McGill, he and his family participated in a United Church congregation. The United Church of Canada formed in 1925, as part of an ecumenical movement, and saw about half of the Presbyterians in Canada join Canada’s Methodists and Congregationalists. Smith was raised in, and ordained as a minister in, the “continuing” Presbyterian Church. In 1961, Smith decided to take a more active theological role in the church, and consequently had his ordination transferred to the United Church of Canada – which he felt was a more fertile ground for establishing

positive relations with non-Christian religions. During this time Smith began to develop his ideas about religious diversity in earnest and this culminated in the publication *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963), wherein he proffered a new definition of religion (as cumulative tradition and faith) that could account for both religious diversity and the presence of authentic religiosity in non-Christians – and the publication of *The Faith of Other Men* (1965) in which he begins to offer a pluralist Christian theology of other religions.⁶

In 1964, Smith accepted a position at Harvard University as the second Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions (est. 1957). At the Center, Smith's concern with the religious other expanded to include not just Muslims, but all of the other “cumulative traditions” in our “religiously plural world.” In 1973, Smith took up a five year post at Dalhousie University that afforded him more time to write. This resulted in the publications of *Belief and History* (1977), *Faith and Belief* (1979), and Smith's most developed writings on religions pluralism, *Towards a World Theology* (1980).

We will now examine some of Smith's literature starting with a piece, originally delivered as his inaugural lecture to the Birks Chair in Comparative Religion at McGill. This lecture was later published as “Comparative Religion: Wither – and Why?” in a volume on methodological issues in the comparative study of religion.

Two Types of Religious Studies Scholarship

In “Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?” Smith argues that a new, more advanced, form of comparative religion is on the horizon. This new form of comparative

⁶ Even though the coining of the term “pluralism” is commonly attributed to Alan Race, the idea of a “religiously plural world” can be traced back to this publication by Smith.

religion transcends that of the 19th century which preoccupied itself with the externals of religion, with the “accumulation, organization, and analysis of facts.”⁷ Instead of merely “searching out material, recording it carefully, scrutinizing it systematically, interpreting it” – and thus producing an abundance of information about the externals of religion – the new form of comparative religion has begun to concern itself with the meaning of these externals for those involved with them, or with the faith in men’s hearts. (32) And, for Smith, the faith in men’s hearts is what religions *themselves* are about.

Smith insists that the study of religion cannot be based on direct observation like the physical sciences, but must be made by inference: We can infer a human or religious concern from an observable manifestation of it but we cannot say that the observable manifestation of it is the concern itself.⁸ Smith does not deny that the externals of religion – the “symbols, institutions, doctrines, [and] practices” – *can* be studied separately, or apart from the meaning they have for believers; as said, he saw this approach to the study of religion as typical of the 19th century. (10) Moreover, he does not deny the value of this approach and, indeed, sees it in a kind of “dialectical” relationship with the new more “personal” approach, of the 20th century, that deals with religions themselves:

Certainly there has been and remains a great deal of preliminary work to be done in the realm of tangible data, of what I have called the externals of religion. It is only as these are accurately established, that the study of religions themselves can proceed; and this latter must continually be revised as the former becomes more exactly known. (35)

⁷ W. C. Smith, “Comparative Religion,” 31; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

⁸ For Smith, this is the fundamental error of the social sciences.

Smith contends that there is no point in debating the relative value of these two forms of religious scholarship because both are needed. However, it is very clear that he sees scholarship which contents itself with the realm of tangible data as inferior to scholarship which deals with this data but then also ventures into the realm of the meaning of religions themselves:

Our plea would be that from now on any study of externalia recognize itself as such; *that only those deserve to be accepted as studies of religion* that do justice to the fact that they deal with the life of men. (37, emphasis added)

For Smith, the study of religion is shifting from a study of data to a study of people insofar as a religion's "institutions, formulations, and overt history" are being seen as "clues to a personal quality of men's lives," i.e to their faith. (38) And, to the extent that religious scholars are now concerned not only with understanding religious facts but religious faith they can certainly be aided in their understanding by having "adherents of that faith as informants." (38-39) In fact, Smith goes so far as to contend that scholars in this new age must 1) be conscious that they are writing for a "world audience" (or in the presence of those who they write about, and 2) be willing to have any statement they make about a religion be validated by that religion's believers, or accept "that no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers." (40; 42)

This second proposition gives the power to confer meaning exclusively to the "insider" or religious devotee and, thus, leaves the "outsider" or religious scholar dependent on the insider for a true understanding of their religion. Smith stands by his principle but makes it clear that what he means by "religion" is the faith in men's hearts,

and not the externals of religion which are equally accessible to a diligent scholar (who in this type of knowledge may well exceed the insider). But, again, as for the *meaning* of the external data or religious system the outsider cannot go beyond the insider:

But about the meaning that the system has for those of faith, an outsider cannot in the nature of the case go beyond the believer; for their piety is the faith, and if they cannot recognize his portrayal then it is not their faith that he is portraying.
(43)

Non-Christians might write an authoritative history of the church but however clever, erudite, or wise they can never refute Christians on what the Christian faith is. The only way that outsiders can even ascertain what Christianity is, is by inference from Christian work art or deed; and they can never be better qualified than those Christians to judge whether their inferences are valid....We recognize also that a similar point applies to all religions. Anything I say about Islam as a living faith is valid only in so far as Muslims can say "amen" to it. (43)

Nonetheless, Smith does not go so far as to say that a true understanding of a religion requires acceptance of it. He maintains that an outsider can come to a true understanding of another faith through a sympathetic appreciation of it; indeed, he maintains the possibility of a scholar writing a history of all religions, in the sense of a history of faith:

When a work does appear worthy of typifying achievement in this realm, we predict it will be written by a person who has seen and felt, and is morally, spiritually, and intellectually capable of giving expression to the fact that we - all of us - live in a world in which not they, not you, but *some of us* are Muslims,

some are Hindus, some are Jews, some are Christians. If he is great, he will perhaps be able to add, some of us are Communists, some inquirers. (58)

For Smith, “[all]men are brothers” belong to the single “human community” – the only community there is. (59) And within this total community, the “two matters of supreme importance” are 1) “relations among persons” and 2) “relations between men and God.” (59) This final statement, about the two matters of supreme importance, is significant insofar as it reflects Smith’s Christian commitments. More specifically, it shows his commitment to the two greatest Christian commandments – to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40) – and this, in turn, influences how Smith handles problems of religious diversity.

This short essay is seminal. In 1963, Smith would publish his influential *The Meaning and End of Religion* wherein he develops his distinction between the internal and external aspects of religion into a new definition of religion, as cumulative tradition and faith. In 1965, Smith would publish *The Faith of other Men* wherein he develops the idea of the “brotherhood of man” under (one) God, into a moral and theological imperative for Christians to acknowledge the work of God in other (non-Christian) faiths. And finally, in 1980 Smith would publish *Towards a World Theology*, wherein he develops the idea that there is only one human community into the idea that there is only one religious history and, thus, the possibility of developing a world theology. We will now briefly review these three works.

Religious Pluralism by Definition

In *The Meaning and End of Religion* Smith rejects the idea of conceptualizing religion as a system of beliefs. This way of thinking distorts the reality of religion in two ways. In one direction, it fails by reifying religion as a uniform, unchanging reality instead of seeing it in its manifold diversity with its ever changing expressions. And, in the other direction, it fails by confusing particular expressions of faith (particularly faith expressed as belief) with faith itself – or with the personal quality that obtains in the hearts of all religious persons as a consequence of their relationship with God.

Smith proffers a dualistic interpretation of religion to account for the two dimension of religion that are typically distorted when religion is understood as a system of belief. For Smith, religion is on one hand “cumulative tradition,” and, on the other, it is “faith.” We will now examine more closely how Smith understands these two terms.

Smith’s dualistic interpretation of religion is grounded in his dualistic perception of reality. According to Smith, a religious person lives between two worlds, “the mundane realm of limiting and observable and changing actuality and a realm transcending this.” (154-55) Smith is reticent about the theological or metaphysical link between these two worlds, but says that from a historical perspective the link is clear – it is “man” or the “living person.” Thus, religion is about a person’s involvement in both a context of observable reality and a reality that is not observable by the historian. But Smith insists that any history of religion that omits either side of this equation, or tries to combine the two, distorts what it tries to report on. Thus, he suggests that we work with two separate concepts – cumulative tradition and faith. (154-56)

Smith initially defines faith as “an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent...” (156) In contrast, cumulative tradition is the observable stuff of religion: “temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on...” (156-57) Cumulative tradition is observable to the historian; faith is not. Cumulative tradition “crystallizes the material form of faith of previous generations,” and these crystallizations of faith serve present generations as “windows through which they see a world beyond.” But the faith in each generation – indeed of every living person – is always new. The world beyond or the “transcendent” is initially mediated by a person’s received religious tradition, but then each person modifies and adds to this tradition. This is so because each person brings their own unique personal quality into their relationship with transcendence and, thus, will necessarily express this (i.e., their faith) in unique and different ways. These different expressions add to the tradition that initially serves as a window to the world beyond, and in this way religious traditions grow, develop, and accumulate. This is why Smith calls religious traditions “cumulative.” (156-60)

Smith insists that cumulative tradition is wholly historical, but that history is not a “closed system” because the living person stands in history, and the spirit of the living person is, to some extent, open to transcendence. Religion is an ever changing human “construct,” but one that is formed in response to transcendence. Thus, Smith is critical of any history of religion that tries to reduce religion to the merely mundane. (161)

Nonetheless he is also critical of religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which err in the other direction by conflating mundane expressions of faith with faith itself. In

these traditions, faith consists “not only in an immediate relation with transcendence but also in the conceptualization of the mundane.” (162) For example, Muslims see “time and eternity” or the mundane and transcendence connected not only in the living person of faith, but also in the pages of the Qur’an. Similarly, Christians are not content with the personal experience of a transcendent Christ, but see the historical Jesus as the divine on earth. Here, Smith is unwilling to cave to the old sort of comparative religion that is only able to see the mundane dimensions of Islam and Christianity, but is equally unwilling to simply equate the Qur’an or Jesus with God or transcendence. Smith’s solution to this problem is, of course, his dualistic understanding of religion as both faith and cumulative tradition. This allows one to see the historical dimension of religion, particularly the fact that religions change and are influenced by their environment – something that, in his view, religious believers ignore. And, it also allows one to see the other-worldly dimension of religion, particularly the fact that religion only persists because it is a human response to transcendence – something that naturalistic historians ignore. (162)

Smith shows how his concept of religion can be used to understand the complex issue of Islamic law or shariah. Many Muslims, according to Smith, see their religion as a system. From, this perspective, “...Islam is a transcendent truth, stable, free from the vicissitudes and contingencies, and it includes a law (shariah).” (163) But modern historical research is able to show that there was a time when Islam existed without the law. Thus, from a historical perspective, the legal system of the shariah was constructed by persons – such as the legal thinker al-Shafi`i – who can be studied. But from Smith’s perspective, al-Shafi`i was not simply an instrument in the hand of God or a strict product

of his historical context, he was one who approached faith through the tradition he grew up in, and then transformed this tradition through his own unique expressions of faith:

al-Shafi`i, like the founder of every other major or minor innovation in Islamic history, was a person of a particular time and place, of a particular temperament and personality, who found himself in a milieu including a particular part of the always changing Islamic cumulative tradition; and that the interaction within his spirit of that environment with the transcendent to which that tradition introduced him, enabled him to produce the innovation by which the tradition was thereby modified. (166)

In the same way that Muslims have identified the shariah with transcendence itself, Christians have tended to view Christian expressions of faith – particularly creedal beliefs – as wholly transcendent realities. Smith handles such perceptions in the same way as he handles the perception that the shariah is a wholly transcendent reality; by maintaining a strict duality between faith and cumulative tradition such that *every* expression of faith is seen as having a mundane dimension, and *no* expression of faith is seen as a wholly transcendent reality (paradoxically appearing within the mundane world). Every form of Christianity appears within a given historical context, and then modifies this from the vantage point of its unique relationship with transcendence, and so on. Thus, Christian faith appears in ever new forms in every different time and place, and this adds to the ever-changing Christian cumulative tradition. (166-67)

As for the other side of the equation – faith – Smith begins by stressing that it is beyond the view of the outside observer, and by emphasizing the diversity of humanity's faith. Moreover, he does not begin his explication of faith by trying to understand its

nature, but by trying to understand the role it has played within religious history. On the basis of his position that one cannot see another's faith but only expressions of it, Smith says that one thing is clear about faith: "*that faith finds expressions in many forms.*" (171, emphasis added)

Throughout religious history faith has been expressed in countless forms, in both word and deed. Smith stresses that such expressions must be understood as expression of religious faith, in the sense that through these expressions human beings come into contact with something greater than themselves. But, the closest Smith actually comes to saying what faith is, is that it is "some personal and inner quality in the life of some men" – and that for these "men" the observable expressions of faith are religiously significant.

Having clarified the meaning of faith, to this extent, Smith proceeds to discuss some of the different forms that expressions of faith have taken. He begins with what he takes to be incontrovertible examples of expressions of faith – first in art, second in community, third in character. (172-77)

Smith's explication of expressions of faith in human character is illuminating with respect to his stance on the equality/inequality of various religions. He suggests that the capacity of a faith to produce good character may be the most legitimate way to assess a religious tradition; but qualifies this by saying no one is in a position to make such judgements. (178) This dual view that other religions produce good people but that we ought not to make judgements about other people's character/religiosity reveals Smith as a reticent pluralist at this point.

Having shown how faith finds expression in art, community, and human character, Smith advances (progressively) to more abstract expressions – those of ritual

and morality. And, finally, Smith moves on to the “thorny question of faith’s expression in ideas and words.” This presents a thorny question since religious words and ideas – in creeds and doctrine – are frequently conflated with faith itself.⁹

As with other expressions of faith, Smith insists that expressions of faith as religious statements are connected to human beings (i.e., they are personal) and that they are connected to transcendence: “My particular hypothesis here is that religious statements express the faith of persons, who as persons are involved in transcendence.” (183) But, even though these statements are connected to transcendence they are also thoroughly historical; they appear, disappear, and reappear at particular times and places; they “serve each generation anew, and concretely in each town, each hamlet, ultimately each human heart, as an expression of faith by which those particular persons are oriented, within their mundane situations, to transcendence.” (183) Moreover, and significantly, Smith submits that there is no difference, *in principle*, between faith expressed as creed and doctrine, and faith expressed as art, religious community, good character, or any other way. (184)

Continuing, Smith suggest that no intellectual religious formulation (and presumably no other expression of faith) refers directly to the transcendent; the transcendent is referred to only indirectly and only through the “inner life of persons.” (184) Smith suggests that this position should be particularly agreeable to Christians since “Christians have claimed that they (as persons) are (through faith) in touch with Truth, absolute and final. Yet this truth for them is not a theological system, but is itself a Person.” (184)The ultimate upshot of this, for Smith, is that no religious doctrine or

⁹ Smith would go on to dedicate two entire books to trying to extract faith from belief, arguing that the latter is an expression of faith in words; see W. C. Smith, *Belief and History*, and W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*.

creed is sacrosanct since all such intellectualizations of faith are necessarily “historical human constructs.” (185) An intellectual expression of faith can never capture transcendence – it can only indicate it. And, it can only indicate transcendence in faith or in the hearts of men: “Theology is part of the traditions, is part of this world. Faith lies beyond theology, in the hearts of men. Truth lies beyond faith, in the heart of God.” (185)

The passage just quoted reveals Smith’s ontology. This consists of the world/mundane, God/transcendence, and human beings/persons of faith. Persons of faith participate in both realms simultaneously, but never in only one. To neglect one’s relationship to transcendence is to neglect the full extent of one’s humanity – it is to be not fully human.¹⁰ And, from the other direction, to claim complete identity with transcendence is to step beyond the limits of the human condition. In one case, the person claims too little divinity, and, in the other, too much.

In the end, Smith conceives of faith as a personal quality of the human being (who stands between the mundane and the transcendent) that has “many sorts of expression.” (185) By way of analogy he likens faith to love. Love can be expressed in many ways – in words and deeds – and yet love itself, beyond its expressions, is located in persons. (186)

Smith makes one final point about faith, and this point ties it back into his concept of cumulative tradition. This point is that all expressions of faith become the “ground of faith” for all subsequent expressions of faith. In other words, they become a part of the cumulative tradition that serves as a window into the world of transcendence for those in each new generation, and so on. (186)

¹⁰ The same logic is in play when Smith contrasts the greater and lesser forms of comparative religion – the latter being inferior because it neglects faith.

Despite his claim that the world of faith is blocked to the historian who only attains to the externals of faith, Smith contends that it is possible (at least in principle) to become aware of the faith of others:

We should be able to arrive at a point where we can understand, not with complete assurance but with reasonable confidence, and not fully but in significant part, what the faith of other persons, other groups, even other ages, is and has been. (187)

Smith envisions the (new sort of) scholar of comparative religion taking up this challenge – because only such a scholar is in touch with both dimensions of religion. This scholar will squarely face the myriad of religious expressions in all of their historical detail, but will then look beyond these expressions to see the faith that they indicate in the hearts of living persons. This is a process that Smith imagines will take years of “disciplined investigation” to produce results. (189)

Smith’s assertion that faith is a living personal quality (of the human standing between this mundane world and another transcendent one) does not satisfy the requirements of a tangible definition. And, yet, Smith remains elusive because he is trying to avoid turning faith into something substantive such that it cannot take on a multitude of forms. Here is one formula that he employs to this end: “To see faith truly is to see it actually, not ideally.” (189) In other words, because faith cannot be seen, except through its various expressions, it has no substance in itself or no singular form. In this regard, Smith’s thought is Aristotelian rather than Platonic: The universal of faith cannot be grasped apart from its instantiations or particular expressions. There is no Platonic Form of faith, no essence of faith – beyond particular expressions of faith – for Smith.

Smith takes his perspective to the extreme, insisting that no one person's faith is the same as any other person's faith, and, in fact, a single person's faith is never the same from day to day:

My faith is an act that *I* make, myself, naked before God. Just as there is no such thing as Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism), I have urged, behind which the Christian (the Muslim, the Buddhist) may shelter, which he may set between himself and the terror and splendour and living concern of God, so there is no generic Christian faith; no 'Buddhist faith', no 'Hindu faith', no 'Jewish faith'. There is only my faith, and yours, and that of my Shinto friend, of my particular Jewish neighbour. We are all persons, clustered in mundane communities, no doubt, and labeled with mundane labels but, so far as transcendence is concerned, encountering it each directly, personally, if at all. In the eyes of God each of us is a person, not a type. (191)

Thus, not only is there no final essence of faith, and no ideal form of faith, there is no ideal form of any type of faith.

But even though Smith refuses to ground his Christian faith – or any faith – in an essential form, his theology does have an ultimate ground. Smith's ultimate ground is God – and humanity:

There is no ideal faith that I ought to have. There is God whom I ought to see, and a neighbour whom I ought to love. These must suffice me; and my faith is my ability to see that they abundantly more than suffice.

The ideal towards which I move is not an ideal of my own faith but is God Himself, and my neighbour himself. Faith is not part of eternity; it is my present awareness of eternity.

Similarly the Muslim's faith is his personal awareness, which takes place on earth, in history, that outside of history there is only God, and that inside of history on earth his duty is to obey only God. This faith has varied across the centuries, and continues to vary, which is another way of saying that it is real.

(192)

Faith is not an essence, an ideal, an end, a part of eternity, or outside of history – such descriptors characterize God only. So, while it may seem that cumulative tradition represents diversity and faith represents unity in Smith's thought, this is not accurate. Faith is singular, but because it has no form except insofar as it is instantiated in particular forms, it is also always plural and varied.

The common ground of religion, then, is not the cumulative tradition that introduces a person to transcendence, and it is not faith by which a person responds to transcendence – it is transcendence itself: "The traditions evolve. Men's faith varies. God endures." (192)

Although *The Meaning and End of Religion* does not deal with the issue of religious diversity directly, in the sense of constructing a theology of religions from a particular religious perspective, it does proffer a pluralistic definition of (true) religion. Thus, it is possible, even at this early stage, to classify Smith as a pluralist according to our criteria. I will pause to argue this point here.

I suggested above that contact with religious others is a contributing social factor to the emergence of humanistic religious pluralism. Contact with others – particularly Muslims in the Muslim world – clearly contributed to Smith’s thinking about religion and religions.

As for the main features of humanistic religious pluralism, the first is the rejection of a “singular maximus,” and the affirmation of the plurality of true religion. Smith clearly rejects the idea of a singular maximus –and he clearly conceives of true religion as plural (by definition.) True religion, for Smith, is cumulative tradition and faith; both cumulative tradition and faith vary, which is to say that religion is plural. Faith is also, in a sense, singular but it is in no way an essence, an ideal, or an end. In Smith’s thought, God, or transcendence itself, is the only (common) ideal or end. Faith is that through which religious persons respond to transcendence but the two are never identical. Faith functions like an Aristotelian universal – it is singular but has no form apart from its instantiations in particular expressions of faith – meaning faith is inherently plural.

The second feature of humanistic religious pluralism is the affirmation that God (or ultimate reality) is one, and the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion. Smith does not explicitly say that God, or transcendence, is one – but certainly this is because he doesn’t feel the need to state the obvious. Smith does speak of God and transcendence in the singular, and he does identify this reality as the common and enduring element in religion; we can infer from this that he conceives Ultimate Reality as one. The rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion is very clear in Smith’s thought. Faith, as a human response to transcendence, is the closest that a person can come to transcendence; but faith is not the same thing as transcendence

itself. Faith (and so religion) is necessarily bound to the mundane world; transcendence is entirely beyond the mundane world. Religion is a human enterprise; only God is God.

The third, and final, feature of humanistic religious pluralism is the employment of the idea of a religious universal, as opposed to the idea of a religious end or the idea of a religious essence. This ground has already been covered but further clarification is in order. As said above, when I claim that humanistic religious pluralism employs the idea of a universal opposed to the idea of religious end or essence, I am using “universal” in an Aristotelian sense. In this sense a universal cannot be identified except insofar as it is instantiated, or seen in particular manifestations. This is exactly the sense in which Smith uses the term “faith.” Faith is the singular and universal element of religion that cannot be seen apart from its various forms, and is indicated by its various expressions.

Thus, even now, I am confident in classifying Wilfred Cantwell Smith as a humanistic religious pluralist.

Conceptualizing the Religious Other in a “Religiously Plural World”

In 1965, Smith published *The Faith of Other Men* in which he introduces the germane term of “a religiously plural world,” and argues that other religions ought to be recognized as authentic “divine revelations.”¹¹ It had become common in some Protestant theological circles (influenced by Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Hendrik Kramer) to see Christianity as faith, i.e., the true religion, and other religions as religions,

¹¹ Even though *The Faith of Other Men* was published in 1965, it was based on public talks given in 1961 and 1962. Thus, we cannot see *The Faith of Other Men* as a simple application, to the topic of religious diversity, of Smith’s pluralistic definition of religion as worked out in *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It seems as though the ideas in both books grew up together and, indeed, they are complementary. For this discussion I will focus the concluding chapter of *The Faith of Other Men* called “The Christian in a Religiously Plural World” but will cite this article from *Religious Diversity*, edited Willard Oxtoby.

defined as vain human attempts to reach God. Thus, Smith's very title was provocative because he was saying that "other men" had faith, and not just religion.

Part Two of *The Faith of other Men* consists of an essay called "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World" in which Smith urges Christians to move away from "exclusivist" attitudes towards other religions and towards a more "ecumenical" attitude. The launching point for Smith's argument is the recognition of a great historical change; specifically of "a true cosmopolitanism" wherein all the world's communities, including its religious communities, are coming to see that they belong to the one world of humanity. This great transformation was impacting Christian mission to the point where the Church was no longer just trying to convert the irreligious and merely religious, but was confronting the "mankind's other faiths."¹²

From Smith's perspective (at the time), traditional Christian mission was in severe crises, if not already dead: Christians no longer wanted to proselytize to non-Christians, and non-Christians certainly didn't want to be on the receiving end of such efforts. As for Christian theology, Smith contends that traditional isolationist or separatist theology – wherein the theologian formulates his or her views unaware of the entire history of human faith – is also coming to an end. He imagines that Christian theologians, if they are to be taken seriously, will now have to form their views in light of other faiths, in much the same way that traditional Christian theologians have formed their views in light of Greek philosophy. (5-8)

But Smith isn't interested in accurate theology *per se*; he is interested in laying the theological/religious foundation for a "world fellowship" that will enable people to live in a "world of religious and cultural plurality" and face the world's joint problems

¹² W. C. Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," 5; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

together. He insists that “coexistence” and “reconciliation” among religions – rather than unity – is the great need for today, if not the “final truth of man’s diversity.” (12)

Consequently, Smith puts forth an explicitly Christian argument for religious coexistence.

Smith begins his argument with the affirmation that “revealed truth” – in this case, Christian revelation – has both conceptual and moral implications; in other words, if Christians truly believe that Christ’s life and sacrificial death embodies the “ultimate truth and power and glory of the universe” then they also ought to hold certain moral and intellectual positions. (12)

On the moral front, Smith contends that being a Christian entails a moral imperative towards unity and harmony amongst all peoples of the earth:

We strive to break down barriers, to close up gulfs; we recognize all men as neighbors, as fellows, as sons of the universal father, seeking Him and finding Him, being sought by Him and being found by Him. At this level, we do not become truly Christian until we have reached out towards a community that turns mankind into one total “we.” (13)

As for the intellectual consequences of being a serious Christian, Smith momentarily defers this issue – except insofar as to say that traditional intellectual formulations, that conceptualize religious others as non-religious, have “encouraged Christians to approach other men immorally.” (13) Smith, on the basis of his more than twenty years of studying other religious traditions, contends that Christians have approached their non-Christian neighbours with arrogance – despite the Christian imperative to approach others with humanity. Smith introduces the following United Church of Canada’s statement as an example of such arrogance: “Without the particular knowledge of God in Jesus Christ,

men do not really know God at all” – as typical of such Christian arrogance. From Smith’s perspective it would be morally intolerable to approach religious others in the real world with such an intellectual formulae – whether true or not:

But except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: “We are saved and you are damned,” or, “We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong.” (14)

Smith finds such an approach intolerable from “merely human standards” and doubly so from a Christian perspective. Such an approach is intolerable because, again, Christians are morally obliged to reconcile rather than alienate, to promote harmony rather than segregation, and so on. (14)

Smith goes on to make a second moral point; this being that it is wrong for Christians to hang their salvific hopes on the eternal damnation of others. Smith, says that he has actually seen and heard Christians with a vested interest in the damnation of others. This particular way of thinking stems from the following logic: If Christianity is true and salvifically effective, then other religions must be wrong and pathways to perdition – and, inversely, if there is truth and salvation in other religions then this must be absent in Christianity. Thus, Christians who see themselves as saved become logically “dependent” on seeing others as damned. From Smith’s perspective, Christians ought to regard the salvation of other human beings in other religions as good news, and hoping for their damnation is neither Christian nor tolerable.

Having expressed his objections to the moral consequences of holding the intellectual view that non-Christians are non-religious, and even damned, Smith moves

on to articulate a view of religious others that is more in keeping with serious Christian faith, or to theologically address the fact of religious diversity.¹³ Smith begins by saying that any serious intellectual statement of Christian faith must now include a doctrine of other religions, or a theology of religions – and, that this theology must reject “exclusivism,” or the view that it is impossible to know God except through Christ, as a position worthy of Christian faith. Smith qualifies this by saying that he is fine with exclusivism insofar as it is a positive expression of the truth and saving power of Christian faith, but maintains that it must be rejected if it necessitates seeing other religions as false and leading to perdition. (15-16)

Smith begins his argument against exclusivism by saying that it entails epistemological difficulties – particularly in proving that other religions do not lead to salvation and are not true. Smith is satisfied that the truth and salvific efficacy of Christianity is self-evident through Christian experience: “...we ourselves find in our lives, by accepting and interiorizing and attempting to live in accordance with it, that it [Christian faith] proves itself. We know it to be true because we have lived it.” (16) Moreover, in Smith’s view, the validity of Christianity is proved by the fact that hundreds of millions of people, for almost two thousand years have “staked their lives upon it , and have found it right.” (16) But, in contrast, he finds little evidence to support the idea that other religions are false. He says that most Christians simply come to this conclusion by way of logical inference: if my faith is true then yours must be false. Smith thinks that consigning others to Hell is far too weighty a matter to leave to logical inference – and

¹³ Smith is willing to conceptualize the problem of religious diversity in terms of questions about truth and saving power in other religions: “as to whether or how far or how non-Christians are saved, or know God” (W. C. Smith, “The Christian in a Religiously Plural World,” 15).

points out that, in the past, conclusions drawn from logical inference have turned out to be wrong in light of “practical investigation.” (16-17)

Indeed, Smith says that practical investigation, or empirical observation, of other religions leads to a second epistemological problem for religious exclusivism; namely, that empirical observation seems to suggest that religious others do in fact know God, independent of knowledge of Christ:

...so far as actual observation goes, the evidence would seem overwhelming that in fact individual Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others have known, and do know, God. I personally have friends from these communities whom it seems to me preposterous to think about in any other way. (17)

Smith concludes from this that those who wish to maintain exclusivism – or the view that religious others do not know God – must do so in the face of contradictory evidence. In this regard Smith sets himself against “neo-orthodox” theologians who claim that they know other religions to be merely human attempts to reach God, because of what they know about God as revealed in Jesus the Christ; indeed they know this *a priori* or before any study of religious others. Smith places himself in the camp that draws conclusions about religious others after studying them, and even enjoys fellowship and personal friendships with them. Smith’s main conclusion, drawn from such contact, is that other religions are “channels through which God himself comes into touch with these His Children” – and he thinks this demands a better formulation of the religious other than that proffered by religious exclusivism. (18)

But before trying to articulate a better formula for understanding other religions, Smith tries to further discredit exclusivism by saying that it is not even consistent with

Christian doctrine; specifically, the doctrine of the Trinity. Smith uses the doctrine of the Trinity to suggest that it must be possible to know God in his creation, and that God must be active in history – including the history of other religions. (19)

Smith also deals with the position that has become known as inclusivism, or the view that other religions may know God in part but not fully. Smith's way of dealing with this problem is to put all traditions, including Christianity, in the same boat – no religious tradition is capable of knowing God fully:

I personally do not see what it might mean to say that any man, Christian or other, has a complete knowledge of God. This would certainly be untenable this side of the grave, at the very least? The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. (19)

For Smith, it is only possible to know God in part, but he avoids relativism by quickly closing the loop on this partial knowledge of God. He does this by affirming that part of what we know about God is that “He does not leave any of us utterly outside of His knowledge.” (19) This knowledge, presumably drawn from empirical observation, is the foundation of Smith's theology of other religions, and Smith goes on to give this knowledge Christian roots.

Smith suggests that Christians can know that God does not leave anyone outside of his knowledge – or that God can be known in other religions – because they know that is how God, as revealed by Christ, would arrange things, or, “because God is the kind of God who Jesus Christ has revealed him to be.” (20) In other words, it is impossible to think of God, as the Loving Father of all human beings, and then imagine that this God would only respond to his children in one religious tradition, and consign all others to eternal damnation. (20)

Finally, Smith turns what he knows about God into positive statements about the nature of salvation and other religions. In a characteristic personal key, Smith says that salvation is not about knowledge, church membership, or anything external – salvation issues from the “anguish and the love of God” and is located in “men’s hearts.” Smith contends we cannot finally say how God acts in the lives of religious others, and so cannot make final pronouncements about them; moreover, he suggests that we should not place limits on God’s salvific activity in the world. But even though we cannot say anything “final” about religious others, Smith thinks that we can say something about them; specifically, we can say (because of what we have come to know about God through Christ) that God’s salvific activity reaches out to all human beings:

The God whom we have come to know, so far as we can sense His action, reaches out after all men everywhere and speaks to all who will listen. Both within and without the Church men listen all too dimly. Yet both within and without the Church, so far as we can see, God does somehow enter into men’s hearts. (20)

In this final statement, Smith positively affirms religious plurality, or a pluralistic Christian theology of religions. It must be remembered that, for Smith, there is no complete or final knowledge of God, and presumably no complete or final salvific state, on “this side of the grave.” Smith draws a sharp distinction between the finite and the infinite and maintains that the finite can never be or know the infinite. This means that religion, or faith, is never identified with God or the infinite; and, so, is never final, perfect, complete, or one. On the other hand, there is faith (and cumulative tradition) and this, for Smith, constitutes true religion. God’s saving action in the hearts of persons is faith, and faith cannot be seen, except in its various expressions within different

cumulative traditions. This understanding of religion, as articulated in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, is plural – and, above, we classified Smith as a pluralist based on this pluralistic definition. But in this final statement Smith is affirming religious plurality personally and theologically. He is confessing that there is, in fact, faith, or the presence of God, within religious others; in other words, religion is plural. Thus, we continue to hold our view that Smith is a pluralist.

It might be argued that Smith is not a true pluralist because he never comes out and says that all (or a number of different) religions are equal. Nonetheless, I think, the idea of equality among the world's "living religious traditions" is implicit in at least three different areas of Smith's thought. First, Smith's insistence that no finite expression of a human being's encounter with the infinite, will ever be identical to the infinite itself guarantees that no religion will ever become wholly other and completely true – in the same sense that the infinite is wholly other and completely true as compared with the finite. Thus, all expressions of faith or all religions remain more or less, and permanently, on the same plane. Second, despite his claims that faith is inherently diverse, Smith never speaks of *faiths* – faith is always singular.¹⁴ In saying that other religions are expressions of faith, Smith is admitting these others into a category that, on one level, has no diversity and, therefore, has no means for making evaluations. Smith would not say that all expressions of faith are equally true (or equally beautiful) but in saying that faith is multiform, he is saying that these diverse expressions of faith are equal, insofar as they are all expressions of faith. Finally, Smith would eventually come to see the religious history of humankind as a singular process, wherein expressions of faith frequently cross the border lines of cumulative tradition. The ground for this singular historical process, is

¹⁴ Oxtoby emphasizes this point in his introduction to Smith's *Religious Diversity*.

the singular reality of faith, and beyond this the singular reality of God or transcendence. This image of one religious history suggests equality among the different religious traditions that contribute to this multiform history. This idea of a single religious history is developed in one of Smith's later works, called *Towards a World Theology*, and we will now close this presentation of Smith's religious pluralism with a brief review of this work.

Generic Religious Terms: Towards a World Theology

Towards a World Theology (1980) may be thought of as the final work of a trilogy that includes, *The History of Belief* (1977) and *Faith and Belief* (1979). In the earlier two works, Smith hammers home an idea that he introduced in *The Meaning and End of Religion* – the idea that belief and faith are not the same thing; that belief is an expression of faith and, indeed, only one type of many possible different types of expression that faith can have. *Towards a World Theology*, then, is an effort to articulate a view of religious history, or to do comparative religion, that is not encumbered with this false understanding. More specifically, it is an attempt to argue for the unity of humankind's religious history – both historically and theologically.

Smith contends that the unity of humankind's religious history is both a historical fact and a theological truth, although neither has been widely recognized and therefore must be demonstrated. Smith takes up this challenge, first as a historian and then as a theologian, in part because he sees himself first and foremost as an historian. But, as Smith notes, this simplifies matters, since Smith belongs to the new breed of religious historian who recognizes that human beings live their lives in relation to transcendence.

This means, on one hand, that human history has an “empirical base of metaphysical truth,” and, on the other, that truth necessarily has a historical dimension:

The history of religion, by which I understand the history of men and women’s religious life, and especially of their faith, lived always in a specific context, is intrinsically the locus of both the mundane and the transcendent, unbifurcated.¹⁵

Thus, even though Smith makes a conceptual distinction between historical and theological work, his ideal mode of study is in between both; a history of religion that accounts for transcendence and a theology that recognizes the historical dimension of faith. Smith actually coins a new term for this new mode of studying religion – he calls it “humane science.” Humane science is the study of human beings by human beings and, for Smith, such a science is ideal for studying religion because religion is a human knowledge of transcendence formed in response to transcendence.¹⁶

In any case, Smith begins his argument for the unity of humankind’s religious history, with a historical argument – hoping to, perhaps, convince those unable to see this unity as a theological truth. Smith supposes that those who believe in the unity of humankind and the unity of God, as he does, should also believe in the unity of humankind’s religious history. But neither (Christian) religious doctrine nor empirical observation has led to the discernment of such unity; religious doctrine locates religious unity far in the future, and empirical observation sees only bewildering diversity. (4)

Smith, however, does not make his task easy because, on one hand, he refuses the vision of those (theologians) who see religious unity coming to fruition “one day,” and, on the other, he acknowledges the reality of all of the bewildering religious diversity seen

¹⁵ W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 3; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

¹⁶ For Smith’s conception of humane science see Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, especially Chapter 4.

by the historian. Smith rejects the theological view of religious unity by claiming that he is not an advocate of religious unity, but an advocate of the unity of religious history – two very different things in Smith’s mind. This move allows Smith to align himself with a historical perspective that sees that “not even one religion is the same, century after century, or from one country to another, or from village to city.” (4) But, of course, Smith does not stop at seeing only diversity, as does the unenlightened historian of yesteryear. He moves forward to carry out the task of the new religious historian; the task of seeing unity or coherence in humankind’s religious history:

It is only the historian who can hold all the evolving diversities of any one religious community’s developments in interrelated intelligibility; and a *fortiori*, all the evolving diversities of all religious communities. (4)

Smith emphasizes that it is *only* the historian – the enlightened humane scientist dwelling in both the mundane world and in transcendence – who is able to discern the unity of religious history. The old type of historian is too bound to the mundane, and the theologian does not fully recognize the mundane dimension of the human encounter with transcendence. Smith also disqualifies philosophers, as fit for this task, on account of their tendency to do violence to actual religions by reducing them to “ahistorical” essences or “emaciating abstractions.” (5) For Smith, history is the locus of religion, and thus his view that the historian is the one to uncover the truth about religion/religious history: “History is the domain of the specific, the multifarious; of recalcitrant fact; of the human. It is the domain of personal faith, in its depth and vitality and diversity.” (5)

Given Smith’s commitment to the reality of religious diversity, it is impossible for him to say that different religions are the same. What he does say, though, is that

different religions (i.e., different expressions of faith) are “historically interconnected.” In other words, religious history is united or singular because the various expressions of faith throughout the world are interconnected. Smith affirms the interconnectedness of religious traditions in the following terms:

Rather, it is to affirm that they are historically interconnected; that they have interacted with the same things or with each other, or that one has ‘grown out of’ or been ‘influenced by’ the other; more exactly, that one can be understood only in terms of a context of which the other forms a part. (5)

Smith notes that such interconnectedness is well established in particular traditions; for example, Christians recognize that what they have is a “shared common history” despite the fact that Christianity is an “ever-changing multiformity.” Smith wants us to recognize that this exact same situation obtains on a larger scale – in the ever-changing multiformity of mankind’s religious history: “What they have in common is that the history of each has been what it has been in significant part because the history of the others has been what *it* has been.” (6) Smith insists, that the singularity of religious history has always been the case, that this truth is being “newly discovered” by the historian of religion. (6)

To make his case, Smith provides two vivid examples of mutual influence among different religious traditions. One of these is the “fable” of Barlaam and Josephat, as encountered by Leo Tolstoy in nineteenth century Russia, which Smith traces through its various incarnations in *different religious traditions* – tracing it all the way back to a second to fourth century composition in Sanskrit known as the *Lalitavistara*. But Smith doesn’t stop at showing how Tolstoy was influenced by an ancient Sanskrit text; he goes

on to show how the thought of Tolstoi would have a profound influence of the thinking of M.K. Gandhi, and how the thinking of Gandhi influenced the great civil rights activist Martin Luther King. Smith's point in all of this is to show that religious influence does not flow in one direction but is more like a web of mutual interconnections wherein various traditions are continually borrowing and transforming expressions of faith from one another. Or, as Smith puts it: "every religious tradition on earth has in fact developed in interaction with the others; not in isolation, in some watertight compartment." (15)

Smith notes that his two illustrative examples of historical interconnectedness (the second being the development of prayer beads) are relatively superficial. Yet, he maintains that his perspective holds up even when dealing with more profound expressions of faith, such as the Christian concept of God. Smith, of course, begins his analysis of the concept of God by insisting that the concept of God must not be identified with God – the concept of God is just another expression of faith or one's personal relationship with God. And from there he frames the particular Christian concept of God as "a part of the world history of the idea of God on earth." Christians, like others, have participated and contributed to this total history.

For Smith, this total view of human religious history is closer to truth than the old way of seeing each tradition developing in isolation; indeed, he sees this as the way that God has seen things all along. But, again, this God's-eye view of religious history is new to human beings as it is being newly discovered by historians only now. (19)

Smith seems to suggest that even historians blind to the transcendent dimension of human religion, would be able to see the unity or interconnectedness of humankind's religious history – in the historical dimension. Nonetheless, such blind historians would

not be able to say anything about the theological unity inherent to humankind's religious history. This is a task for the religious historian, and so Smith closes *Towards a World Theology* with some reflections on the theological dimension of the unity of humankind's religious history. (19)

Smith frames the task of the new historian/theologian (or humane scientist) in terms of "conceptualizing the whole" or making the total of humankind's religious history intelligible. Such a conceptualization would be a "world theology." Smith makes no pretence of being able to articulate such a universal truth, but he does think that he can move towards it. And he attempts this on three distinct fronts: vocabulary, truth, and history." (181) Smith's movement towards a world theology, might lead some to question whether or not he is really a pluralist, and we will close out our examination of Smith by addressing this question. But first, let's examine Smith's interim vision of a world theology.

With respect to language, Smith briefly discusses four conceptual categories or terms that he thinks may function "generically" within a world theology. Today, we might refer to such terms as being "cross-cultural," but the idea is that these singular and common terms can be used to accurately signal what may appear to be different religious expressions in different religious traditions (to use Smith's language).

As might be expected, the first generic term proposed by Smith, for use in a world theology is *faith*. Having just published a substantial volume on faith (and belief) Smith says little more about it in this context, but does express the hope that "others will find its subsuming of several specifics persuasive and helpful." (182) This statement tells us

something of how Smith's generic terms function; they function as unifying conceptual categories that can subsume (all) specific instantiations of the category.

The second term that Smith considers is *salvation*. In this case, Smith's only conclusion is that this term needs some work before it can function generically within a world theology: "Those of us who know what we wish to say in this realm have a distance yet to go before we have found or constructed a way of saying it intelligibly." (182) This statement tells something about how Smith understands the situation and task of the world theologian. The world theologian is situated in a world of seemingly disconnected manifestations of religion, and the task of such a theologian is to see how these different manifestations are actually different versions of the "same" reality. By identifying the commonality, and finding a suitable term to express it, the world theologian brings intelligibility to an otherwise unintelligible situation. The unintelligible situation is one of raw diversity: the intelligible situation is one of diversity subsumed within a great unity.

Smith's third term is *theology*. Smith realizes that the term theology might have to give way to something else on account of cumulative traditions such as Buddhism and Western humanism that find it problematic. But, right now, the only viable alternative he sees is philosophy, and Smith prefers theology to philosophy for at least three reasons. First, he sees philosophy/the Greek tradition as one among other cumulative religious traditions, meaning that philosophy is particular rather than universal. Second – and apparently because Smith's first point is not well understood – theology has the advantage of keeping the problem of finding a suitable generic term in the forefront (because it is obviously not agreeable to everyone). In contrast, calling oneself a

philosopher might generate the illusion that one has “already attained universalism.”

(182) Third, on a related note, calling theology philosophy might lead to a tendency to approach religion from the outside (in the manner of the old comparative religion). Even so, Smith recognizes that Buddhists and humanists are unlikely to accept theology – just as many Christians and Muslims are unlikely to accept philosophy. Moreover, coming up with a new term is not easy because it would have to “subsume the past” but not “supersede” it. Smith closes by reluctantly tossing out “transcendentology” as a possible alternative. (182-183)

Finally, Smith considers the term *God*. Smith begins by explicitly affirming his view that the term God is a symbol. He is less explicit about saying what it is a symbol for but we can gather that it is for “the transcendent dimension within and around humankind.” (183) Smith contends that among those who use the concept of God (i.e., theists) there has been a tendency to emphasize different things. Some have emphasized that God transcends all human conceptualizations of Him, and others have emphasized the aspects of God that can be positively known. Smith confesses that the term God has a positive connotation for him, but recognizes that this is not the case for others – particularly those from non-theistic religious traditions. As a way beyond this impasse, Smith suggest that we mean the following by the term God: “a truth – reality that explicitly transcends conception but in so far as conceivable is that to which man’s religious history has at its best been a response, human and in some senses inadequate?” (185)

Smith is willing to admit that there is much in religious history that is “repugnantly perverse” but he insists that these need not “eclipse the divine.” (185) At

this point, Smith does not try to sort out the perverse from the divine, in religion. But he does seem to assume that his reader will see divinity in their own religion, and he does assume that divinity is in all religions and so makes the claim that “If any [religion] is to be taken seriously, all are.” (185) His aim here is to move towards a better generic term for what some have traditionally called God – to make this concept “more corporate and more historical.” (186) For Smith, this means transforming it into a term that can (ideally) be used by all of the world’s cumulative religious traditions, and that gives accurate expression to the reality that is responded to in each different tradition. Indeed, Smith’s hope is that the world theologian will work diligently to produce a whole new vocabulary that will “bridge the gap between specific and generic” and so make better sense of humankind’s religious history. (186)

Is Smith Really a Pluralist?

It may seem that Smith could go on and on, if not for the limits of time, in identifying terms that would need to become more corporate in order to make sense of our religiously plural world. Thus, we might imagine Smith’s preliminary steps evolving into a rich world theology that would make humankind’s religious history intelligible. But Smith’s insistence that terms such as transcendence/God and theology (or derivatives of these) must be preserved, and his insistence that these terms must be “anchored in history” suggest that his world theology is well past nascent form. Indeed, I will now argue that Smith’s theology leaves no room to develop generic terms beyond the few he has outlined – or, at least, there is no room to develop generic terms that have relevance for the entire religious “world.”

Smith understands what he means by God/transcendence, theology/transcendentology, history, and, of course religion (faith and cumulative tradition). These are the unmovable pillars of Smith's world theology, however much he may insist that a lot of work is yet to be done to develop one.

Although, Smith insists that no concept of transcendence is transcendence itself, there is no doubt in Smith's mind that there is transcendence. Transcendence is the opposite of the mundane world; religion is a human response to this great reality; consciousness of this "surpassingly great Other" is what keeps religion from being mere collective subjectivism; transcendence is the source of divinity in the human world.

Smith does not think of "history" as a symbolic or critical term similar to the terms God and theology. History is an objective domain in Smith's thought – it is the truly human world where the mundane and the transcendence meet. And Smith has painstakingly articulated his view that this convergence of the transcendent and the mundane, in human beings, is a personal quality known as "faith." Thus, humanity "at its best" is a faith community.

This idea of faith is, of course, central to Smith's concept of religion. Faith, or the personal quality of a human being's response to transcendence, can only be seen in expressions of faith. Such expressions of faith become the means for others to first come into contact with the transcendence – but this personal contact must then be expressed in its own way. In this manner, expressions of faith are perpetually developed and accumulated. The deposit of various related expressions of faith, constitute a cumulative tradition. Thus, there is a Christian cumulative tradition, a Hindu cumulative tradition, and so forth. Since, faith can only be seen in its various expressions, it can be thought of

as a multiform reality, such that we can think of Christian faith, Hindu faith, and so on. But, on the other hand, faith is a singular reality, and so it is wrong to think that there are *faiths*. Faith is one, in the sense that it is always a human response to transcendence (which is one), and Smith would eventually come to the conclusion that cumulative tradition, or humankind's religious history is also one. Thus, there are no radically separate cumulative religious traditions, even though conceptual divisions amongst them can be made; there is one cumulative religious tradition of humankind. This unity can be seen by the historian who is able to see interconnected expressions across religious boundaries. But more importantly it is seen by the theologian, or transcendentologist, or humane scientist, or the historian with an eye for faith.

The theologian – the world theologian – is able to see the unity of humankind's religious history at a deeper level. This theologian is not only able to see similarities in expressions of faith across religious borders, but is able to discern faith in these various expressions of faith – and realize that this faith is a genuine response to the one transcendent reality that appears in human history in the hearts of human beings. Ultimately the world theologian understands transcendence, not perfectly but meaningfully. And in this cosmopolitan era the task of the theologian is not just to see God/transcendence in one's own tradition, but in human life altogether:

[Theology]...is not simply of the history of religion, but of that to which the history of religion has at its best been a response. (These two amount to the same thing, if the former be taken authentically, listened to seriously.) That response has been human and in many senses inadequate, but not ultimately inadequate since sinners and derelicts and the undistinguished, as Shinran and Luther and

others have noted, are saved—or more generically, since human history, human life as lived in history, is and has been not inane. (186)

Thus, Smith knows what true religion is – it is faith and cumulative tradition. This entails knowing what faith is – it is a personal quality in the heart of one responding to the transcendent that is shown through expressions in the mundane world. And, it entails knowing what cumulative tradition is – it is the accumulative of various expressions of faith throughout the world. This understanding of religion entails a tripartite ontology consisting of 1) the world of transcendence, 2) the mundane world, 3) the human world wherein the mundane and the transcendent meet. The human world is synonymous with the historical domain; thus, it is within history that one can see the convergence of the transcendent and the mundane in the human heart (in faith) and the embodiment of this convergence (in expressions of faith). And, it is the world theologian who can see this process taking place across all of human life – in all human faith communities. Indeed, the world theologian can see that there is only one faith community and is charged with the task of making this community intelligible to others.

But what more is needed to make Smith's vision of a world theology more intelligible? It might be suggested that the generic terms, or categories, suggested by Smith would need to be further developed – along with many others – in order to have a functional world theology. But do the parameters set by Smith even allow for this? In other words, if we accept Smith's definition of religion, his ontology, and his view about who is in the best position to know the truth about such matters, is there any room left to introduce further generic religious terms? I think we can answer this question, negatively,

by reflecting on Smith's handling of the generic term "salvation" above, and considering how we might develop the term salvation within Smith's world theology.

Smith offers practically nothing in terms of a more corporate understanding of the term salvation – he simply leaves the task to future world theologians. But I suggest his deferral to the future had nothing to do with the limits of time, and everything to do with structural limitations imposed by Smith's definition of religion. For Smith, every religious "thing" is an expression of faith – all religious art, all religious practices, all religious rituals, all religious doctrines are expressions of faith. Salvation is a term that for many is synonymous with true religion. (See, for example, John Hick below.) For Smith, though, true religion is faith (in the singular) and expressions of faith (in the plural). Thus, for Smith, salvation must be an expression of faith. This means that, even if salvation (or a like term) is used, generically, to account for specific instances of "salvation," the term salvation itself must still be subsumed under the meta-generic heading of faith. Indeed, within Smith's theology no religious term could be generic in the same universal sense that faith is universal.

Terms, such as theology and God, might give the impression that Smith's world theology could accommodate generic/universal terms akin to faith, but theology and God are used by Smith in order to explicate faith; they are respectively the condition of faith and the mode of understanding faith.

But apart from the conditions under which faith is obtained (Smith's tripartite ontology of the mundane world, transcendence, and the historical human world), and the mode of understanding faith (theology/transcendentology), every other religious thing

must be an expression of faith. Salvation belongs in this category and this, I suggest, explains why Smith didn't even make a start with this generic term.

Nonetheless, the larger question raised by Smith's steps towards a world theology, is whether or not he remained a pluralist in making these. Would it not be more accurate to think of him as an inclusivist in light of his insistence that faith is singular, that religious history is singular, and his efforts to incorporate universal/generic terms from his own tradition that can account for this singularity?

I still maintain, that Smith is still best understood as a pluralist because he does not change his view that faith can only be discerned in particular expressions of faith. This means that faith, though singular, is also always plural. To repeat, true religion, can never be reduced to a singular form of religion, but can only be discerned in its multiform expressions. Smith's very definition of religion continues to make him a pluralist.

2. John Hick: The Pluralist Hypothesis

As with Smith, I will not try to present a comprehensive view of John Hick's thinking about religious diversity, but will present enough to argue that his thought exhibits the three main features of religious pluralism, and to show how this thought stems from contact with religious others.

John Hick may be thought of as one of the "founding fathers" of religious pluralism. Hick's religious pluralism is primarily about recognizing non-Christian religions as equally valid to Christianity. For Hick, true religion, is religion that effects salvation; thus, Hick's pluralistic claim is that all of the "great world religions" –

including Christianity – are coequal in terms of salvific efficacy. In other words, there are several true religions – or, religious pluralism is the case.

Hick never raises questions about the validity of Christianity; he always assumes that it is salvifically effective. The question, or problem, for Hick, is authenticating the other religions. Hick's solution to this problem is to define salvation (religion) in such a way that it can assume different traditions-specific forms. His critics have argued that his definition of salvation reduces all religions to essentially the same form, and thereby eliminates the very diversity it is meant to authenticate. Hick's particular solution to "the problem" of religious diversity is easier to understand if we understand the personal context in which his pluralistic theorising arises. Thus, we will begin our examination of Hick's theology of religions by examining an autobiographical account of his involvement in three theological controversies, since each controversy tells us something about Hick's perception of, and solution to, the problem of religious diversity.

Hick's Encounter with the Religious Other

Hick begins his autobiographical account by identifying himself as conservative by nature, but something of an intellectual radical:

My mind showed a wilful propensity to philosophy, and to the asking of questions, together with an unsociable habit of noticing flaws in arguments and inconsistencies in accepted belief systems and, to make matters worse, and obsessive respect for facts.¹⁷

Hick self-identifies as a liberal, historically-minded philosopher who is willing to challenge the intellectual status quo when it is flawed or inconsistent. In this respect, he is

¹⁷ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 1; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

the opposite of fundamentalists, evangelicals, and the “church-going masses” who hold traditional religious beliefs no matter how much they are disproved by the facts of history. Hick’s questioning and challenging disposition has led him into three significant theological controversies.

The first controversy took place when Hick tried to move his ministry membership from a Presbytery in England to a Presbytery in the United States in 1959, since he was taking a teaching position at Princeton Theological Seminary. According to Hick, the American Presbytery (of New Brunswick, in New Jersey) had a strong fundamentalist contingent. One of the questions that Hick was asked in his interview was whether he had objections to anything in the Westminster Confession of 1647. Hick mentioned several points in this document that he took exception to, including the creation of the world in six days, the predestination of many to Hell, the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and the virgin birth of Jesus. Hick’s questioning of the virgin birth led the committee to reject his request for transfer or to bar him from the Presbytery. (1-3) Hick didn’t actually positively deny the doctrine; his position was that there wasn’t any historical evidence in support this view, and moreover that it was non-essential to the more important Christian doctrine of the Incarnation (which Hick did assent to at the time).

The decision by the New Brunswick Presbytery to bar Hick from the Presbytery was upheld by a higher governing body of the Presbyterian Church (the Judicial Commission of the Synod of New Jersey) in 1962, but was then overturned by an even higher body (the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly). Despite finding this whole situation ridiculous, Hick also saw it leading to some positive changes

in the Church. First, the Church upheld the principle of toleration on subsidiary theological issues (such as the virgin birth); second, it subsequently became more difficult for conservative faculty at the Princeton Theological Seminary to force their views on liberal students; and, third, the Princeton Seminary came to be seen as more liberal within the Church. What Hick, no doubt, learned from this experience is that there is room for liberal views, such as his own, within the Church.

In 1964, Hick returned to England to teach at Cambridge University, and, then, in 1967 took up a chair in the Philosophy of Religion at Birmingham University. It is in Birmingham that Hick encountered religious pluralism in a concrete way, and become immersed in a second theological controversy. Hick describes Birmingham as a “fascinating and challenging place.” (4) It was fascinating on account of its rich racial, cultural and religious diversity that emerged from large scale immigration in the 1950s and 1960s. When Hick arrived in 1967, about 10 percent of the population of one million was “black.” As for religious diversity there were “Muslims from Pakistan and, later Bangladesh; Sikhs from the Indian Punjab; Hindus from Gejerat and other parts of India; and fervent Pentecostal Christians from Jamaica, Trinidad, and other Caribbean islands.” (5) And it was challenging on account of “a pervasive racism” that, according to Hick had “become deeply ingrained in the British mind during the centuries of colonialism.” (5)

Official government policies, at the time, were non-discriminatory – but, in practice, there was pervasive colour discrimination throughout Birmingham and other parts of England. This led to the emergence of several official and voluntary organizations whose aim was to produce a more just and equitable society. According to

Hick's description, these groups were made up of "black and white liberals and as the Establishment would say) radicals." Hick himself became seriously involved in both an official and a voluntary group. (6)

The voluntary group that Hick became involved with was called All Faiths for One Race (AFFOR); in fact, Hick was a co-founder of this group and served as its first chairperson. Members of AFFOR were Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, and even humanist and Marxist. The group was largely involved with social issues – helping immigrants to navigate social assistance programs, seeking out local radio time for immigrant groups, encouraging local churches to become involved in these issues, and so on. But it eventually became embroiled in an issue of some theological significance. (6)

The issue involved the publication of an AFFOR pamphlet, produced by Hick, wherein he exposed the racist intensions, and Nazi ties, of two political groups in England (the National Front and the National Party). AFFOR decided that it would like to publish this pamphlet, with a preface written by local church leaders commending it to its members. As things turned out, the local church leaders were not willing to write such a preface on account of the possibility of being sued for defamation; they even refused when AFFOR revised the pamphlet so that it contained no personal references. In the end, the pamphlet was published as *The New Nazism of the National Front and National Party* with a preface written by a well-know Christian leader from outside the Birmingham community, who wrote as an individual rather than in his official capacity as President of the Methodist Conference. (8-9)

Despite the refusal of church leaders, to contribute to the pamphlet, it did receive wide circulation and attention within church circles. Hick attributed this to the time being

right; in fact, he says that the late 1970s mark a turning point in favour of pluralistic society:

The late 1970s were something of a turning point in the mobilisation of Christian opinion in Britain against organised racism, and saw a growing commitment to the creation of a just pluralistic society (9)

Hick says that this new Christian consciousness is growing, even though it still belongs to the minority within the churches. He also says that this consciousness is connected to a “new openness” to people from other faiths, and a new interest in “Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Buddhism” – and that this has many practical implications. (9)

Hick experienced the practical implication of this new openness to other religions in the official group that he was involved with – the Religious and Cultural Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee. The panel was involved in trying to establish a new multi-faith “Agreed Syllabus” to replace the (then) current Agreed Syllabus, or the exclusively Christian religious education curriculum that was mandatory for all students in the State-school system. Hick chaired the multi-faith committee that organized this work, and eventually a new Syllabus was produced, that had students learn about more than one faith while still being able to “specialize” in their own. (10)

Hick attributes the success of this project to changing attitudes in the “host community” to those of other faiths - and says that among the minority of church goers, who are concerned with religious pluralism there is “an open and accepting spirit and a real desire to seek justice.” (10) Hick even goes so far as to say that *in practice* there is an acceptance of the sort of religious pluralism he envisions:

In practice it is accepted that the other great streams of religious life and thought are independently valid areas of divine revelation and salvation, and that the traditional policy of trying to convert all mankind to the Christian way should be abandoned. In the experience of meeting people of other faiths many Christians have thus been led by the Spirit into significantly new attitudes and practices. (10)

Thus, Hick sees religious pluralism as a “grassroots” movement that stems from meeting people of other faiths. I think it is significant that Hick’s experience of religious diversity has been one of being in a dominant religious group that is “hosting” minority religious groups. In such a situation, any recognition of validity that the minority groups receive comes unilaterally from the dominant host group. In contrast, the dominant host group needs no such recognition of validity from the minority groups – its validity is taken for granted. This, attitude is, I think, reflected in Hick’s philosophy of religious pluralism, wherein non-Christian religions are recognized as true religions on account of being just like Christianity (as understood by Hick).

Nonetheless, being able to see other religions as “independently valid areas of divine revelation and salvation” – or as true religions – required Hick to interpret religion and reinterpret traditional Christian theology. Hick felt justified in this enterprise since he saw traditional theology lagging behind the “new practical outlook” of religious pluralism; it was out of step with the times and creating a disjunction between how Christians were acting and how they were thinking:

Most Christians still adhere to the traditional theology according to which there is only one way of salvation from which follows the duty to try to bring all human beings into that way. The old conception of the unique superiority and soul saving

power of Christianity is still enshrined in the liturgies and hymns... . Thus many Christians find themselves behaving in one way whilst still thinking theologically in another. And it is then one of my locations as a theologian to work for the new kind of theology of religions which is implied by the new praxis. This seems to me to involve a frank recognition that there is a plurality of divine revelations and contexts of salvation. (10-11)

This work, of reinterpreting traditional Christian theology, to fit the “new praxis” of religious pluralism has made Hick’s work controversial amongst Christian theologians – and Hick discusses this with his third controversy.

This third controversy revolves around Hick’s reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Hick says that he was stirred to think about the “logical character of incarnational language” in light of the problem of religious pluralism and came to the conclusion that Christ’s incarnation should be understood mythically or metaphorically rather than literally. Hick was not alone in this view, and in 1977 edited – and, along with six British academic colleagues, contributed to – a volume called *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Hick identifies three themes in this volume: 1) historically, Jesus did not teach that he was God incarnate or the Second Person of the Trinity; 2) the idea that Christ is God incarnate can be seen as a doctrinal development that didn’t take full form until the fourth and fifth centuries – in the decades after Jesus’ death he was seen as a “prophet appointed by God in the last days to usher in the Kingdom”; 3) seeing incarnational language as mythic or metaphorical allows for a “genuine acceptance of religious pluralism.” (11-12)

Although these ideas were not new, *The Myth of God Incarnate* created a “furor” in British church life. The contributors to the volume were vilified as enemies of Christ, and soon a counter-volume called *The Truth of God Incarnate* was published. Hick attributed the controversy, at least in part, to a disjunction between scholarly research on religion and parish preaching. According to Hick, the ideas of *The Myth* were “already familiar to and largely accepted within the scholarly world” (13) – but they were unknown to the “average occupant of the pews” since such things weren’t being taught in the churches. *The Myth* helped to change this situation by bringing what scholars had known for a long time to the “body of church people and the general public.” (13)

Hick obviously makes a distinction between the average church goer, and those in the churches who are sensitive to the issue of religious pluralism. The former are removed, both in practice and theory, from the reality of religious pluralism; while the latter are pluralists in practice who need to be brought into the modern era in terms of theory and theology. Hick represents the best of both worlds: he is a pluralist, in practice, who is dedicated to bringing the insights of modern scholarship to bear on Christian thinking about other religions.

For Hick, thinking about the doctrine of the Incarnation as a language of myth or metaphor, used to express an experience of God, opens the door for Christians to be positively related to other religions – or their mythical and metaphorical expressions of their experiences of God:

...the realisation that religious language expresses apprehension of the divine in pictures and that these pictures are human and culturally conditioned has opened up for some the possibility that the different mythologies of the great religious

traditions may constitute alternative, or perhaps even complementary, rather than rival ways picturing the divine reality. (13-14)

But even though Hick says he is interested in reading the doctrine of the Incarnation as myth rather than as a historical reality, he is also interested in dismantling particular myths and replacing them with different (seemingly more historically realistic) accounts. Thus, on one hand, he is willing to see the *myths* of God's incarnation in Christ, and Christ's atoning crucifixion and resurrection as having "an imaginative unity and an emotional and moral impact which have powerfully affected millions of people over many centuries." But, on the other hand, he wants to "dismantle" these myths and replace them with alternatives:

We can... speak instead of Jesus as the man who was startlingly open to God and who saved people by making real to them the divine presence and the transforming divine claim upon their lives, thus setting up a new way of salvation within history – the way of discipleship to Jesus as he is mediated to us through the Bible and the Church. (14)

Thus, even though Hick wants us to think of religious language as myth, he does not shy away from "demythologizing" myths that he thinks are out of date. Whether or not Hick sees the above demythologized account of Jesus as a new myth is not clear. It seems that this would have to be his position in order for him to remain consistent about the nature of religious language; moreover, it does seem that Hick is hopeful of a pluralistic theology of religions emerging as a new framework, or new myth, for understanding religion – for both Christians and those of other faiths. (14)

I have presented this autobiographical account, primarily, to show how Hick's pluralism is born from his encounter with religious others; or, in Hick's words, how his theory of pluralism grew out of his practice of religious pluralism. This account, however, also shows Hick holding a number of views consistent with humanistic religious pluralism. First, Hick clearly affirms that there is not only one true religion but many – there “is a plurality of divine revelations and contexts of salvation.” Second, Hick does not affirm the unity of God (probably because he takes this idea as unassailable), but he does clearly present a humanistic concept of religion.¹⁸ He speaks of religions as human and culturally conditioned expressions of divine reality; he speaks of Jesus as a *man* who was open to God; and, he rejects the idea that Christ is the Incarnate Son of God, seeing this as a late theological development that altered the earlier understanding of Jesus as a prophet appointed by God. Third, Hick does not conceptualize true religion as an end, but as a universal form that can be expressed in a multitude of ways. Religion is a human and culturally conditioned expression or an authentic experience of God – these expressions of the divine revelation constitute divine revelations and contexts for salvation.

Nothing more needs to be said to make the point that Hick rejects the idea that there is one ultimately true religion, and promotes the idea that there are many true religions. It is also clear from the autobiographical account above, and the discussion in Chapter 3 that Hick holds both a unitary metaphysics and a “humanistic” concept of religion – so as to avoid the conclusion that there is one ultimately true religion. To repeat Hick's words: “If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other

¹⁸ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of how Hick has typically assumed that Ultimate Reality is one.

religions.”¹⁹ What needs further explication, though, is how Hick’s theology of religions employs a religious universal, instead of a religious end or essence – and is, thus, pluralist rather than inclusivist or exclusivist. To this end we will now review one of the most accessible forms of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, as given in *The Rainbow of Faiths: A Christian Theology of Religions*.²⁰

The Pluralistic Hypothesis

Hick’s argument begins with the juxtaposition of two incompatible ideas: 1) there are a number of great world religions amongst which it is impossible to affirm the moral superiority of any particular one (including Christianity); and, 2) Christians must be morally superior to religious others because Christianity was founded by God in person – as implied by the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity – and because God offered a salvific pathway to all of humanity through the atoning death of his Son, Jesus, the Christ.²¹ For Hick, moral superiority is the sign of being saved and, therefore, the salvific advantage of being a Christian guarantees that Christians will be morally superior to others.

Hick concludes from these seemingly contradictory ideas that Christian religious concepts or doctrines, leading to the conclusion that Christians are morally superior to others, must be wrong. He comes to this conclusion because he sees no way that he can be wrong about the fact that it is impossible to empirically determine the moral superiority of Christianity; thus, doctrines that do lead to this impossible conclusion must

¹⁹ Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, IX.

²⁰ For the most philosophically rigorous presentation of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, see Hick’s, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

²¹ Hick, *Rainbow of Faiths*, 15-16; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

be wrong. Hick's logic is questionable here because the conclusion he should come to is not that the Christian claim of superiority is wrong, but that it is impossible to tell if this claim is right or wrong, since it is impossible to empirically determine moral superiority amongst religions.²² Nonetheless, in Hick's mind, Christian claims of moral superiority, and all religious concepts that support such claims must be wrong, and so he sets himself the task of reinterpreting these concepts.

Most important, on his revisionary list, is the Christian doctrine of salvation that claims salvation is made available to human beings *exclusively* through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on Calvary around 30 CE/AD. Hick rejects this notion of salvation by arguing that, if true, it would manifest in the overall moral superiority of Christians – and since this is nowhere to be seen, this notion of salvation is necessarily false. Thus, Hick suggests the following alternative salvific formula: Salvation is the transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. (17-18) Hick is even so bold as to claim that this is real concern of *all* of the great world religions, and he later goes on to show how this is realized. (17)

At this point in his argument Hick, discusses the concept of Christian exclusivism with respect to salvation. Exclusivism is the affirmation that salvation (henceforth understood in Hick's terms) is only available through Christian identity. Hick rejects this position out of hand on the ethical grounds that it would be cruel of God to withhold salvation – and consequently damn – countless numbers of people, past and present, who had no opportunity to become Christian. (19)

After this dismissal of exclusivism, Hick discusses Christian inclusivism with respect to salvation or, more specifically, two forms of Christian inclusivism. The first

²² For a similar criticism of Hick, see Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 149.

type asserts that the saving grace of Christ may be present in other religious traditions but in order to be saved a person must become Christian, either in this lifetime or the next. The other type of inclusivism asserts that a person may be saved within the context of another religious tradition, but still maintains that the salvific power in other traditions really comes from Christ. (20-22)

Hick contends that it is difficult for Christian inclusivists to maintain the traditional Christian salvation narrative because of the mental gymnastics required to discern a salvific impulse, generated around 30 CE, in religious traditions predating Christianity. The typical manoeuvre of such inclusivists is to locate the Christ's saving power not in the historical event at Calvary but in Christ's identity as the eternal Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. Hick seizes on the opportunity presented by this move to suggest that this transcendental source of salvation – called the Logos by Christians – is the same transcendental source of salvation that is present in the other world religions, where it is known by different names such as the Dharma, Allah, the Tao, etc. (22-23) With this groundwork laid, Hick then introduces his full fledged theory of religious pluralism or his pluralistic hypothesis, and in this process reinterprets or revisions Ultimate Reality and religion.

Hick begins this process by addressing the subject of truth-claims and the related thorny issue of conflicting truth claims in world religions; specifically, the point raised by Bertrand Russell that if the world religions disagree not more than one of them can be right. (24) To tackle this problem Hick introduces three analogies – 1) the ambiguity of optical illusions, 2) Bohr's complementarity principle as applied to the observation of light, and 3) the use of technical distortions by cartographers to create different types of

maps for different purposes – to show how it is possible to see or map the same reality in different but equally valid ways. Hick uses his cartography analogy to argue that different theologies are different finite conceptual maps of the Infinite or the Real; these conceptual mappings, though different, are equally true and equally effective at leading human beings to salvation. (24-27)

Hick then begins his reinterpretation of the Christian concept of God by saying that his three analogies suggest that there is an ultimate ineffable Reality which is the ground and source of everything – including the different human conceptions of it, the correspondingly different experiences of it, and the correspondingly different forms of life lived in response to it. Moreover this Reality (the Real) is such that when the religious traditions are in proper or soteriological alignment with it (through their concepts, experiences and responses) they are contexts of salvation. (27)

But this raises the question of how we know if the concepts (truth claims), experiences, and responses are true and authentic – or, in soteriological alignment with the Real? Hick's answer is given earlier in his claim that salvation shows itself in the sign of spiritual fruits such as love, patience, and kindness; in other words, it can be seen in moral excellence or "saintliness." (16-17) Consequently, if we see moral excellence in a religious tradition we know that its truth claims are true and more broadly it is a tradition in soteriological alignment with the Real. This, then, is how Hick deals with the difficult problem of conflicting truth claims; by reducing truth-claims to a means of achieving salvation: Truth claims, no matter how contradictory, are equally true if they lead to salvation.

By this point in his argument Hick is confident that he can pronounce the fact of multiple religions – or, religious pluralism, in the sense of multiple equally effective contexts of salvation. This fact would seem to prove that no particular religion is identified with the Real as such, but Hick feels the need to ground this proposition in ontological reality. Consequently, Hick, distinguishes between the Real in itself and the real as experienced within the various religious traditions, using Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal. Nonetheless, once having established that it is not possible to conceptualize the Real, in itself, he asserts that there are two basic religious categories for understanding the Real – “deity” (the Real as personal) and “the absolute” (the Real as impersonal). (29)

This conceptualization of Ultimate Reality is significant for Hick because it allows him to undermine religious perspectives that claim to be ultimate on account of coming from the “one true God” or from a point of perfect identity with Ultimate reality. Hick’s solution is simple: the one true God is a persona of the Real and the One identified with Ultimate Reality is an impersona of the Real. Both are human conceptions of the real; neither is the Real in itself.

Hick closes by asking what impact his hypothesis might have on religions. He says that in some respects it won’t change much, but in others it will change quite a lot. Things won’t change insofar as religions will continue on their own unique cultural paths to salvation – but they will change insofar as religions will be forced to give up their notions of superiority and, thus, modify any religious concepts that support this idea. (29-30)

When Hick rejected the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth in 1959, he was temporarily banned from being a Presbyterian minister, but was eventually vindicated. When Hick went public with his view that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ should be read as mythic or metaphoric language, rather than a literal account of a state of affairs, he caused something of an uproar in the life of the church, and some bitter theological reaction. When Hick spearheaded a movement toward the development of a pluralistic theology of religions, with the publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* in 1987 – and when he fully articulated his own pluralistic hypothesis or theology of religions with the publication of *An Interpretation of Religion* in 1991 – he generated a storm of criticism against the very idea of religious pluralism.

In Chapter 5, we will examine some of the criticisms that have been launched against Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, and pluralism in general, as well as the creative efforts of these critics to formulate a better Christian response to religious diversity. These critics object to Hick's pluralism from two different directions. First, they criticize him for his innovative reinterpretations of Christianity – particularly his reinterpretations of God, Christ, and religion – which they claim turns Christianity into something other than Christianity. Second, they claim that Hick's theology – apart from not being really Christian – is not really pluralist because it only acknowledges other religions as true insofar as they conform to his theology, or his understanding of God, religion, and salvation.

I will now summarize the main features of Hick's theology of religions, and then argue that it deserves to be called pluralist, primarily, because it employs a concept of true religion that can be pluralized.

Is Hick a Pluralist?

Hick's concept of God, religion, and salvation are all connected. He conceives of God as one, unknowable, and ineffable. Or, rather, he conceives of "the Real" as having these (mostly negative) characteristics. He uses "God" to designate the Real perceived and conceived as personal – in contrast to "the Absolute" which designates the Real perceived and conceived as impersonal.

Because the Real cannot be fully known or fully experienced, no religious knowledge and no religious experience of the Real is complete, final, or perfect. This means there is no strong identity between any religious experience or reality, and the Real as such. Thus, such ideas as "divine revelation," "divine incarnation," "identification with the absolute," and so on, cannot be taken at face value. They must be understood as limited, human, culturally conditioned experiences/perceptions and consequent expressions/conceptions of the Real. In other words, Hick employs a "humanistic" opposed to a "revelatory" concept of religion, or a concept of "divine religion."

But humanly constructed religion is constructed in relation to the Real – which is real – and, this is why Hick thinks of his theology as religious rather than naturalistic.²³ The fact that it is impossible to identify religion with God means that it is impossible for there to be one perfect religion. It also makes it possible for there to be many different

²³ For Hick's primary discussion of this distinction, see *An Interpretation of Religion*, 234.

religions, or many different ways of perceiving of and conceiving of God. But, it does not guarantee that there will be many equally true religions.

To introduce this idea into his theology of religions Hick needs to have not only a concept of religion but, a concept of true religion.²⁴ True religion for Hick is a religion that produces salvation: if a religion is salvifically effective it is a true religion. Hick defines salvation as the turn from self-centredness to God-centredness/Reality centredness; thus, if a religion effectively creates Reality-centeredness in its adherent it is a true religion.

As for detecting Reality-centred individuals Hick says that these are revealed by “fruits of the spirit”; basically, true religions will produce saints, or people manifesting moral excellence. Jesus, in Hick’s view, is a profoundly Reality-centred human being who serves as a spiritual exemplar for those who follow him.

Finally, Hick makes the claim that the great world religions seem to produce saintly characters with, more or less, the same degree of effectiveness; thus, the great world religions are equal with respect to being true religions.

Whether Hick is right about any of this does not interest me. What interests me is the nature of Hick’s idea of true religion. I suggest that Hick’s idea of true religion (i.e., salvation) is best understood as a *religious universal* – and, thus, as something distinct from a religious end or a religious essence. It functions in the same way as Smith’s religious universal “faith” since it has no reality except insofar as it is instantiated in particular forms of religious salvation – in Christian salvation, Buddhist salvation and so forth.

²⁴ For one of Hick’s discussions about how to differentiate authentic from inauthentic religions, see *Rainbow of Faiths*, 110-111.

Nonetheless, Smith and Hick seem to come to their universals by different means – Smith by feeling the personal quality of faith and then discerning this same (universal) quality in the religious expressions of others, and Hick by observing multiple forms of religion and abstracting from these a universal form of religion – and this warrants further investigation into Hick’s universal(s).

Allow me to begin this process by quoting at length from *An Interpretation of Religion*:

The soteriological transformation normally occurs within the context of a particular tradition – indeed in the past probably almost always so – taking a form made possible by that tradition and being identified by criteria developed within it. There are accordingly Buddhist saints, Muslim saints, Christian saints and so on, rather than simply saints. However there is an all important common feature which we can both observe today and find reflected in the records of the past. This is a transcendence of the ego point of view and its replacement by devotion to or centred concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life. This shift from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is capable of expression in quite diverse forms of life. I have myself observed it in the very different lives of, for example, a Buddhist monk living in a forest hermitage in Sri Lanka and a Sikh doctor involved in a range of practical social activities in the Punjab. It can also occur in many different degrees.²⁵

This passage is taken from a section of *An Interpretation of Religion* that is trying to establish a criterion for discerning those who are truly saved or Reality-centred from

²⁵ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 301-302.

those who are not (in relative terms), or for discerning true religion from false religion. Hick needs to do this because his “God’s-centredness” is very much like Smith’s faith insofar as it can’t be detected in and of itself but only in “clothed” form.²⁶ For Smith, faith is clothed in its manifold expressions; for Hick God-centredness is clothed in the idea of “the saint” – a God-centred person who manifests love towards all sentient beings. These expressions of love or “fruits of the spirit” can take many different forms but can generally be divided into more outward acts aimed at social transformation and more inward acts aimed at spiritual edification.²⁷ Thus, Hick’s salvation is not an end point that obliterates all religious diversity, but a point of origin for multiple expressions of religion: As Hick says above “This shift from self-centredness to Reality-centredness [i.e., true religion] is capable of expression in quite diverse forms of life.” This means that for Hick true religion is, by definition, pluriform or plural.

Nonetheless, Hick’s conceptualization of pluriform true religion is more complicated than this, primarily because Hick is not willing to make a causal connection between particular forms of religion and particular expressions of sainthood. For Hick, religion in its most basic form is an *attempt* to perceive and conceive the Real – and there are endless instances of religion as such. Moreover, these various perceptions and conceptions of the Real, born of this basic religious effort, *may* be “authentic” and

²⁶ Paul Griffiths criticizes Hick for using a substantive, rather than a formal, definition of salvation – which makes his position only semi-pluralist. For Griffiths, defining salvation as something along the lines of “the end that all human beings desire” would be to define it formally. Defining it as “turning from self-centredness to Reality-centredness,” in contrast has some substance, and it is possible to imagine a definition of salvation that differs from this one, but could still be understood as salvation in the more formal sense of “the end that all human beings desire.” Granting Griffiths this point, I still maintain that – *in Hick’s usage* – his definition of salvation is not substantive, but is universal or formal. Even though he may be wrong about it, Hick does not see any alternatives to the form of universal form of salvation that he postulates – and this form of salvation has no reality except insofar as it is instantiated in particular instances, or insofar as it assumes particular forms of salvation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 303-306.

therefore serve as a context for salvation. Remember: salvation is a person's turn towards Reality-centredness and therefore must involve an authentic representation or Manifestation of the Real. (The Real itself is, of course, not available as a soteriological referent.)

But the only way to know if the manifestation of the Real, that one is using to become Reality-centred, is an authentic manifestation of the Real – and, therefore, that one actually is Reality centred – is by visible fruits of the spirit that can be generalized as a saintly character. The saint is the sign of both real salvation and of an authentic manifestation of the Real. For Hick, the saint is a generalized universal, abstracted from various sorts of saints, and this is all apparently plain to see. But even if it is, Hick is not willing (as said above) to identify particular manifestations of sainthood with particular religions. Thus, for Hick, a (true) religion is primarily an authentic manifestation of the Real and subsequently a context for actual salvation – which might be thought of as the fulfillment of true religion.

At the pinnacle of true religion we find Reality-centred persons of different sorts – we find Buddhist and Christians and so forth because these have used Buddhist perceptions and conceptions of the Real and Christian perceptions and conceptions of the Real as contexts for salvation. But this high point of religion – which is pluriform – is relatively mute, unexpressed, invisible. It is only when Christians and Buddhists are dressed as saints that we can see them as truly saved and therefore, deduce that their religious contexts are authentic. There is, however, nothing Buddhist or Christian in the clothing of a saint – so even though we are able to deduce that one's unexpressed God-centredness is Buddhist or Christian – we cannot properly say that there are Buddhist

saints and Christian saints. The most that we can say is that there are Buddhists and Christians who are (also) saints.

Consequently, I see Hick's pluralism limited in two ways. First, the domain in which Hick establishes religious plurality, or a pluriform religious universal (by way of seeing saints using different religions as contexts for God-centredness) is largely invisible. Here, there are God-centred persons not yet discernable, as such, because they are not clothed in sainthood. At most, we see figures that are vaguely distinct to the extent that their Reality-centredness casts a shadow of their particular context of salvation or the particular manifestation of the Real that their saved life is centred on. But when it comes to expressing this God-centredness – which makes up a great deal of what is regarded as religious diversity – the figure of the saint practically reduces all diversity to a skeletal uniformity. Or, at least it is not as rich as the diversity which remains in a “shadowy” state at the level of Reality-centredness. At the level of expression, Hick is only willing to say that there seems to be broad types of soteriological expression – the “spiritual” inward sort and the “political” outward sort.

But even with these criticisms, Hick should still be classified as a pluralist, or a humanistic pluralist. First, he makes the basic claim made by all pluralists that true religion is plural rather than singular; he rejects the idea of a singular maximus. Second, he denies the idea of strong identity between religion and the “one God” so as to avoid the conclusion that religion is one. And, third, as just discussed, he employs religious universals rather than religious ends or essences in his conceptualization of true religion.

Hick employs two universals: 1) the universal of salvation or God-centredness, and 2) the universal of the saint. The saint acts as the “visible” form of God-centredness.

But, even so, God-centredness does have its own vague appearance because concrete particular religions serve as contexts for salvation. This allows Hick to speak meaningfully about different contexts of salvation, such as Buddhist and Christian, but not so concretely and specifically about the various expressions of these different contexts of salvation. Still, Hick does acknowledge that there are significantly different expressions of salvation or different forms of the saint, and so his concept of the saint is a universal. The saint is universal because there is no one substantive form of the saint that can be realized; the saint is abstracted from different forms of the saint and is, therefore, inherently pluriform. Likewise, Hick's idea of God-centredness (taking into account that it is a relatively invisible and unformed reality that has to be authenticated by the concept of the saint) does not have a substantive form that can be realized. It is also an abstraction that cannot be seen apart from particular instantiations; it, too, is inherently pluriform. In short, Hick's universals have limitations – saints do not reflect the depth of religious diversity, and the saved do not show the breadth of religious diversity – but they are still universals.

Thus, I remain confident that Hick is best classified as a religious pluralist.

3. Paul Knitter: Religion as Eco-Human Well-Being

Paul Knitter is among the most vocal advocates of religious pluralism – and is perhaps its most passionate advocate. Knitter's passion stems from a positive correlation he makes between religious pluralism (the mutuality model) and the alleviation of human suffering, along with positive correlations between exclusivism (the replacement model) and inclusivism (the fulfillment model) and the promotion of human suffering. Because of

this Knitter finds exclusivism and inclusivism immoral and therefore unacceptable.

Among the advocates of pluralism (or the mutuality model), Knitter may also be the most sensitive to the criticisms of religious pluralism – and the most responsive as he continually tries to refine the meaning of religious pluralism in light of such criticisms. But Knitter is first and foremost a pluralist, and more specifically a pluralist Christian theologian and, thus, in order to understand his passion for pluralism and his apology for pluralism it is necessary to first understand his theology of religions.

To this end, we will exam parts of two of Knitter’s books that may be considered companion volumes: 1) *One Earth Many Religions: Multi-Faith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* in which Knitter articulates his pluralistic, or correlational, model of interfaith relations that calls for the religions of the world to unite around the “relative-absolute” criterion of “eco-human well-being” (*soteria*) in order to collectively address the suffering of the earth and its inhabitants; and, 2) *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* in which Knitter takes up some of the theological questions and challenges that Christians would face in adopting his pluralistic model. Both of these volumes begin with the same autobiographical account of Knitter’s journey from exclusivism to inclusivism and from inclusivism to pluralism – and since he felt it was important to introduce both his generic theology of religions and his explicitly Christian theology of religions with this autobiography we will begin our examination of Knitter’s theology with this story.

Knitter's Encounter with the Religious Other

Knitter calls his autobiography a “dialogical odyssey” to emphasize how much his life and thought – particularly as a Christian and theologian – have been shaped and changed by unanticipated encounters with others. Knitter conceptualizes two others that have especially affected his life and theology: the *religious other* and the *suffering other*.²⁸ The religious other served as the primary influence on Knitter’s theology up until the early 1980’s – and this influence is recorded in Knitter’s *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (1985). But after the early 1980s, Knitter became increasingly exposed to, and influenced by, “a bigger neighbourhood of the other” as he came into contact with Central American refugees who, for Knitter, came to represent the thousands of people throughout the world who are suffering needlessly on account of injustice. Knitter would eventually come to understand, and feel, the suffering other to be all sentient beings and the earth itself, and this suffering other would become an even greater concern for Knitter than the religious other: This concern is reflected in *One Earth Many Religions* and *Jesus and the Other Names*.²⁹

Knitter frames his dialogical odyssey in terms of Race’s exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist approaches to other religions – and insists that these types are not mere “academic play things” but represent different perspectives obtained through genuine personal spiritual struggles. Moreover, Knitter attributes his personal spiritual struggles – as he moved from exclusivism to inclusivism and from inclusivism to pluralism – to his encounters with the religious and the suffering others. (4)

²⁸ Knitter will typically capitalize “other”; for the sake of consistency in this work I will not follow this pattern.

²⁹ Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 1-3; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

Knitter describes his first encounter with the religious other as more of a monologue than a dialogue. He didn't want to converse with religious others but to convert them; he wanted to be a missionary. Knitter took his first step in this direction by joining the Divine Word Missionaries, following four years of seminary high school and two years as a novitiate. Knitter says that concern, even love, for others was his prime motive in becoming a missionary but says that his love and concern was akin to the love and concern that a doctor might have for a sick patient and not that between friends. As a missionary he had the healing medicine of God's Word, and the heathens, mired in sin, were in desperate need of this medicine. (4)

Knitter recounts that his (Roman Catholic) missionary training, in the late 1950s early 1960s, involved becoming familiar with ideas such as "accommodation" and "missionary adaptation." These ideas involved using points of similarities between Christians and non-Christians as a starting point for the latter's spiritual transformation. In retrospect Knitter could see that, although this was a self-interested concern for others, it was also a positive first step towards positively recognizing religious others. (4-5)

Missionaries in training at the Divine Word Missionary houses would come into contact with a steady stream of missionaries returning from the field. But contrary to what Knitter was expecting, the experienced missionaries typically spoke about what was good, profound, and beautiful in these other religions, and not their sinful depravity. Knitter also had his first exposure to Buddhism at this time as a consequence of completing a project on the history, culture, and religion of Japan – one of the "mission countries" of the Divine Word Missionary. Here, too, Knitter was surprised by what he learned and that there was much in Buddhism that he liked. Thus, by the end of his

college studies in 1962 Knitter was beginning to seriously doubt the exclusivist tenet that only *we* have religious truth while *they* are mired in sin and error; the facts didn't seem to support this idea. (5)

In 1962, Knitter was sent to Rome to finish his theological studies and there would find the key to moving beyond exclusivism – the theology of Karl Rahner. Knitter arrived in Rome two weeks before the start of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. The Second Vatican Council saw the Roman Catholic Church become more open to the modern world, and this included greater recognition of the truth in other cultures and religions. Karl Rahner (see Chapter 1) played a key role in formulating the Church's new attitude toward “non-Christian” religions, and while in Rome Knitter had the opportunity to take courses about, and by, Rahner. Knitter found Rahner's view that the Church *must* recognize other religion as authentic and ways of salvation radically refreshing; it was a way of moving beyond the official line of exclusivism taught at missionary school and of squaring Church doctrine with his experienced reality. (6)

After earning his Licentiate in Theology in Rome, Knitter decided to complete a dissertation, at the University of Muster under the supervision of Karl Rahner, on Catholic attitudes toward other religions. After about a year Knitter discovered that someone else had just published a dissertation on this topic, and so decided to transfer to the University of Marburg to complete a similar dissertation on Protestant attitudes toward other religions. In his dissertation, Knitter argued that Protestant theologians did not go far enough in overcoming the exclusivism of Karl Barth's theology of religions. These theologians would acknowledge that other religions were “revelation” but would not acknowledge them as “salvation.” From Knitter's Rahnerian perspective this

amounted to going only half way in recognizing the authenticity of other religions. Even so, Knitter would eventually come to think that his own perspective was limited, since it saw the saving grace that was present in other religions as a reflection of the saving grace that was fully present only in Jesus the Christ. (7)

Knitter would eventually come to see his Rahnerian inclusivism as a “bridge” – specifically as a bridge from exclusivism to pluralism. And, for Knitter, the motivation to getting off this bridge and to the “other side” was encounter with the religious other. While completing his doctoral studies in Germany, Knitter had met Rahim, a fellow student from Pakistan who was majoring in chemistry and was a devout Muslim. Rahim and Knitter became close friends and often discussed religion. Two things about Rahim impressed Knitter: 1) he was ethically superior to most Christians that Knitter knew, and 2) he was perfectly content to remain a Muslim. Consequently, Knitter found it difficult to uphold his view that Rahim would ultimately need to be “fulfilled” in Christianity. His inclusivism was waning, and it waned further as he began his teaching career at Catholic Theological Union (Chicago) and Xavier University (Cincinnati). At these institutions, Knitter taught not only theologies of religions and interreligious dialogue but also courses in world religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. This required Knitter to become a serious student of these religions, which he approached with both an “intellectual-historical and personal-experiential” method. The upshot of this study and teaching was that Knitter became even less convinced that other religions were ultimately fulfilled in Christianity. (7-8)

Knitter realized that he needed a new theoretical map to sort out his spiritual universe and consequently turned to guides such as Raimon Panikar and Thomas Merton,

both of whom had experience with multi-religiosity. Knitter himself even entered into this new world of multi-religiosity by re-embracing the practice of daily meditation – but now in the form of Zen Buddhist meditation or *zazen*.³⁰ Knitter describes this new awakening to the truth of other religions, that was reshaping his theological perspective as follows:

From such study, conversations, and practice, I realized that a dialogue of discovery and theological insight was unfolding – sometimes exploding – within me. There were particular experiences and insights that shook and then rearranged my theological perspectives: when I realized that perhaps the Hindu claim of non-dualism between Brahman and Atman was not just an analog, but perhaps a more coherent expression of what Rahner was trying to articulate with his notion of the supernatural existential or when I realized that the Buddhist experience of *Anatta* (no-self), as much as I had understood and felt it, enabled me to better understand and, I think, live, Paul’s claim “It is now no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). (8)

Knitter finally moved away from his Rahnerian inclusivism by writing a book – *No Other Name?* (1985) – in which he surveys different “models” for understanding other religions within Christianity, and begins to lay the foundation for his own new model based on dialogue.

³⁰ In this respect, Knitter is more engaged in religious diversity than either Smith or Hick; he not only acknowledges the validity of the religious other he participates in the religious life of the religious other. This, I would suggest is what makes Knitter most reluctant, among humanistic religious pluralists, about applying essences or universals that compromise religious diversity.

Following the lead of John Hick, Knitter grounded his new approach to religions in theocentrism rather than Christocentrism; in other words, he wanted Christians to recognize that God rather than Christ was the origin of religion:

Though we Christians claim Jesus the Christ as our necessary and happy starting point and focus for understanding ourselves and other peoples, we must also remind ourselves that the Divine Mystery which we know in Jesus and which we call *Theos* or God, is ever greater than the reality and message of Jesus. (9)

The fact that God transcends religion, allows Christians to see other religions as possible responses to the Divine Mystery. Knitter, at this point wasn't positively affirming that other religions were genuine responses to the Divine Mystery or Ultimate Mystery – this would come later – he was only saying that other religions *may* be authentic responses to this reality. And, if this was the case, then other religions would not be fulfilled in Christianity but would be related to Christianity, since all religions (including Christianity) move towards God, or “continue their efforts to discover or be faithful to inexhaustible Mystery or Truth.” (9)

Knitter would eventually go on to positively affirm that other religions are, like Christianity, authentic but not exhaustive responses to the Divine Mystery (in *One Earth Many Religions* and *Jesus and the Other Names*). But to understand the particulars of this pluralistic affirmation it is helpful to learn more about Knitter's life experience.

As mentioned above, after writing *No Other Name?* Knitter's focus turned more and more to the suffering Other. This turn began in 1983 when Knitter met, in Cincinnati, two Salvadoran students who had become refugees as a consequence of speaking up about human rights in their native land. This meeting inspired Knitter to become involved with

the Sanctuary Movement in Cincinnati – an ecumenical group that, in defiance of American policy, was providing shelter to Central American refugees. And it also inspired him to embrace liberation theology in order to make sense of religion and be a faithful Christian. From this point on, Knitter could no longer do theology unless it was connected to liberation (theology) – and we see this in all of Knitter’s work in the theology of religions starting with his contribution to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987) called “Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions.” (10)

This need to fuse concern for the religious other with concern for the suffering other was enforced in Knitter’s mind when he had the opportunity to take a five month sabbatical to India in 1991: “If there was ever a country that has housed, so graphically and tensely, the ‘many religions’ and the ‘many poor,’ it is India.” (11) India proved to Knitter that dialogue and liberation must go hand in hand. By this time Knitter, like many others, was becoming sensitive not only to the suffering of other human beings but also to the suffering of all sentient beings and the earth itself. Thus, Knitter felt it necessary to conceptualize justice and liberation very broadly as “ecohuman justice and liberation.” And this is particularly significant for our discussion here because ecohuman justice and liberation, or ecohuman well-being would become Knitter’s universal criteria for judging true religion. Religions that promote ecohuman justice are true religions and those that do not are not.

This universal criterion – placed on top of his “agnostic” theocentrism – is at the heart of Knitter’s theology of religions, and so we will now turn to Knitter’s generic articulation of this universal criterion of religious truth in *One Earth Many Religions*, and his more Christian-specific articulation of it in *Jesus and the Other Names*.

A Generic Theology of Religions

In *One Earth Many Religions*, Knitter connects global responsibility with being religious: “to know the Sacred is to care for the Earth; to care for the Earth is to be touched by the Sacred.”³¹ Knitter uses this connection to establish a common ground for interreligious dialogue; more specifically, he suggests that the earth can be used as 1) a basis for understanding religious beliefs cross-culturally, and 2) a basis for evaluating all religious beliefs. In other words, Knitter suggests that “justice or ecohuman well-being can serve as a universal criterion for truth without becoming a new foundational or absolute norm for truth.” (118)

Knitter forms his view that justice or ecohuman well-being can serve as a universal criterion for judging religions in conscious opposition to the postmodern view that any attempt to establish such an ethical criterion will drown in a sea of diversity. And, his quest for commonality or universality on the ethical front begins with a claim that the Earth provides human beings with a common story that can help us to understand and unify our various religious experiences. Most significantly – as noted by several visionary philosophers, scientists, and theologians – recent (scientific) discoveries about the origins of the universe and its workings provide all religions with a “common creation myth.” (119) Knitter believes that this common myth can serve a “hermeneutical framework” for linking various religious creation stories and showing the deep connectedness of all living beings:

³¹ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 118; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

The scientific enterprise has eventuated in a creation myth that offers humanity deeper realization of our bondedness, our profound communion not only within our species, but throughout the living and non-living universe. (120)

Knitter emphasizes that this common myth not only connects all living creatures by identifying their common origin and heritage, it also connects them by showing how the universe works, i.e., by showing that the universe is deeply interrelated and organic: “What one is and what one makes of oneself takes place through dependence on others, through relationships and connectedness.” (120)

For Knitter, this common story can serve as a meeting place for all religions and nations, and it suggests that the Earth – rather than any religion or nation – should demand the primary loyalty of all human beings. Nonetheless, Knitter’s main concern is not with remythologizing this story into a religious story, but with attending to the common ethical task that it implies. He believes that it is on the ethical level that this common story can most practically unify the religions. The common ethical task that Knitter sees before all peoples and all religions is care for the Earth and our species in the face of impending ecological disaster – and he believes that this must impel the peoples of the world to a universal discourse and to universal action, despite the protests of postmodernists. (121-123)

In short, “our Earth” now understood as “one Earth,” on account of the common creation myth of modern science, is the common “place” where all religions can come together to share their myths of origin – and, it is also an ethical community in which persons can come together to “identify and defend common criteria of truth.” (123) Knitter sees these two spheres working in concert – the religions will come together to

communally affirm (in different ways) the new creation myth, and these will provide the “materials and perspectives” to fashion “global ecological norms.” (123) Indeed, Knitter believes that the religions will have a “determinative role” in responding to the global ecological crises because only they can articulate the sacredness of the Earth, without which care for the earth can never be effective: “If we regard the Earth and all its creatures as merely finite, as disposable tools to achieve our own good, we will not dispel our ecological nightmares.” (123)

Knitter believes that all of the “wisdom traditions” (religions) teach such things as respect for human life, the interconnectedness of all beings, the need to overcome self-aggrandizement and so forth – and that spokespersons for the world’s religious communities are forming a common front to criticize the ethical failings that are leading to ecological destruction. Moreover, Knitter believes they *must* form a common front because they face a common problem; namely, the well-being of human beings and our one Earth. (124)

But even though Knitter recognizes that all nations and religions share a common problem, he also recognizes that they certainly do not share a common solution to this problem. Following David Tracy, Knitter affirms that religions are not the same – there is no single essence of religion or a single way to salvation, but that there are common criteria that allow religions to talk to one another and overcome incommensurability. Tracy identifies mystical, reasonable, and ethical points of commonality in all religions and Knitter believes that all of these must come into play in interreligious dialogue, but he suggests that the ethical is the best starting point for making “shared assessments of truth.” (126) For Tracy, ethical truth criteria is about the “personal and social

consequences of our beliefs,” and so Knitter proposes a universal criterion for universal truth based on ethical fruits. More specifically, he says that we can judge a religion (a religion’s beliefs) to be true and good if it removes suffering and promotes well-being. Thus, religions can judge the validity of each other’s beliefs on the basis of whether or not they promote ecohuman well-being and reduce ecohuman suffering. For Knitter there is something raw and universal about ecohuman suffering that defies interpretation, and this validates the quest for *universal* solutions.

Despite his claim that ecohuman well-being might serve as a criterion for religious truth, Knitter is ever mindful of the postmodern warning against a particular, culturally conditioned notion of justice masquerading as an absolute criterion of justice. Thus, he tries to conceptually validate his claimed universal criterion by calling it a “relative-absolute criterion.” (129) By calling his universal a relative absolute Knitter is trying to walk a line between the extremes of absolutism (one and only) and relativism (anything goes). Knitter’s way between these two extremes is to claim that his norm of ecohuman justice, on one hand, demands that we follow and defend what we see as true, but, on the other, demands that we be open to seeing the truth more fully. This middle path requires us to embrace absolutely what we have (by acknowledgement) grasped only relatively. (129)

Knitter claims that this situation, wherein one embraces absolutely a relative norm, is paradoxical, and uses Langdon Gilkey’s reflections on the finite and Infinite, and on absolute and relative truth to explain this paradox. For Gilkey, the absolute requires the relative in the same way that the Infinite needs the finite. The Infinite comes into contact with the finite by becoming “finitized,” and likewise absolute truth becomes

known to us in relative forms. In other words, human beings can only know Divine truth insofar as it assumes relative form – and, yet, the relativized Divine never becomes the merely relative but always also remains the Divine and so reveals absolute truth. (130)

In short, Knitter understands truth as having different aspects and this is especially evident at the level of ethical practice:

In what truth calls us to do, in the liberating praxis it generates, it can be absolute; yet when we reflect on how we have known this truth and the limitations of our knowing it, we feel the relative aspect of truth. (130)

Knitter even sees this dynamic taking place in us bodily: the heart takes full possession of truth and commits to it fully, but the head, when it tries to grasp the truth realizes that truth is so much bigger than it is, and that there must be more truth. (130)

But, of course, Knitter is most interested in seeing this dynamic at play in interreligious dialogue that is directed towards the universal goal of ecohuman well-being. Here Knitter claims that when we recognize something as true because it promotes ecohuman well-being we must be willing to stand up for it absolutely, but at the same time we must be open to other claims about what justice is and how it might be realized. Thus, Knitter imagines the religions, through a dialogical process, coming to ever greater realizations of justice. In this dialogue the religions will be ever open to new ways of realizing the human good or justice:

It requires that we be genuinely open to brand new ideas, to utterly different ways of realizing, or even conceiving, the human good. We have to be ready to be surprised, stretched, maybe humiliated. (131)

Thus, justice or the human good can be realized in many different ways – and Knitter makes this a permanent condition by insisting that the project of ecohuman well-being will always stand incomplete – it will “always be beyond our comprehension and our actualization.” (131)

Knitter believes that this relative absolute criterion of ecohuman justice would be acceptable to Christians, since Jesus provided the same criterion with his proclamation of the “reign of God” (also called the Kingdom of God) that functions as an absolute insofar as it is already here (within us) and as a relative since it is not yet established in the present. Let us now look more closely at how Knitter adapts his universal criterion to the Christian tradition in *Jesus and the Other Names*.

The section from Knitter’s *Jesus and the Other Names* that we will now examine is meant to show what is unique about Jesus or the message of Jesus –and, as indicated above, the uniqueness of Jesus’ message is framed as a unique form of Knitter’s religious criterion of ecohuman well-being.

Knitter’s *Generic Theology of Religions in Christian Form*

Knitter begins his quest to find what is unique in the message of Jesus by denying that he is looking for an essence of Christianity or an inner core that never changes. Moreover, he insists that by unique he does not mean something that no one else has, but rather that which makes something special or distinctive.³² These qualifications allow us to think of Jesus’ message as a unique form of something more universal.

Knitter, in a manner similar to Smith, says that Christianity does have a “unique core” but that this is not static and ahistorical – “to get at it and to feel its transformative

³² Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 84-85; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

power, one has to approach it and apply it with the interpretative tools of one's own historical and cultural context." (85) As with Smith's faith, this core of Christianity cannot be viewed naked, but can only be seen when clothed in the languages of different peoples and different times. And, also like Smith's faith, Knitter's core is both uniform and pluriform: "the core of Christian revelation is a pluriform, adaptive, changing reality." (85) Knitter would also make the same claim about religion in general and so in this regard is, like Smith, a pluralist by definition.

Knitter begins his quest for the pluriform core of Christianity with scholarship on the historical Jesus, even though he recognizes that he is entering a mine field of theological controversy. Moreover, Knitter recognizes that the historical Jesus can never provide the whole story about Jesus because Jesus, within his community (the church), is also the Christ of faith. And, on top of this, the message of Jesus is not only found in the gospels, but also in the guidance of the Spirit which may or may not be embodied ecclesiastically. (86-88)

But even with these qualifications, Knitter claims that there is a surprising consensus among biblical scholars regarding the central message of Jesus; according to these scholars, the central message is of the coming Reign of God into this world. This means that Jesus' ultimate concern is not – as it is for many Christians – Jesus himself. And, it also means that Jesus' ultimate concern is not simply God. For Jesus, there is something that mediates the absolute truth of God, and so serves as a criterion for judgment, but this divine mediator is neither the church nor the "Kingdom of heaven." This divine mediator, and ultimate criterion for judgment, is the Kingdom of God on earth. (89)

This means that the message of Christ is not christocentric, theocentric, or ecclesiocentric. In *No Other Name?* Knitter identifies pluralism with theocentrism, and so requires further explication of his new position that is not theocentric. Knitter claims that Jesus would have seen his message as incomplete if it only called for belief in, and worship of, God – for Jesus, God could not be known or worshipped apart from the Reign of God. Thus, for Jesus, in order to be God-centered one had to be Kingdom-centered, and so we can call his message Kingdom-centered. (89-90) Thus, the Kingdom of God is the divine mediator that serves as the ultimate criterion for judgment.

As for what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God, Knitter says that the meaning of this symbol can never be fully exhausted; nonetheless, he is willing to identify certain features of the Kingdom. First off, the Kingdom of God is a this-worldly reality that effects a transformation in human beings and human societies:

...Jesus intended the betterment, the well-being, the fuller life of people around him, especially those who were suffering. It was a reality that would change both human hearts *and* human society. (90)

The Reign of God will take concrete form in justice and peaceful relations between the peoples of the world, and in the disappearance of sickness, injustice and oppression. It will entail that human beings will have a new relationship with God and that this relationship will be manifested in new relationships among human beings that are characterized by a harmonious human society and a peaceful natural environment. (90-91)

Consequently, for Jesus, God is present in any “Kingdom activity” or in anything that promotes human well-being and removes suffering. The symbol of the Kingdom of

God is, for Knitter, the core of Christianity – and this, of course, is identical to his core of religion which is expressed more generically as ecohuman well-being. (91) Thus, it would be fair to say that Knitter conceptualizes the message of Jesus (Christianity) as a unique, but not exclusive, expression of the relatively absolute norm of ecohuman well-being.

Having concluded that the core of Jesus' message is the announcement of the Kingdom of God it becomes necessary for Knitter to reinterpret understandings of Jesus that deflect away from this conclusion. Knitter argues that after the resurrection of Jesus, his community turned away from his original message by turning away from Kingdom-centeredness and becoming Christ-centred. Consequently, Christian conversion became about believing in Christ rather than embracing Jesus' social message. This focus on Jesus led to a "litany of titles" being "heaped upon" Jesus, the most the most central being "Son of God." For Knitter, this turn away from Kingdom-centeredness to Christ-centeredness represents a wrong turn:

...christocentrism was not meant to replace but to enhance Kingdom-centrism.

Being centered on Christ is the Christian way of being centered on the Kingdom. As Jesus would remind us: It is more important to focus on the Kingdom than to focus on him. (92)

In the above passage we see Knitter's understanding of "unique" in play: Jesus provides the unique Christian path – but not the only path – to the Kingdom.

In any case, Knitter's main concern is to find a title for Jesus that is more in keeping with the bearer of a message about God's coming Kingdom. The title that Knitter suggests as a replacement for those that encourage exclusive focus on Jesus (by

emphasising his divinity) is “Spirit-filled Prophet.” Knitter claims that this title is grounded in what can be known with “relative certainty” about the historical Jesus. Drawing on the work of Marcus Borg Knitter summarizes the characteristics of the historical Jesus as follows:

1. The historical Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God.
2. Jesus was a *teacher of wisdom* who regularly used the classic forms of wisdom speech (parables and memorable short sayings known as aphorisms) to teach a subversive and alternative wisdom.
3. Jesus was a *social prophet* similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. As such, he criticized the elite (economic, political, and religious) of his time, was an advocate of an alternative social vision, and was often in conflict with authorities.
4. Jesus was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church. (93)

Knitter then boils this down to characterize Jesus as a “spirit-filled mystic and a social prophet” (93) – or, a Spirit-filled Prophet. For Knitter, titles for Jesus must evoke or enable (1) the power of the Spirit of Jesus, and (2) prophetic action in the social world, or action that helps bring about the Kingdom of God. If titles such as “the only Son of God” fail to do this they are ineffective, and should be dropped in favour of more effective titles such as Spirit-filled Prophet which would actually be more orthodox on account of being more in line with the original message of Jesus. (93)

Having established the pluriform core of Christianity and a congruent identity for Jesus, Knitter moves on to identify the aspects of Christianity that make it unique, or the “essential ingredients in the Christian religious experience.” (94) Knitter identifies three essential ingredients and each is tied to a characteristic of God, as God is made known through Jesus. First, Christians must be actively engaged in the struggles of this world – since God is known in history. Second, Christians must give special concern to the suffering other – since God seeks the well-being of the oppressed. Third, Christians must carry out their task of bringing justice into the world with hope that their efforts, despite inevitable failures and setbacks, will make the world a better place – since God is faithful to those who work to establish his Kingdom. (94)

Knitter’s first essential ingredient of Christianity reveals his theology and ontology, and establishes the conditions for the other two essential ingredients. This first ingredient is the claim that God is a God of history. Even though God is a transcendent reality, God cannot remain transcendent and must become involved in the finite world of history: “By the very divine nature, God must get involved (express God’s self) in the finite, in history.” (94) Knitter calls this relationship between the Divine and the historical a “non-duality.”³³ Within this ontological state, the Divine becomes involved in the historical, with the corollary that participation in the Divine *requires* participation in history.

In more Christian terms, one feels the Spirit of God through involvement in history, and most specifically through the practice of loving one’s neighbor. Indeed, Knitter clearly sees love of one’s neighbors (acts of justice) as an expression of one’s

³³ I suggest that “relational unity” would be a more accurate term and would avoid confusion with forms of nonduality found in Hinduism and Buddhism that envision the finite ultimately dissolving into the Infinite.

mystical experience of God, since he sees mystical experience as “somehow maimed, inadequate, even dangerous” if it is not fulfilled in historical praxis. Knitter summarizes the relationship between the historical and transcendent elements of Christian faith as follows:

Christian existence contains a historical element – the Reign of God, justice, knowledge, and service to human beings – and a transcendent element – God and the knowledge of God. The transcendent element is not directly accessible but must be reached through its historical mediation. (95)

In other words, God and the knowledge of God is mediated through Kingdom activities – love of neighbour/acts of justice. Thus, from Knitter’s perspective, one does not have a religious or spiritual life unless one is actively working for the Kingdom or for the transformation of this world into a better more just world.

Knitter’s thought runs along similar lines when considering the first two commandments for Christians; namely, love of God and love of neighbour. For Knitter, the two are inseparable and it is through love of the neighbour that one loves God. (95)

The other two essential features of Christianity, identified by Knitter, follow directly from the idea that being religious means working for the Kingdom. The first is that the oppressed or the suffering other ought to be given priority in one’s activities to establish the Kingdom. In other words, Christians must give special attention to improving the conditions of those affected most grievously by the injustices and inequities of this world. The second is that Christians must hold out to other religious communities the hope that *this world* actually can be made better and saved; for Knitter, this may be the most unique feature of the “Judeo-Christian covenant.” (96-98)

Knitter closes his account of the uniqueness of Christianity by drawing it into a comparison with Buddhism and Hinduism to emphasize its uniquely relational characteristics. This comparison seems to suggest that Christianity is relatively better than these Eastern religions in some regards, and, on the surface, this would seem to be incompatible with Knitter's pluralistic view that all religions have their own unique ways of bringing justice into this world (i.e., of being religious.) But here it must be remembered that Knitter always frames "Kingdom activity" in relative terms and so has no need to shy away from saying that the uniquely Christian way of manifesting ecohuman justice is better than some other religious ways. However, such claims are always part of an interreligious conversation – a conversation that is meant to lead *all* of us *closer* to the Kingdom.

That said, Knitter claims that Buddhism and Christianity both emphasize wisdom/knowledge of God and love/compassion, but that Buddhism gives priority to wisdom and Christianity gives priority to love. The Buddhist turns inward to find wisdom, and as a consequence of wisdom manifests compassion for others. In contrast, the first move for Christians is out towards the neighbour, and through love for the neighbour the Divine is experienced. Knitter is even willing to suggest that this pattern is typical of Asian and primal religions as compared to Semitic religions. (99)

Knitter also notices differences in the way that Christians diagnose and seek to remedy the ills of this world. Buddhist and Hindus tend to see a person's problems stemming from the way they see and feel the world (from their relative state of enlightenment). In contrast, Christians see that human beings create structures of injustice (e.g., apartheid in South Africa) that cause suffering for other human beings. Thus, the

world's problems are not merely manifestations of internal states but are rooted in social conditions that themselves must be addressed. For the Christian, allowing or participating in unjust social structures is spiritual failure. (99-100)

What is most unique about Christianity then, as compared with other religions (and particularly the Asian religions) is that it is a form of religiosity that demands relationship with others – all others. This, of course, includes all religious others – and for Knitter the Christian ideal is to work with all other religions to move ever closer to the unreachable goal of the Kingdom of God or ecohuman well-being. (100-101)

Having now examined the basic elements of Knitter's pluralistic model – in both generic and Christian form – we will look at some of his later work that focuses on defending the pluralist model.

Knitter's Defence of Religious Pluralism

I began this section by saying that Knitter is one of the most passionate advocates of religious pluralism, and one of the most responsive pluralists to the critics of religious pluralism. These two characteristics of Knitter come out strongly in Knitter's introduction to, and contribution to, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*.

Knitter's passion for pluralism stems from his belief that pluralism is necessary for the establishment of a just and peaceful world – and that there is a causal link between claims of religious superiority and religious violence. He agrees with Hans Kung that there can be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions, but he adds to this that there can be no dialogue among the religions (a prerequisite for peace among the religions) unless religions drop their claims to religious superiority. In other words, the

religions *must* drop their (exclusivist) claims to be the only religion and their (inclusivist) claims to be the best religion, and adopt a pluralist model wherein many different religions are acknowledged as equally true.³⁴ Knitter subtly links exclusivism and inclusivism to violence by calling those who refuse interreligious dialogue, on account of their claims of superiority, “militants” – but is equally critical of hypocritical “peacemakers” who are no different from these militants so long as they maintain (even if only in their hearts and minds) their own superiority while at the dialogue table. In short, to condone claims of religious superiority is to condone religious violence and other forms of injustice:

We are acutely aware that throughout history almost all human conflicts have been validated and intensified by a religious sanction. God has been claimed to be on both sides of every war. This has been possible because each of the great world faiths has either assumed or asserted its own unique superiority as the one and only true faith and path to the highest good – in familiar Christian terms, to salvation. These exclusive claims to absolute truth have exacerbated the division of the human community into rival groups, and have repeatedly been invoked in support of oppression, slavery, conquest, and exploitation.³⁵

The only way beyond this violence and injustice, in Knitter’s mind, is to embrace the pluralist model.³⁶ Knitter is passionate about eradicating violence and injustice and, consequently, passionate about religious pluralism.

³⁴ Or, rather, instead of simply dropping exclusivist and inclusivist claims, Knitter would like to see pluralists from all traditions reinterpret these claims as mythic or symbolic expressions of a truth that cannot be finally expressed; see, Knitter, *Myth of Religious Superiority*, viii.

³⁵ Knitter, *Myth of Religious Superiority*, x.

³⁶ Knitter identifies the following six planks of the pluralist model: 1) all religions have internal resources that allow for a pluralistic interpretation of religion; 2) pluralisms must affirm that there are deep religious

In his contribution to the *Myth of Religious Superiority* called “Is the Pluralist Model a Western Imposition: A Response in Five Voices” Knitter shows his responsiveness to the critics of religious pluralism by trying to further clarify the meaning of religious pluralism in light of their criticisms.

Knitter focuses particularly on the criticism that the pluralist model is an “ultimately exploitative Western imposition”³⁷ and he identifies this criticism with “postmodernism” or “postliberalism.” According to the critics, pluralism is an imposition because it ignores the reality of language – or the reality that one must always speak in a *particular* language that necessarily determines and limits what one tries to express or understand. This means that whenever we try to understand or judge another religious language, we do so from within our own religious language. Pluralists, however, have tried to find a common language within all religions, and in the process have simply imposed their own language on others (without acknowledging this). Think of Smith’s “generic” religious terms such as faith, Hick’s particular definition of salvation, and even Knitter’s concept of the “Reign of God.” The critics claim that by using such terms, pluralists are reducing all religions to a common essence or common ground and, thus, eliminating the religious plurality that they aim to authenticate. (28-29)

My position is, of course, that the critics of pluralism have missed an important characteristic of the language of humanistic religious pluralism; namely, that it speaks in

differences and avoid reducing all to a common essence; 3) all religions must recognize that the Ultimate Mystery can never be fully grasped by human beings and so by any religion; 4) pluralism is not the same as relativism – pluralists, in dialogue, make judgements about harmful religious practices; 5) ethical concerns have priority at the dialogue table; 6) interreligious encounters and dialogue must respect freedom of conscience, i.e., religious persons must be free to share what they find to be true in their religion (witness), although they must not assume that their witness is superior (i.e., they must not proselytize) (Knitter, *Myth of Religious Superiority*, x-xi).

³⁷ Knitter, “Western Imposition?,” 28; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

terms of religious universals that allow for multiple expressions, instead of religious essences or ends that eliminate religious multiplicity. Thus, in the eyes of humanistic pluralists, their generic terms, or universal terms, capture all and distort none. But, in the eyes of the critics, the so-called generic terms of pluralist are simply a case of one religious language imposing itself on all others – or of (mis)understanding the other in terms of the self. More specifically, it is the imposition of a Western language, since the originating, motivating ideals of pluralism were “all originally packaged in the European Enlightenment – universal truth linked to the universality of reason, evolution toward ever greater unity, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one), liberal democracy.” (30) The obvious concern here is that some religious voices will be marginalized and silenced as Western elites – who are already politically and economically advantaged – use their “universal terms” to decide what does and does not count as an authentic expression of religion.

Knitter is sobered by these postmodern criticisms, but as said earlier sees them as warning signs rather than roadblocks, and consequently tries to defend and clarify the pluralist project. Knitter articulates his defense of pluralism in five different “voices”: the voice of religious believers and teachers; the voice of religious mystics/teachers; the voice of religious philosophers; the voice of religious friends; and, the voice of religious activists.

Each of these voices reveals a truth about the nature of religious pluralism and our religiously plural world. The believer tells us that religious pluralists expound universal religious truths. The mystic tells us, though, that there are no absolute truths because finite beings can never fully grasp the Infinite. The religious philosopher tells us that

religions are deeply different. But the religious friend and the religious activist show us that there is common religious ground. The religious friend shows us this when we see truth/God in their starkly different expressions of religion. And, the activist shows us this by identifying the suffering other as a cause of common concern for *all* religions.

In evoking the voice of (pluralist) religious believers and teachers – who expound universal truth – Knitter is trying to distance pluralism from both relativism and the postmodern affirmation of mere religious diversity. Knitter claims that all religions make universal truth claims – claims that are true for everyone and that together constitute a comprehensive framework for understanding reality. For Knitter, the belief that what is true for me is true for everyone is what makes every religious believer a teacher or preacher. And, the belief that one’s religion provides a comprehensive framework for understanding reality – in conjunction with the understanding that one cannot transcend one’s own religious particularity – is what makes every religious believer an “inclusivist” (in some sense). (31-32)

In saying that religious persons claim to have a comprehensive framework for understanding reality, or a “universal understanding power,” (32) Knitter is distinguishing pluralism from postmodernist perspectives that see universal truth as both impossible and dangerous. But, he also acknowledges that pluralists – in order to avoid the intolerance associated with *absolute* truth-claims – have not done a good job of affirming universal truth-claims. This has led to the (inaccurate) perception that pluralists reject the idea of using criteria to judge religions and, thus, effectively affirm that all religions are true. For Knitter, recognizing the truth of every religious claim ensures that

no religious claim can be taken seriously, and he insists that such relativism is not what pluralism is about. (32)

Knitter associates the problem of vacuous religious truth with relativism, but associates the related problem of isolated religious truth with postmodernism or postliberalism. Postliberal thinkers such as George Lindbeck and William Placher (and perhaps Mark Heim³⁸) see religions as locked into their own conceptual universes with no means of communicating with, or relating to, those in other religious universes. For Knitter, the pluralist model affirms, and tries to encourage, relationships of *mutuality* between the different religions. Indeed, creating a context of dialogue or of mutual sharing of truth between religions is so central to pluralism from Knitter's perspective that he prefers to call pluralism "mutuality." (33)

But while pluralists affirm the possibility of universal truth claims, they emphatically reject the possibility of absolute truth claims. According to the critics of religious pluralism, all religions do, in fact, make absolute truth claims; thus, when pluralists deny the possibility of absolute truth claims they are critiquing religious world views from their own world view. More precisely, they are using a (Western) tenet of the Enlightenment – i.e., that all truth is historically conditioned and so relative – to judge the truth claims made by (all) religions. Knitter acknowledged that the critics are right in recognizing that pluralists reject absolute truth claims, but goes on to argue that they are wrong to ground this rejection (solely) in the Enlightenment. (33-34)

To make this argument, Knitter evokes the voice of religious mystics/teachers in all religions. According to Knitter, the "mytico-theological traditions within all religions"

³⁸ See Chapter 5 for an alternative reading of Heim's theology of religions.

maintain that absolute truth claims can only be made in a qualified sense. (34) This is so because finite human beings can never fully and finally grasp the Infinite mystery:

...there is broad agreement that what the religions are seeking is beyond human comprehension and that therefore all human speaking about it can never be more than “relatively adequate.” In different ways and in different contexts, religions recognize that what they are after they can never fully find. Yes, they find something, and that something transforms their lives, but they never find everything. Religion deals with that which can never be totally known or definitively grasped by human beings. So if religious practitioners can be utterly certain that they have experienced God or Truth or Enlightenment, they also are utterly certain that this Reality is *more* than what they have experienced. (34)

Knitter qualifies “absolute” truth claims in religions by insisting that such claims are never complete, full, or final, since they can never be identified with the infinite reality that they seek to grasp. What religions seek always remains an “absolute mystery” and so no religion can claim that its experience of, or revelation from, this ineffable reality is absolute truth. Moreover, this truth about the “relative adequacy” of all religious truth is recognized within all religions and so this “plank of the pluralist model” is not a Western imposition. It is a deep seated truth found in all religious traditions that can thus serve as a means to break down the isolating effect of absolute truth claims: “...it grows out of respect for the humanity everyone has in common with everyone else and the limits of finite human existence.” (36)

Thus, we might say that, for Knitter, a universal truth claim is a claim about the infinite that is true but not final or complete. Knitter’s dictum that there can *always* be

more *always* converts absolute religious truths into “relatively adequate” religious truths. But Knitter’s conviction that real truth is never complete truth does not prevent Knitter from searching (collaboratively) for truth that is comprehensive and true for all of us, i.e., universal truth. But, before moving in this direction Knitter calls on the voice of the religious philosopher to make the point that religious pluralists are also very serious about affirming religious diversity.

In the same way that Knitter recognizes the failings of pluralists in affirming universal religious truths (and so appearing to be relativists), he also recognizes the failings of pluralists in affirming deep religious differences (and so appearing to be essentialists). Knitter even acknowledges his own past failings in this regard:

I confess that in my eagerness to bring my fellow Christians to recognize the validity of other religions, in my efforts to find common ground for a more authentic dialogue of religions, and in my way of speaking of the Ultimate Reality that connects the different religious families, I did not make sufficient room for the real, deep, distinctive, perhaps irreducible differences among the religions.

(37)

Knitter now recognizes (and thinks others pluralists should too) that any effort to speak in terms of a common ground or a common Ultimate Reality raises questions about whose common ground and whose Ultimate Reality is ordering the universe of faiths. Still, Knitter refuses to let deep religious differences balkanize the religions; he says that at very least these differences create a context for religions to discuss how they will manage their differences: “How should we manage our differences? How can we make

genuine connections in the midst of *real* differences? How can we measure incommensurables?” (37) Knitter suggests, here, that the work of “pluralists” such as John Cobb with his concept of multiple Ultimates, and Raimundo Panikkar with his concept of Ultimate Reality itself being pluralistic might be helpful. But as helpful as such “paradoxical” ideas might be for authenticating deep religious differences, they still seem to perpetuate a problem that is central for Knitter; namely, the problem of how radically different religions can connect and speak with one another. (37-38) Thus, even though Knitter is willing to acknowledge that religions are very different, he is not willing to say that they are merely different. Knitter seeks connection, common purpose, universality for the religions, and thus completes his clarification and defense of pluralism with two further voices that address this theme.

The first voice that Knitter calls on to locate a point of contact between different religions is the voice of the “religious friend.” According to Knitter, those with radically different religious perspectives can connect and learn from one another *as friends*. Knitter comes to this conclusion on the basis of what he has seen in his own dialogue with religious friends. Religious friends do, in fact, communicate and learn from one another and, therefore, there must be “something” that allows for this connection. Knitter is reluctant to be too specific about the nature of this common something, but does suggest that the “image of Ultimate reality” might be an appropriate signifier of a “Universal Mystery that enables connection and communication.” (39)

In saying, on one hand, that religious pluralists should be wary of identifying a common religious essence or speaking of a common Ultimate Reality since religions are so different – and, on the other, that religious friends know that “there is something

common, something universal” (39) that serves as the ground of all religions, Knitter seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. Knitter wants to say that there is “‘something’ between and within the religions” (39) but is unwilling to call this the essence of religion, or the Ultimate Reality to which all religions refer. Nonetheless, Knitter’s “Ultimate Mystery,” of which “Ultimate reality” is a limited conceptualization is really no different from John Hick’s “the Real” of which God and the Absolute are limited conceptualizations. Knitter’s Ultimate Mystery looks even more like Hick’s “the Real” when he implies that this reality – which is recognized by pluralists – is also the grounding reality of the universal truth claims made by religious persons in various traditions. For Knitter, religious persons see this (same) reality or this great “Other” in their own traditions but also in religious others: “In the face of the other I see or sense the face of the Other that shines within and beyond us all.” (40)

Having suggested that there is a great Other or an Ultimate Mystery that connects the different religions, Knitter evokes one final religious voice – the voice of the religious activist – in order to identify a more tangible commonality amongst the religions of the world. Knitter suggests that the “suffering other” is, or ought to be, the common concern of all religions, indeed, of all religions acting *together* or interreligiously. The suffering of all human beings, and of the earth itself, ought to bring religions together to fight for social justice in order to relieve this suffering and promote peace. In this, Knitter suggests that interreligious dialogue should start in the ethical realm. More precisely, he suggests that it should start in the realm of suffering caused by religiously motivated violence since it is intolerable that religious people should stand by when gross human suffering is caused in the name of God. But, more significantly, Knitter concludes that pluralism is

inherently interreligious (i.e., something that is found in or can be adapted to all religions) by arguing that concern with social justice and religiously motivated violence is inherently interreligious. Knitter's conclusion is based on the assumption that pluralism is causally connected to social justice and peace in the same way that claims of religious superiority (i.e., inclusivism and exclusivism) are causally connected to social injustice and religiously motivated violence. In other words, pluralism is interreligious because pluralists are concerned with social justice and concern with social justice is interreligious. (41-42)

Is Knitter Really a Pluralist?

Once more, I suggest that contact with the religious other is a contributing social factor to the emergence of humanistic religious pluralism, and that the three main features of this type of pluralism are 1) the rejection of the idea of a singular maximus, and the affirmation of the plurality of true religion; 2) the affirmation that God (or Ultimate reality) is one, and the rejection of the idea of strong identity between God and religion; 3) the employment of the idea of a religious universal, as opposed to the idea of a religious end or the idea of a religious essence.

For Knitter, contact with the religious other allows one to see the Ultimate Mystery that is the ground and animating force within the religions of the world. Indeed it was contact with the religious other that precipitated Knitter's "dialogical odyssey" from exclusivism to inclusivism and finally to pluralism or mutuality.

This existential experience of the authenticity of religious others means, for Knitter, that the plurality of true religion is a fact. And this, in turn, means that there

cannot be one superior form of religion or a singular maximus. Thus, Knitter's theology conforms to the first main feature of humanistic religious pluralism.

The presence of the second main feature of humanistic religious pluralism is somewhat more ambiguous in Knitter's case, but I suggest it is still present. This ambiguity stems from the fact that Knitter is a Trinitarian, and uses the Trinitarian concept of God to argue for the plurality of religions. But Knitter also emphasises that the different persons of the Trinity are related and one – and, in the end, contends that all religions are grounded in a *singular* Ultimate Mystery. Then, in order to ensure that there are multiple religions or multiple ways of knowing and responding to the Ultimate Mystery, Knitter insists that there is no way to finally or completely grasp the Ultimate Mystery. Thus, just like Smith and Hick, Knitter posits a transcendent reality that is the source and focal point of all religions, but *cannot ever* be grasped or contained by religion. Smith prefers to call this reality Transcendence, Hick prefers to call it the Real, and Knitter prefers to call it the Ultimate Mystery – but I suggest that these are synonymous concepts since each acts in the same way – as the ultimate ground of religious plurality.

The concept of an Ultimate Reality that is finally unknowable, of course, leaves the door to relativism wide open – if we cannot know final truth about Ultimate Reality then all truths about Ultimate Reality must be judged as equally true and equally false. Smith, Hick, and Knitter all reject this conclusion and, thus, all establish a criterion for true religion. For Smith, the criterion for true religion is faith, for Hick the criterion is salvation, and for Knitter the criterion is ecohuman well-being.

I have argued that Smith's concept of faith does not function in the same way as a religious end or religious essence, and is better understood as an Aristotelian universal. It is a universal that can only be seen in its various instantiations and so is also inherently plural. Likewise, I have argued that Hick's concepts of salvation and the saint function as universals, insofar as they can both assume multiple forms, and neither can be identified with one particular form; these universals are formless in their uniformity and inherently plural when they assume form. Knitter's theology of religions does not, however, fall so neatly into this pattern – at least not in all respects.

When Knitter speaks of mystical experience finding expression in historical involvement, or love of God finding expression in love of the neighbour, his thought runs along the same lines as Smith and (to some extent) Hick. Love of God must be “clothed” in love of the neighbour; otherwise, it has no (positive) reality. Thus, we see love of God when it is shown in love of the neighbour, in the same way that we see faith when it is shown in expressions of faith.

But for Knitter the locus of true religion is not love of God – such that religions, understood as various attempts to express this love in acts of loving one's neighbour, could be judged. For Knitter, the locus of true religion is love of neighbour, and religions are understood as various attempts to realize this ideal. Knitter articulates love of neighbour in two different ways: 1) as the religious symbol Kingdom of God, and as the relatively absolute truth criterion of ecohuman well-being. Each of these terms means the same thing in Knitter's theology of religions.

What is different about Knitter's religious universal of eco-human well-being – as compared with Smith's universal of faith and Hick's universals of salvation and the saint

– is that it is a concrete social reality. There is nothing concrete about Smith’s faith, and it can’t even be seen until it is expressed. Hick’s salvation is almost as indiscernible until it shows itself in saintly character – and the saint is, in some respects, inherently diverse on account of being a person. Again, Knitter’s universal is a concrete social reality; thus it can’t manifest in diversity because it is already a manifestation (of love of God), and it implicates *everyone*. In short, Knitter’s universal doesn’t leave very much room for diversity – and so we might ask if it is better understood as a religious end rather than a religious universal.

On one level, I would suggest that Knitter does employ an end rather than a universal, and so his theology of religions leans more towards inclusivism than pluralism. However, Knitter does something with his religious end that makes it function more like a universal (that enfolds diversity) than an end (that terminates religious diversity). Specifically, he claims that his end can never be attained. Though Christians must strive for the Kingdom of God with all their might, they must also realize that the Kingdom will never finally come. And though all religions should strive, in concert and with absolute determination, to realize ecohuman well-being, they must realize that they can never completely reach their goal.³⁹

By putting his concrete social goal permanently out of reach, Knitter creates a situation in which no one (i.e., no religion) can ever claim that it has attained the goal, or that it is the exclusive path to the goal: It is always possible to get “closer” to a goal that can never be reached. Given this context, it is possible to acknowledge that there are multiple paths to the goal – and sometimes Knitter even talks about their being multiple,

³⁹ Knitter does not say why the goal of religions and all human beings can never be achieved, but presumably this is related to his conviction that Ultimate Reality can never be exhausted.

albeit partial, realizations of the goal. In other words, there are multiple (partially) true expressions of true religion. So, by identifying an end that can't be achieved Knitter creates something akin to a religious universal – a single reality that admits diversity – and, consequently, I think his theology of religions is still best classified as pluralist.

Nonetheless, Knitter does *not* really uphold the idea of religious diversity as an ideal. Admittedly, there are many hands building the Kingdom, but the best circumstance is for these many hands to work *together* – so that we *all* might move closer to the Kingdom. And, on this account, I would be willing to assign to Knitter his preferred designation of “mutualist.”

4. Conclusion

One of the most obvious criticisms that can be aimed at all three forms of religious pluralism discussed above is that their universals do not capture all religious diversity. For example, one might be hard pressed to find a Zen Buddhist who would agree to see their experience of satori, as either faith or an expression of faith; as a turn towards God-centredness that will necessarily manifest in a saintly character; or as a “kingdom activity.” And if one believes that satori is in fact something different from Smith's faith, Hick's salvation, or Knitter's Kingdom activity, then one might also believe that there is religious reality that falls outside of these conceptualizations of religion – and, even, that these conceptualizations of religion distort some religious realities.

But this type of criticism can be leveled against any theology of religions that claims to be comprehensive (and I think all do). What I have primarily been interested in establishing is whether or not the theologies of Hick, Smith, and Knitter are pluralistic. I

have come to the conclusion that they are because they claim that true religion is “ultimately” (or permanently) multiform rather than uniform and they use arguments and conceptual tools to maintain this position. They argue that although God is one there can be no strong identity between God and religion and, so, religions cannot be one like God is one; thus, religion is plural. And they use the concept of a religious universal (rather than a religious end or essence) to create a universal concept of true religion that is both uniform and multiform; that brings coherence to the religious universe without distorting its manifold forms.

Returning then to the question of distortion, the first thing to note is it can be supposed that in the minds of our three pluralists, their conceptions of true religion are broad and true enough to accommodate all religions without distortion and to judge them without error. If we assume that this is the case then, based on the arguments in this chapter, we would (I hope) concede that our three pluralists are, in fact, pluralists. On the other hand, we might also assume that their conceptions of true religion are not the unerring balances that they suppose them to be. Returning to our earlier example, let’s now suppose that satori is 1) an authentic expression of true religion, and 2) that it is not an expression of faith as conceived by Smith, a form of salvation as conceived by Hick, or a Kingdom activity that promotes ecohuman well-being as conceived by Knitter. In this case, I suggest that the reasonable conclusion to draw is not that our representative pluralists are not really pluralists, but that they have not properly understood the world’s religious diversity. And, of course, such a criticism would place the onus on the critic to explain how things *really* are – in pluralistic terms or otherwise.

That said, it should be acknowledged that the three humanistic pluralists are not simply concerned with affirming religious diversity; indeed, it could probably be argued that their more “ultimate concerns” are with religious unity and problems of religious disunity, and that their interest in religious diversity stems from a desire to affirm a *more comprehensive* religious unity. We see this in Smith’s impulse toward a wider (worldwide) ecumenism; in Knitter’s desire to save the (whole) world; and, in Hick’s rigorous efforts to validate all of the world’s great religions. This theme cannot be further explored here, but it is perhaps worth bearing in mind as we now move to our next chapter where we will look at the work of the three most vocal critics of humanistic religious pluralism, and their efforts to construct better theologies of religious diversity.

5

Neo-Religious Inclusivism

1. Introduction

In this section we will examine the work of three Christian theologians: a Catholic philosophical theologian (Paul J. Griffiths); an academic Catholic theologian (Gavin D’Costa); and, an academic Protestant theologian (S. Mark Heim). I will call these three thinkers “neo-inclusivists” because while each organizes their thinking about religious diversity around an explicitly Christian end, each also recognizing the possibility, if not the fact, of non-Christians teaching religious truths that Christians need to know. This is not characteristic of traditional inclusivism. Griffiths, D’Costa, and Heim all claim to be open to seeing the truths of other religions *on their own terms* and, thus, they are highly critical of (humanistic) pluralist theologies that insist on reducing different religious languages to one language. By claiming that religions are equal by virtue of their sameness humanistic pluralists are no longer truly pluralist. The neo-inclusivists claim that their own explicitly Christian theologies of religions are more pluralistic because they are willing to see that other religions may have truth that Christians do not have and need for their own salvation.

2. Paul J. Griffiths’ Defence of Inclusivism and Exclusivism

Paul J. Griffiths is a philosopher of religion or a philosophical theologian – who has taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Duke

University – and has made several important contributions related to problems of religious diversity and interfaith relations.¹ In his most recent contrition, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, Griffiths, like D’Costa and Heim, comes to the conclusion that religious pluralism is a questionable reality.

Problems of Religious Diversity, is, on one level, an introduction to the dominant questions that arise in the face of religious diversity; a review of possible answers to these questions; and, an argument for the positions that the author commends from his Catholic Christian perspective. However, on another level, it can be read as an apologetic effort to reinterpret the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm versus the pluralist paradigm and, indeed, to defend exclusivism and inclusivism against pluralism.²

In *Problems of Religious Diversity*, Griffiths makes the uncommon move of addressing the various problems, or questions, that arise in the face of religious diversity *separately*. Griffiths addresses sets of questions related to the following four topics: (1) truth, (2) epistemic confidence, (3) the religious other, and (4) salvation – the last of which he sees as (to some extent) a combination of elements from the first three sets of questions.

As said, Griffiths’ work can be seen as apologetic, and thus for each problem he, on one hand, defends the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm and, on the other, criticizes the pluralistic paradigm. In defending the exclusivist/inclusivist paradigm Griffiths makes the following points: First, no religions are actually exclusivist with respect to truth. Second, knowledge of religious diversity need not lead to epistemic arrogance or a loss of

¹ See especially Griffiths, *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*; Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*; Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*.

² Generally, Griffiths treats inclusivism and exclusivism as though they are variants of a single position.

epistemic confidence, but can lead to epistemic uneasiness that can serve as a basis for creative tradition-specific thought about religious diversity. Third, mission or teaching is in integral part of religion, which can't be rejected with the hope that the rest of it can be accepted. Fourth, exclusivism with respect to salvation does not necessarily entail a commitment to restrictivism, i.e., it is possible to hold the position that it is necessary to belong to a particular religion in order to be saved and the position that all human beings will be saved.

In criticizing the pluralist paradigm, Griffiths makes the following parallel points. First, parity claims with respect to religious truth (a characteristic of pluralism) require a circumscription of truth that denudes it of its usual meaning. Second, the loss of epistemic confidence, characteristic of pluralists who encounter religious diversity, entails abandonment of one's religion – or of the central claims of one's religion. Third, the broad religious tolerance advocated by pluralists, is largely idealistic, insofar as it is almost impossible to effect politically. Fourth, pluralism is usually only quasi-pluralistic because it necessarily circumscribes the category of religion.

In this review we will look at how Griffiths deals with the problem of truth and the problem of salvation. In dealing with the problem of truth, Griffiths suggests that a form of inclusivism, wherein Christians are open to the possibility that other traditions teach truths not explicitly taught by the Church, is the best approach. In dealing with the problem of salvation, Griffiths comes to the conclusion inclusivism (it is necessary to belong to Christianity in a relaxed sense) coupled with a possibilist restrictivism (it is possible that not all will be saved) is the best position for Christians to adopt.

In dealing with the question of truth, Griffiths distinguishes two types of response: those that claim parity with respect to truth and those that claim difference. As for making a parity response, Griffith surveys three different perspectives: a Kantian, a Wittgensteinian, and a non-religious. Very basically, the Kantian view achieves parity with respect to truth by claiming that there is a single religious claim that defines religion as such, and that all religions make this same claim (even if they also make many false claims and, amongst themselves, many contradictory claims.)³ For Griffiths, Kant's parity claim is most in line with religious pluralism or, at least John Hick's, religious pluralism. Wittgenstein's parity view is achieved by seeing that all religious claims are coherent within their own "form of life" and, so, all true in this qualified sense. (45-50) Finally, the non-religious view of parity, which is most commonly held by those involved with legislation in religiously neutral states, is achieved by limiting the scope of religious truth, for example, by saying that all religious claims are equally true insofar as they do not conflict with an overriding interest, or law, of the state. (50-53)

As for religious responses that say religious claims are different with respect to truth, Griffiths identifies two: exclusivism, and inclusivism. In discussing exclusivism Griffiths claims that no actual religious communities maintain this position because it amounts to saying that no religious community, except one's own, makes claims that are true. Most religions are open to the possibility that their rivals may have gotten a few things right and so are inclusivist with respect to truth. Griffiths goes further by identifying different forms of inclusivism: "necessary inclusivism" that says other religions *must* make at least some true claims; "possibilist inclusivism" that says other religions *may* make religious claims that are true; "closed inclusivism" that says all true

³ Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 37-44; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

claims made by other religions are already explicitly made by one's own religion; and, "open inclusivism" that says other religions may teach and understand truths not explicitly taught and understood by one's own religion. Griffiths suggests that possibilist, open inclusivism is the best response to the truth claims of other religions. (Necessary inclusivism and possibilist inclusivism can be held together with either open or closed inclusivism.) (60-64)

In advocating possibilist open inclusivism for the Church Griffiths is open to the possibility that other religions might have something to teach the Church on their own terms – and in this differs from traditional inclusivism where other religions need the Church but not the other way around.

I suggest that this openness to *different* truths in other religions makes it impossible for Griffiths to accept (humanistic) pluralist theologies of religions, since these see other religious truths only insofar as they are essentially the same as Christian truths: This is what makes pluralist theologies not truly pluralist. Griffiths makes this argument in relation to John Hick's broadly Kantian approach to parity with respect to religious truth. Griffiths argues that since Hick claims soteriological equality for all religions that he ought to have the working assumption that the aggregates of truth, in the claims of different religions, are equal. Griffiths rejects this as a general assumption, saying that no one (presently) has enough empirical knowledge of all religions to reliably make such an assumption. Griffiths does, however, say that there is evidence to suggest that truth is not evenly distributed among all religions. He cites the Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven's Gate, and Osho as movements that would qualify as religions (according to his definition) but do not possess an aggregate of truth claims on par with

Orthodox Judaism, for example. John Hick would, of course, say the same, thing; claiming that parity with respect to truth can only be established among the great “post-axial” religions (the world religions). But on this point Griffiths notes that Hick’s position is not as pluralistic as it seems:

It is to these [the great post-axial religions], he says, that the working hypothesis of parity with respect to truth ought to be applied. But then the pluralistic hypothesis is no longer quite as pluralistic as it seems, for now some actual religions are excluded from the claim that the aggregate claims of all actual religions are related identically to the fundamental religious claim. (44)

Griffiths, makes a similar point when discussing the problem of salvation – where he defends the “exclusivist” idea that belonging to a home religion is necessary for salvation, by softening it with the further idea that this exclusivist claim does not have to be tied to “restrictivism,” or the idea that salvation is limited to some.

In his discussion of salvation Griffiths notes that there are two related, but separate, questions that can be addressed. The first asks *how one is saved* and the second asks *who is saved*, and it is this first question that he says can be coherently answered with the responses of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. (142) Griffiths presents the exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist responses to the question of how one is saved with representatives of the three positions – Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and John Hick respectively – but he is also very vigorous in distilling the *formal* responses.

According to Griffiths, exclusivism boils down to claiming that belonging to the “home religion” is necessary for salvation (albeit not necessarily sufficient for it). In other words, if one wants to be saved one must belong to the home religion (even if

belonging to the home religion won't necessarily guarantee one's salvation). (150-151) Inclusivism is only a variation on this position because it is based on this same assumption that if one wants to be saved one must belong to the home religion; however, it is different from exclusivism in that it employs a *looser* sense of what it means to belong to the home religion. This view brings into play the notion that one might be participating in the home religion while not aware of this fact, and seemingly participating in another religion. (159-160) Pluralism, in marked contrast, rejects the basic premise of exclusivism and inclusivism – that one must belong to the home religion to be saved – in order to assert the basic truth of pluralism that all religions are able to deliver salvation in and of themselves. (142)

But in rejecting the basic premise of exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism finds itself bound to a problematic position; *specifically*, that belonging to the home religion is not necessary for salvation. Griffiths calls this form of pluralism, which cuts the connection between salvation and membership in a religion, *negative* pluralism and notes that it is rare for religious persons to hold this position. (142-143)

Instead, religious persons are more likely to adopt a positive form of pluralism that claims a positive connection between religious membership and salvation, and maintains that this connection, whatever it is, is equally present in all religions – despite the fact that this usually undermines the diversity that pluralism seeks to honour. (143) More specifically, the positive form of pluralism must, in one way or another, make selections among the religions – in deciding which ones are equally valid – and therefore must remain only quasi-pluralistic. Griffiths, as indicated above, uses the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick to make this point.

Griffiths argues that pluralistic theories based on 1) a substantive definition of “salvation” or the final religious end sought by all religions; and, 2) a claim that salvation (that which indicates religious authenticity) is verifiably by evidence.

For Hick, religion boils down to salvation – religions that effect salvation are authentic and those that do not are not. Hick defines salvation as a turn from self-centeredness to God-centredness, and in making this move he immediately circumscribes what can be an authentic religion: An authentic religion is one that turns its adherents from self centredness to God-centredness. Hence, *all* religions are not equal and, hence, Griffiths claims that Hick’s pluralism is only quasi-pluralistic.

Hick also says that it is possible to determine the authenticity of a religion by (the evidence of) whether or not it produces saintly characters: If a religion produces saintly characters it is authentic, if it does not it is not. In this move, Hick is simply identifying the empirical form of an authentic religion, which provides concreteness to his circumscription of what constitutes authentic religion; and, again, for Griffiths, this is what makes his pluralism quasi-pluralistic.

Hick’s belief with respect to the second point is that all of the “great world traditions” produce saintliness with more or less the same degree of effectiveness, but faced with a lack of empirical evidence the only thing he can say, for sure, is that there is no way of knowing whether one tradition or another is more salvifically effective. Griffiths agrees with Hick on this point – but not with Hick’s conclusion drawn from it that, therefore, all of the great traditions are equally salvifically effective. Griffiths, discerns quite correctly, that the only further conclusion we can draw is that “*we have no*

idea whether all the great traditions are or are not equally salvifically effective.” (149, emphasis in original)

The other question, related to salvation, that Griffiths addresses is that of who is saved, and he identifies two responses: “restrictivism” and “universalism.” Restrictivism says *all will not be saved* which can be expressed differently as *some will not be saved*. Universalism, on the other hand, says that *all will be saved* or, expressed differently, that *there is no one who will not be saved*. Griffiths also discusses these two positions in the mode of necessity and the mode of possibility (where they merge into the same position); nonetheless, what is most important in this discussion is his point that exclusivism/inclusivism need not necessarily be tied to restrictivism.

In other words, it is possible to hold that belonging to the home religion is necessary for salvation, without holding that this means some or all people will suffer eternal damnation. Or, it is coherent to be an exclusivist, who says that all must belong to the home religion to be saved, while being a universalist, who says that all will be saved. This is significant because exclusivism (in its Christian form) is often rejected on the ethical grounds that a loving God could not consign to hell human beings who had no chance of becoming Christian.(161-168)

Griffith’s own suggestion for the best Christian response to the question of salvation is as follows: First exclusivism should be affirmed, or it should be affirmed that belonging to Christianity is necessary for salvation; however, this should be a relaxed sense of belonging since it is difficult to determine just how much explicit Christian faith one needs in order to be saved. (Thus, Griffiths favoured position could be called inclusivism.) Second, Christians should acknowledge that both restrictivism and

universalism are possible answers to the question of who is saved. Universalism is possible because of God's desire to save all, and restrictivism is possible because human beings are always free to accept or reject God's universal offer of salvation; thus, any affirmation of universalism must acknowledge the possibility of restrictivism. Griffiths believes that God gives human beings every chance to be saved – including post mortem chances – but does maintain that eventually chances come to an end and so it must be *possible* for some to not be saved. As for answering the question as to whether universalism (all are saved) or restrictivism (some are not saved) is the case, Griffiths says that he doesn't think it's possible to know – but he does frown on making negative judgements about another's spiritual destiny. (165-166)

By saying that it is not possible for Christians to know for sure if universal or restrictivism is the case, we are left with saying that both are possible. And, if universalism, must acknowledge the possibility of restrictivism, then Christians must, until the end, maintain a “possibilist restrictivism” – that is necessary coupled with exclusivism/inclusivism.

I have said that all of the theorists, in this discussion, employ the idea of “true religion”; Griffiths is the exception to this. Griffiths (for the purpose of dealing with problems of religious diversity) defines religion very broadly as “a form of life that seems to those who belong to it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance to the order of their lives.” (12) Griffiths obviously does not try to distinguish between more and less authentic versions of religion based on this definition of religion – but, as discussed above, he does speak about varying degrees of truth and falsehood across the aggregate of religion's claims. Moreover, he says that Christians ought to be

open to the possibility of other religions having truths not explicitly known within Christianity. Griffiths calls this stance “open inclusivism.”

Griffiths does not say that the religion possessing the greatest amount truth across the aggregate of its claims is the “true religion.” Nonetheless, we can assume that, for Griffiths and other religious persons, the “home religion” is presupposed to have the greatest amount of truth. Thus, the starting point for Griffiths’ open inclusivism is the relative “superiority” of Christianity, in terms of truth across the aggregate of its claims, and from this vantage point it is acknowledged that other religions *may* serve to deepen this truth. So, even though Griffiths does not employ the notion of “true religion” he ends up saying something very similar to Christian inclusivists who do: Christianity is the truest religion.

Even if we acknowledge that Griffiths works with a more qualified understanding of true religion, than other Christian inclusivists, we can still see that his inclusivism is a departure from traditional Christian inclusivism. Traditional Christian inclusivism claims that all truth in other religions is *derived* from Christianity; Griffiths’ open inclusivism claims that other religions *may* be independent sources of truth (even if this truth is eventually incorporated into Christianity). This is a change and would require Christians to listen to the truths of other religions *on their own terms*.

Griffiths does not identify “true religion” with salvation either. He understands salvation formally as the end that all human beings should want, and acknowledges that for him this is Christian salvation or the attainment of the beatific vision. As a Christian, he also believes the following: 1) that belonging to Christianity (in a loose sense) is necessary for salvation, 2) that all human beings will be given the chance to obtain

salvation – be it in this life or the life to come, and 3) that it must be possible to refuse salvation and, therefore, *possible* for some to not be saved. Although he does not say so explicitly, I will presume that Griffiths sees truth claims as productive of salvation – and, therefore, that he believes the truth claims of other religions *may* make Christian salvation more effective. If this is the case, the need to take other religions seriously is amplified.

As said in the brief introduction to this chapter, acknowledgement by the home religion that alien religions might have something to teach it is the hallmark of neo-inclusivism. This idea is found in Griffiths' concept of open inclusivism with respect to truth, and seems to have implications for the question of salvation. Nonetheless, Griffiths does not develop a full-blown neo-inclusive Christian theology of religions, so for this we will turn to two other theorists; namely, Gavin D'Costa and S. Mark Heim.

3. Gavin D'Costa's Roman Catholic Trinitarian Theology of Religions

Gavin D'Costa is a Catholic theologian who teaches at Bristol University. In 1986, he published a book called *Theology and Religious Pluralism* in the pattern of Alan Race's *Christians and Religious Pluralism* which – despite D'Costa's stated preference for inclusivism over pluralism – helped to validate Race's typology and his characterization of religious pluralism.

A Critique of Humanistic Religious Pluralism

In 1990, D'Costa edited and contributed to a volume called *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. This book was brought

together in direct response to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and has been seminal for all subsequent criticisms of religious pluralism, including D'Costa's 1995 article called "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," wherein he renounces his commitment to the traditional threefold typology. Indeed, D'Costa describes this particular article as a public act of self-humiliation because in it he argues that the threefold typology – that he previously embraced, defended, and helped to authenticate – is incoherent since both inclusivism and pluralism are logically forms of exclusivism and, therefore, nothing called pluralism (or inclusivism) really exists.⁴

D'Costa's point in this article is a logical one, and is quite simple: He argues that there is no such thing as pluralism because pluralists are committed to some form of truth criteria whereby they include certain religions within the category of authentic religion and exclude others. D'Costa argues that if pluralists did not use such exclusivist criteria they would not be able to distinguish between the "great world religions" and various "destructive cults," as they typically do. However, pluralists *do*, in fact, use exclusivist – and religious tradition-specific – criteria to judge the authenticity of various religions and, so, they fail to achieve their (apparent) aim of affirming religious diversity as an autonomous value.

D'Costa sees the "logical shape" of pluralists denying some religions the status of being an authentic religion, as identical to that of exclusivists denying the existence of truth and salvific efficacy in other religions, and this is why he says that pluralism is really exclusivism. Thus, D'Costa claims that there is a logical category mistake in the labelling of pluralism because it shares the same logical structure as exclusivism, and he maintains that this argument holds for all forms of so-called pluralism, both Christian and

⁴ D'Costa, "Impossibility of a Pluralist View."

non-Christian. D'Costa would later go on to argue this at length in his book called, *The Trinity and the Meeting of the Religions* – a book that also includes D'Costa's own attempt to produce a Catholic trinitarian theology of religions. D'Costa claims that his tradition-specific theology of religions is actually more open, tolerant, and egalitarian in its approach to other religions than are “pluralist” theologies of religious pluralism. We will now examine D'Costa's trinitarian theology of religions.

In the first part of *The Meeting of Religions* D'Costa argues that John Hick, Paul Knitter and Dan Cohn-Sherbok (a Reform rabbi) are all exclusivists, since they propound a “form of Kantian exclusivist modernity”⁵ and belong to the “exclusivist Encyclopaedic tradition.” (47) As such, they have bought into the Enlightenment's unitary view of reality, which obliterates all otherness. Here is how D'Costa characterizes Hick's and Knitter's engagement with religious otherness:

...in so much as their positions actually advance modernity's project, rather than Christianity's engagement with difference, they deny or even obliterate difference and Otherness. In Hick's case, he mythologizes the differences away so that the religions can be fitted into his system. In Knitter's case, the religions are all judged by allegedly self-evident criteria that are found in the ecosystem. Both Hick and Knitter know the full truth and what is ethically required of the religions independently of any of the religions.” (39)

After arguing that these representative Christian and Jewish pluralists are really exclusivists, D'Costa turns to look for pluralists in other religious traditions, and so examines the “neo-Hindu pluralism” of Radhakrishnan, and the “‘skilful’ pluralism” of the Dalai Lama. (56; 74) Without going into the specifics of his argument, D'Costa

⁵ D'Costa, *Meeting of Religions*, 39; cited in text by page number hereafter.

concludes that Radhakrishnan and the Dali Lama are also both exclusivists. The defining feature of exclusivism, for D'Costa, seems to be seeing the other in terms of one's own religiosity, or, not being able to "affirm another on the other's own terms." (91) It is with respect to this feature that D'Costa classifies Karl Rahner – who typifies inclusivism for many – as "clearly and explicitly an exclusivist."⁶ (91)

Even so, when D'Costa puts forth his own trinitarian theology of other religions – which he also calls exclusivist – he maintains a residual, pejorative meaning for both inclusivism and pluralism. According to D'Costa, inclusivism and pluralism are identifiable by their (wrong) view that other religions are vehicles of salvation in and of themselves– pluralists maintaining that these different salvific vehicles are of equal value and inclusivists maintaining that the salvific vehicle of the home religion is still superior. (99-101) It is in this sense that D'Costa still refers, for example, to Rahner as an "inclusivist" and Hick as a "pluralist."

I, of course, maintain that useful distinctions can be made between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, as outlined in Chapter 3. Using these distinctions, D'Costa is an inclusivist because he rejects the exclusivist idea that there is only one authentic form of religion, and because he posits a singular religious end for all religions. Moreover, he is a neo-inclusivist because he attributes position value to non-Christian religions in realizing the ultimate (Christian) religious end.

D'Costa – in an effort to distance his own approach to religious diversity from the modernist pluralist approach – describes his approach as "unashamedly Roman Catholic in method, orientation, and accountability." (99) More specifically, D'Costa claims that

⁶ Rahner is an exclusivist because 1) he identifies salvation with the beatific vision, and 2) other religions only remain lawful until their historical encounter with Christianity (D'Costa, *Meeting of Religions*, 91).

his approach engages creatively with other traditions while remaining faithful to his own; that it is more open, tolerant, and egalitarian than pluralist approaches; and, that it is open to criticism from religious others. (99)

A Trinitarian Approach to the Religions

D'Costa's approach revolves around two main arguments; 1) that non-Christian religions are not vehicles of salvation per se, and 2) that the Spirit (or third person of the Trinity) may be present in non-Christian religions. The second argument allows for the possibility that non-Christian religions will play a vital role in God's historical plan for the salvation of humanity, and the first argument ensures that this salvific plan will remain singular or unified.

Denying Other Religions as Salvific Structures in order to Preserve Eschatological

Unity. To argue his first point that non-Christian religions are not independent salvific structures, D'Costa makes an exegetical reading of several Papal Declarations and documents, primarily 1) *The Declaration of the Church to Non-Christina Religions (Nostra Aetate, 1965)*; 2) *The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964)*; 3) *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio, 1991)*; and, 4) *Crossing the Threshold of Hope (1994)*.

D'Costa begins his exegesis by addressing a single question in light of *Nostra Aetate*; namely, "are non-Christian religions, *per se*, vehicles of salvation," or, are they "mediators of supernatural revelation to their followers?"(102) D'Costa comes to the conclusion both pre-Conciliar and post-Conciliar (i.e., before and after/during the Second

Vatican Council, 1962-65) Church teachings remain silent on this question – but that post-Conciliar theologians have read this silence very differently. More specifically, some have read the silence to mean that non-Christian religions are salvific structures, and others, such as D’Costa, have read the silence as precluding this possibility. D’Costa, though belonging to the latter category, doesn’t see this as preventing an open, tolerant, and egalitarian approach to other religions. (101-102)

D’Costa begins his argument by “contextualizing” *Nostra Aetate*’s silence on the question of whether non-Christian religions are salvific vehicles, with the aim of showing that it is difficult to answer this question positively.

First, D’Costa notes that the Church relates to the different religions differently; in other words, different religions have different theological and historical value for the Church. Judaism has pride of place among other religions since it is the “root from which the church springs”; (103) Islam is next, since it has obtained a positive knowledge of the creator God; and, in last place come Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions (the primal religions of Africa in particular) in which people can be found living a good life. (102)

D’Costa links supernatural revelation to salvation – if a religion is the bearer of supernatural revelation then it can be seen as a salvific structure. *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges only Judaism as a bearer of supernatural revelation, since the Church received the “revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant.” (103) But D’Costa is unwilling to see this as an acknowledgement that Judaism is, per se, a vehicle of salvation because Jewish Revelation is the “Old Testament” and, therefore, superseded by the “New Testament”; thus, it is only valid insofar as it is appropriated by Christianity or

included in Christian scripture. Therefore, if Judaism cannot be recognized as a salvific structure, then other religions certainly cannot be since these are not recognized as bearers of supernatural salvation in any sense. (103)

Second, D'Costa looks at what *Nosta Aetate* says about the related question of the possible salvation of the non-Christian. *Nosta Aetate* says nothing about whether or not non-Christians can be saved, but it can be taken for granted that they can be, since this possibility is explicitly stated in *Lumen Gentium* (another post Conciliar document). *Lumen Gentium* acknowledges the unique place of the Jews but, according to D'Costa, stops short of saying that Judaism is a salvific structure per se.⁷ It also says that through the use of reason (i.e., through natural means) one can obtain a knowledge of the creator God, and, through God's grace, do His will; in other words, one can obtain salvation through natural means. D'Costa concludes from this that one does not have to acknowledge Islam as a salvific structure, since Islamic knowledge of the creator God and of God's will could be obtained through reason. (103)

The Council Fathers also affirm that *anyone* can obtain salvation under the following three conditions: 1) a person is ignorant of the gospel of Christ and his Church through no fault of their own; 2) a person strives to live a good life; and 3) such positive striving is recognized as preparation for the "full and undiminished truth of the gospel." (104) As such, even those who do not believe in a creator God – such as Buddhists – can be seen as moving towards salvation. The third point, here, emphasizes that the truth found in other religions is the Truth found in Christ – meaning that the salvation obtained

⁷ Presumably, D'Costa takes this acknowledgement of Judaism's unique place as an acknowledgement that Jews can be saved.

in other religions is derived from Christianity, which means that other religions are not in and of themselves independent salvific structures.(103-104)

Third, D’Costa notes that while *Nostra Aetate* focuses only on the positive aspects of other religions, other Church documents record negative qualifications about truths found outside of the Church. For example, the *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gents)* makes the point that other religions are an admixture of truth and error, that can only obtain purification and perfection in Christ. (104-105)

D’Costa’s contextualization is meant to show that the Conciliar documents do not give a positive answer to the question of whether or not other religions are salvific structures. And though they also do not give an explicitly negative answer, D’Costa argues that the Church’s silence to this question is a *prohibition* on “any unqualified positive affirmation of other religions as salvific structures, or as containing divine revelation.” (105) But, again, he insists that this does not prevent the Church from acknowledging the presence of saving grace in other religions, and that they contain “much that is good, and holy, and much to be admired and learned by the church.” (105)

D’Costa, while acknowledging that his own position on this issue has been marginalized in the Church, still presses forward by arguing that his reading of the Conciliar documents is consistent with later Papal documents on other religions, particularly *Redemptoris Missio* (1991) and *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994). (105)

Crossing the Threshold of Hope is Pope John Paul II’s commentary on *Nostra Aetate*. In *Crossing the Threshold*, the Pope reiterates the position of *Nostra Aetate* that the Church rejects nothing that is “true and holy” in other religions – but this document

also spells out some of the things that are not true and holy in other religions. For example, he is critical of Buddhism's "negative soteriology" and of Islam's "reduction" of the Divine Revelation that is given in the Old and New Testaments – even though he is also willing to acknowledge the religiosity of certain aspects of both Buddhism and Islam. (107)

D'Costa isn't particularly interested in whether or not the Pope is right in his judgements, but he does take the fact he makes such judgements as an indication that he does not take other religions to be salvific structures as such – if he did there would be no basis for his criticisms of these other religions. (106-107) And, this, of course, supports D'Costa's reading that the Church does not affirm other religions as salvific structures. For D'Costa, *Redemptoris Missio* makes this point even more definitively.

In *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II sees the natural human quest for God as related to the Holy Spirit. It is the grace of God, through the Holy Spirit, that is (within history) leading all men and women to the Truth of Christ. But, according to D'Costa, this grace is not "the fullness of sanctifying and redeeming grace found in Christ's eschatological Church." (107) In other words, God's grace brought through the Holy Spirit is necessarily fulfilled in the eschatological Church (i.e., oneness with the Father through oneness with the Son). By insisting that the grace of God brought by the Spirit to other religions is fulfilled in Christ, D'Costa is saying that there cannot be authentic religious quests "apart from Christ, the trinity, and the Church." (107) This, of course, means that no religion, except for Christianity, is a salvific structure. In short, D'Costa takes the Pope's vision of Christianity as the fulfilment of all religions, in *Redemptoris Missio*, as proof that other religions cannot be salvific structures in and of themselves.

It seems to me, that in rejecting the idea of other religions being salvific structures, D'Costa is not only concerned with faithfulness to tradition, but also with preserving the unity of the Church's eschatological vision. Thus, I don't see D'Costa so much opposed to the idea that other religions are different means to the same salvation, but to the idea that they offer different forms of salvation. He might reject the idea that religions provide different means to the same end on empirical grounds, but he rejects the idea that they are salvific structures per se, or offer different salvations, on ideological grounds. The acknowledgement that other religions are salvific structures would undermine the unity of D'Costa's eschatological vision of salvation that centres around the concepts of Christ, the triune God, and the church.

Apart from preserving the unity of the Church's eschatological vision, D'Costa has a secondary concern; namely, taking religious others seriously *on their own terms*. For D'Costa, pluralists fail in this regard – they domesticate difference by seeing the other in terms of the self – and this is the main reason why D'Costa sees his “trinitarian exclusivism” as more open, tolerant, and egalitarian than pluralist theologies of religions. D'Costa uses the idea that the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinity) may be present in other religions to take seriously the truths of other religions, and we will now examine this part of D'Costa's theology.

The Presence of the Holy Spirit in Other Religions Demands Taking Them Seriously. The possibility of the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions (or in other human cultures) is explicitly acknowledged in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. (109-110) As said above, it is this idea that D'Costa

uses to argue that other religions have truths (that they can teach to the Church); however, this idea can also be used to argue that other religions are independent salvific structures, so D'Costa begins by arguing against this idea.

In making his argument, D'Costa rejects the ways in which both humanistic religious pluralists (such as Paul Knitter) and metaphysical religious pluralists (such as Raimundo Panikkar) use the idea that the Holy Spirit is present in other religions.

Paul Knitter, according to D'Costa, suggests that the Church's acknowledgement that the Spirit is present in other religions might lead Christians to abandon their "Christological fixation" which, in turn, would lead to better interfaith dialogue. Knitter's idea, here, is that the Spirit functions as a common reality (equally) present in all religions – including Christianity. D'Costa rejects this idea because "it is clear that the Spirit cannot be disassociated from Christ" (110) – by which D'Costa obviously means that the Spirit must be understood as leading to Christ. D'Costa doesn't discuss Panikkar's concept of the Spirit but, instead, makes his point with respect to Panikkar's "Logos Christology." According to D'Costa, Panikkar conceives the Logos as a universal revelation, and takes Jesus Christ to be one instance of such revelation. This move is illegitimate, in D'Costa's eyes, because it makes Biblical history irrelevant to salvation history. (110)

In these cases, and others, D'Costa criticises pluralist theologians for not working within the legitimate parameters set by the Conciliar documents (and, more generally, the Catholic tradition). For D'Costa, it is illegitimate to exclude or conflate concepts that are a part of the tradition, and specifically he says that any acknowledgement of the presence of the Spirit in other religions must come with "a tacit acknowledgement that in a

mysterious and hidden manner, there too is the ambiguous presence of the triune God, the church, and the kingdom.” (111) In other words, other religions are necessarily a part of the same (singular and Christian) salvific process.

As for making a contribution to the Christian theology of religions – within legitimate parameters – D’Costa questions the “unilateral” way in which the Church has understood Christianity as the “fulfilment” of other religions, and other religions as preparation for the gospel. He wonders if the Church might not open itself up to the truths of other religions in the same way that it has opened itself up to the truths of Western secular (scientific) culture. *Guadium et Spec* recognizes, not only, the positive aspects of modernity as possible preparation for the gospel – but also (in D’Costa’s words) “that such cultures may therefore have elements which will challenge and even change elements within the church, in its structure, formulations, and practice.” (111) In other words, if the Church can acknowledge that it might be challenged and changed by the truths of Western secular culture then it can, similarly, acknowledge that it might be challenged and changed by the truths of other religions.

Understanding other religions as preparation for the gospel, in this more “dialectical” way would prevent the church from domesticating the other – because the other would be recognized as possibly having things to teach the church on its own terms. Yet, D’Costa remains cautious by making the point that the Church has never sanctioned western modernity as a legitimate alternative worldview, and by insisting that the recognition of truth in other religions would have to take place in real time, or “on the basis of the historical experiences of the local churches.” (112)

To further develop this theme, D'Costa turns to John Paul's *Redemptoris Missio*, which he says acknowledges the work of the Spirit in other religions in "important structural and cultural dimensions," meaning that the Spirit is affecting and shaping not only individuals, but also "society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions." (113) But despite this acknowledgement, that the Spirit is shaping concrete realities, including the concrete realities of other religions, John Paul does not confer independent legitimacy on other religions; legitimacy is always granted within the confines of the triune God, Christ, and the Church. This is very significant, for D'Costa, and the point on which he sees both pluralism and inclusivism moving beyond the legitimate parameters of tradition.⁸ (113-114)

But, despite the above qualification, D'Costa thinks that *Redemptoris Missio* can be read such that Christian fulfilment is understood as a two way street:

...if one were to retain and utilize the category of fulfillment in a very careful sense, then it is not only the other religions that are fulfilled in (and in one sense, radically transformed) their *preparatio* being completed through Christianity, but also Christianity itself that is fulfilled in receiving the gift of God that the Other might bear, self-consciously or not. (114)

D'Costa develops this theme more fully by looking at ways in which the Spirit – acting both within and outside the Church – works to make the Church more "Christ-shaped." (114) Drawing on a passage from *Redemptoris Missio*, that speak of the work of the Spirit both inside and outside of the church, D'Costa emphasizes three important

⁸ Again, D'Costa says there is no such thing as pluralism and inclusivism, but obviously he maintains the following "secondary" definitions: pluralism says there are multiple salvific structures (religions) and these are all equally effective; inclusivism says that there are multiple salvific structures but one of these is superior to all others.

points. First, if the Spirit works inside the church to make Christians more Christ-like, then it must have the same function in other cultures and religions. Second, if it is possible that the Spirit is doing transformative work in other religions then the church must be critically and reverentially open to what other religions have to say.⁹ Third, the discernment of the Spirit in other religions must bring the Church to greater truth or more truthfully into the presence of the triune God.” (115) In other words, the Church must acknowledge the possibility of the Spirit in other religions, must listen to what the Spirit is saying in these other religions, and must allow itself to be transformed by the Spirit as discerned in other religions. D’Costa summarizes his position in the following strong terms:

...if the Spirit is at work in the religions, then the gifts of the Spirit need to be discovered, fostered, and received into the church. If the church fails to be receptive, it maybe unwittingly practicing cultural and religious idolatry. (115)

For D’Costa, this trinitarian openness to the truth of other religions – i.e., this hearing what others have to say on their own terms, and being open to the possibility of being internally transformed by this – is greater than the openness of pluralists. D’Costa reflects on how his theology is more open than pluralistic theologies, and more tolerant and egalitarian as well – even though he acknowledges that openness, tolerance, and equality mean different things for him than for pluralists.

As for openness, D’Costa says that pluralists are not really open because they already know what they are going to find in other religions prior to real historical engagement with other religions. D’Costa says that his Catholic trinitarian doctrine of

⁹ D’Costa’s view is that the church must first listen to other religion’s auto-interpretations, even though the final word on these religions belongs to the Christian hetero-interpretation.

God is only “eschatologically ‘closed’” meaning that Christianity can always remain open to change from without, within history. In other words, until Christ leads all to the Kingdom of God, Christians must remain open to the possibility that the Spirit in other religions is leading to greater truth about Christ, and there is no way to predetermine what this truth will look like. As D’Costa puts it: “there can be no *a priori* knowledge of what other religions may disclose: the surprises, beauty, terror, truth, holiness, deformity, cruelty, and goodness that they might display”; thus “...positive or negative judgments are then *a posteriori* and must be accounted for.” (133) For D’Costa, taking the auto-interpretation of other religions seriously means that the church is open to “genuine change, challenge, and questioning.” (133)

D’Costa is trying to make the point that since Christian truth is closed only eschatologically that, in history, the Church’s openness to truth in other religions is practically open-ended. What D’Costa does not examine, however, is the extent to which Christianity’s particular end-time vision (and concept of God) determines what it is able to discern as truth. (It is always the prerogative and obligation of the Church to discern what is true in other religions.) It would certainly seem that these have something to do with, for example, John Paul’s, negative evaluation of the “negative soteriology” of Buddhism.

In any case, D’Costa interprets openness in terms of taking history seriously, or of hearing what religions actually have to say within history, and maintains that his trinitarian orientation fosters such openness. Moreover, he says that although this seriousness about history and about the truths of other religions is relatively new for the Church (Post Vatican II) and quite novel, it is also an authentic development with real

implications for the Church's mission. As for tolerance and equality D'Costa interprets the former as civic religious rights or "the right to be free from civic coercion in the practice of one's religion," and the latter as the human dignity that belongs to all human beings as result of being made in the image of God. (137) Both of these concepts are, of course, compatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, neither openness, nor tolerance, nor equality is about acknowledging other religions as independent salvific structures – all religions are working within the same universal (Christian) framework.

Thus, Gavin D'Costa's trinitarian theology of religions is clearly inclusivist since there is only one form of true religion, or only one form of salvation for all. But he is a neo-inclusivist because he attributes to other (non-Christian) religions possible positive value in leading humanity to the single (Christian) religious end sought by all.

4. S. Mark Heim's Protestant Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends

In 1995, another critic of religious pluralism – S. Mark Heim – came to a conclusion very similar to D'Costa's; specifically, that pluralists are really inclusivists. Mark Heim is a Baptist theologian who teaches at Andover Newton and has been actively involved in ecumenical and interfaith activities for many years. His views on religious diversity are found primarily in an unintended trilogy of books including: *Is Christ the Only Way?*; *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*; and, *The Depth of the Riches: Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*.

A Critique of Humanistic Pluralism

In *Salvations*, Heim offers a thorough-going critique of pluralistic theologies of religions in general, by critiquing the work of three representative pluralists: John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter. He argues that it would become evident that pluralists are really inclusivists if they would come clean and make explicit arguments for why their views of religion are better than others – instead of falsely presuming that their views are of a higher logical order since they are not bound to any particular form of religion.¹⁰

He says this because he thinks that the supposedly universal religious norms established by religious pluralists will show themselves to be capitulated forms of Christianity created in light of modern, Western philosophical, historical, and social criticisms; in other words, these norms will show themselves to be *particular* forms of religion, meaning that pluralistic theories of religion are no different in this respect than inclusive theories of religion.

John Hick provides an example, for Heim, of a pluralist who reinterprets Christianity (and religion) in light of Western philosophical criticisms of Christianity (and religion) – particularly Kant's distinction between noumenal reality and phenomenal reality, and his claim that noumenal reality can never be known in and of itself, but only as perceived and conceived through phenomenal forms. Hick uses this insight to claim that it is impossible to know God or the Real (to use his preferred term) *as such* and that all religious perceptions and conceptions of the Real are necessarily limited by historical and cultural conditions. However, given this condition it is still possible to distinguish

¹⁰ For a useful discussion of the seeming impossibility of constructing a theory of religions that is not simply a further expression of one particular type of religion, see Owen, *Attitudes Towards Other Religions*. Also, see my discussion of this problem in the Conclusion.

authentic from inauthentic responses to the Real (or true perceptions and conceptions of the Real from false ones): Authentic responses lead to salvation and inauthentic responses do not.

Hick defines salvation substantively as turning from self-centredness to God-centeredness and says that we can see the evidence of salvation in moral behaviour and saintly character. So, for Hick, religions are different, culturally limited, responses to the Real that lead to a God-centred life that bears positive moral fruits: This is Hick's meta-theory of religion, that serves as the basis for his theory of religious diversity. And his theory of religious diversity is that the world's great religious traditions are equal because – as far as he can tell – these religions produce good people with about the same degree of effectiveness.

Heim, on the other hand, suggests that Hick's meta-religion is a *particular* form of Christianity accommodated to Western philosophical criticisms of religion – that needs to justify its claim to universality as much as any religion that serves as the basis for an inclusivist or exclusivist theory of religion.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith provides an example of a pluralist who reinterprets Christianity (and religion) in light of modern Western historical criticisms of Christianity (and religion) – particularly the view that religious phenomena are historical phenomena that can only be explained in terms of other historical phenomena, and not in terms of Divine causation. Smith's way of accommodating this principle of the historical study of religion is to introduce a dualistic definition of religion; thus, Smith's well known definition of religion as faith and cumulative tradition. In this definition, faith is a universal quality or an existential attitude found in all religions: it is "a quiet confidence

and joy which enables one to feel at home in the universe and to find meaning in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate."¹¹ Cumulative tradition on the other hand is the cultural form that expresses faith, and this manifests in bewildering religious diversity not only from one religion to another but also within the same religion.

Given this distinction, Smith is happy to let the historian of religion explain tradition or the externals of religion via the methods of modern history of religion. And, more than this, Smith is of the view that the historian of religion – the higher type who deals comparatively with the meaning of faith – has newly discovered the unity of all religions on the level of faith. Thus, Smith's meta-theory of religion is that religion is constituted of faith and cumulative tradition – and his theory of religious diversity claims that all of the world's great religions are on par – *because they are all expressions of faith.*

Heim, in contrast, suggests that Smith's meta-religion or normative form of religion is a particular form of Christianity that in its "cumulative tradition dimension" accommodates itself to Western historical criticisms of Christianity (and religion) and in its "faith dimension" bears an uncanny resemblance to an existential form of Protestant Christianity stemming from Kierkegaard. And here, as with Hick, the very particular nature of religion proposed by Smith – that does not allow for the possibility of different types of religion – leads Heim to the conclusion that pluralists are no different from inclusivists.

Paul Knitter, according to Heim, provides an example of a pluralist who reinterprets Christianity (and religion) to accommodate modern Western social criticisms of Christianity (and religion) – specifically criticisms by feminists, liberationists, and

¹¹ W.C. Smith in Heim, *Salvations*, 46.

social scientists who have criticized Christianity (and religions) for fostering social evils such as patriarchy, economic exploitation, and so forth. In fact, he notes that Knitter goes so far as to make such social justice issues the sole criteria by which religions are judged to be authentic; thus, religions that support and perpetuate human injustice are judged to be inauthentic and religions that promote social justice are judged to be authentic.

Moreover, Knitter conceives of salvation *collectively* as the attainment of a just social order – or to use Christian language, of the “Kingdom of God,” but he sees this as a future accomplishment that the world’s religious traditions – along with the marginalized voices of the oppressed – will struggle to bring into being.

Knitter’s meta-theory of religion, then, is that religion is that which brings about a just social order – and his pluralistic theory of religious diversity is that the religions of the world are equal insofar as they are equally committed to this universal norm.

For Heim, though, Knitter’s meta-religion is a particular form of Christianity (or religion) based on Western notions of social justice, that *may* be willing to entertain other notions of social justice but is unwilling to give up the idea that commitment to social justice is the essence of religion. Thus, Knitter who judges the validity of other religions against the singular standard of his meta-religion is also an inclusivist.

In the second part of *Salvations*, Heim began to construct his own “more pluralist” theology of religions, and this work culminated in a further work called *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*.

A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends

Heim calls his own theology of religions inclusivist, but his work has created some conceptual confusion since it resembles deep pluralism/metaphysical pluralism. I maintain that Heim's theology is inclusivist since it posits a single highest religious end (Christianity), and neo-inclusivist because it attributes positive value to other (non-Christian) religions in attaining the highest single religious end. We will now examine Heim's theology of religions.

All religions struggle with presenting a vision of God and means whereby God and human beings can be in communication and eventually come to a final goal of intimate communion. Judaism and Islam basically present a God, most transcendent to his creation, who communicates through word revelations about his nature, the purpose of creation, and the nature of human beings through his appointed prophets. Such communications are gathered up in the Hebrew Bible for the Jews and in the Koran for the Muslims.

The Far Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, stress primarily the immanence of God in all creation, especially the fulfilment of human striving to be found in the *advaita* experience of non-duality. The human person finds completion in total immersion in the Absolute Being.

Christianity's strength consists in maintaining the antinomy of "both/and." God is both transcendent to his creatures and also immanently indwelling in his human children in intimate personal relationships. The Good News is that God is love and love unites but also differentiates.¹²

¹² Maloney, *Pseudo-Macarius*, 1.

The above passage is taken from George A. Maloney's introduction to his translation of *Pseudo-Macarius*, but could have been written by Mark Heim, or even Paul Tillich. It expresses Christianity's strength as being able to strike a balance between transcendence and immanence; between unity and diversity; between God and human beings. The logic of the Trinity strikes the same kind of balance, wherein the three persons of the Trinity maintain their particularity and yet are one. It is the structure and logic of the Trinity that Mark Heim employs in his theology of religions. The structure of the Trinity means that there are different dimensions of God that can be related to (necessarily differently) – and these different relationships constitute different religious ends. The logic of the Trinity – which unifies or integrates the three persons of the Trinity without reducing them or destroying their particularity – is, then, used by Heim to argue that the highest religious form of religion (Christianity) is the one that unifies without reducing the different religious ends. In Heim's theology, different religions (or different religious ends) function analogously to the three persons of the Trinity – but whereas the three persons of the Trinity are simultaneously differentiated and united in the idea of the Trinity, it is different religious ends that are unified in Christianity's ultimate end of communion. Nonetheless, there is a link between these two: Communion is the unifying and identity preserving relationship between the three persons of the Trinity – and communion is also (in Christianity) the unifying and identity preserving relationship between the different religious ends found in various religious traditions.

Thus, Heim would claim that his theology of religions maintains the integrity and ultimacy of different religious ends – in the same way that the doctrine of the Trinity

maintains the integrity and ultimacy of the three different persons of the Trinity. Let us now consider a portion of Heim's argument in the *Depth of the Riches*.

Heim claims that God is triune and, therefore, has distinct dimensions. The fact that God has distinct dimensions means that God can be related to in different ways.

Salvation is communion with each distinct dimension of God:

Salvation is precisely communion with God across the breadth of these complex dimensions of God's nature, a communion whose fullness requires participation in relation with other persons and with creation. Humanity realizes its deepest encounter with the plenitude and diversity of the divine nature through this web of communion, this shared relation with God.¹³

But salvation, understood in this way, is not only the Christian religious end; it is also a means for Christians to understand other religions. For Heim, the communion of the triune God is the same as the communion of salvation. This is significant because Heim will argue that Christian salvation unifies, without reducing, all authentic relationships with God (i.e., God related to under different dimensions), in the same way that the concept of the triune God, unites without reducing the three persons of the Trinity. Heim says that to encounter God under one dimension is to encounter the same one God who can be encountered under multiple dimensions – but that encounter under one dimension doesn't demand encounter under all. These singular encounters with only one dimension of God constitute different religions, or different religious ends and, again, Christian salvation constitutes communion with God across all dimensions. This means, for Heim, that Christian salvation and other religious ends, are all grounded in the triune God. (209)

¹³ Heim, *Depth of the Riches*, 209; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

Heim describes three different types of relation with God, or three encounters with different dimensions of God: one marked by “impersonal identity,” a second by “iconographic encounter,” and a third by “personal communion.” There are two variations of impersonal identity and two variations of iconographic encounter. Personal communion is singular and amounts to the integration of all of the different relations with God, or different religious ends. (210)

The two variations of impersonal identity are used by Heim to account for Buddhism and Hinduism. The first variation is grounded in the “emptiness” of the triune God, wherein sharp dividing lines between autonomous entities are transcended. The second variation is grounded in the realization that the divine persons are completely immanent in one another. (210)

Heim speaks about how the relationships between the divine persons of the triune God are “‘externalized’ in terms of the economic interaction between God and creatures.” (210) Heim’s way of thinking about this is to see the same sort of relationships that obtain between the persons of the triune God carried over to relationships between God and creatures. Thus, differences in the ways human beings relate to God mirror differences in the ways that the persons of the Trinity relate to one another – or, the relations within the Trinity, are “economically expressed” as analogous to the relationship between God and human beings.

Heim says that the first variation, economically expressed, has to do with God’s withdrawal from the world, and that this allows for insight into both the insubstantiality of existence and the emptiness of God: The realization of the divine under this dimension is the Buddhist nirvana. The second variation, economically expressed, has to do with

God's immanence in the world, or "God's sustaining presence in creation, in, with, and under the natural order. If this insight is pursued, in and of itself, it leads to the realization of God or the dissolution of the self into the Self. (211) Heim is clearly thinking of the Hindu end of non-dualism here.

But, even though Buddhist nirvana and Hindu non-dualism are authentic religious ends – or real encounters with the divine life under a particular dimension – Heim insists that these ends are not the same as Christian salvation.

Having effectively located Buddhist and Hindu ends within the life of the triune God, Heim considers the second dimension of the triune life; namely, the iconographic. As with the first dimension, Heim begins by describing the relationship between the persons of the Trinity under this dimension, before extending it to the relationship between God and human beings. Here, each of the three persons of the Trinity experiences the others as a distinct and unique character. Expressed externally, this means that human beings experience God as a distinct and holy other. Heim says that there are two variations of this encounter of God as a distinct other. In the first variation, the divine other is experienced as law, order or structure; Heim cites the Buddhist dharma and the Tao of Taoism as examples of this. According to Heim, such law or structure expresses the common will of the triune God – and single-minded conformity to the will of God produces distinct religious fulfilments. Again, Heim insists that such fulfilments are authentic even though they are not the same as Christian salvation. (211)

The second variation of the iconographic dimension of the triune God focuses on encounter with God as a personal Being. As with the first variation, the idea of law and morality are also strong here – but they appear in a more personal key, or, "in the context

of command, promise, trust, and faith.” (211) Heim cites Islam as an excellent example of such personal faithfulness in relation to a personal God – but, here too, insists that this is not the same as Christian salvation. (211)

Finally, Heim discusses the third – integrating and culminating – dimension of the triune life; namely, communion. And, as before, Heim starts by describing what communion looks like within the triune God. In the communion of the triune God, there is integration without reduction; unity and diversity:

This unity is such as to leave each one’s unique particularity intact. Because God’s nature is constituted by the communion of three persons, that nature maintains within it distinct and irreducible dimensions. (211-212)

Such communion is expressed externally in a relationship between God and creatures wherein creatures recognize that the different dimensions of God 1) maintain their own personal integrity and 2) achieve coequality. Heim suggests that there are two ways to imagine this. First he identifies this with “traditional polytheism” and “some postmodern theological perspectives.” (212) According to this view, different relationships within the triune God (even though not rightly understood as such) are seen as diverse and unconnected ways of relating to God. Heim finds such perspectives problematic because they resist integration within the one divine life:

That reality itself is seen to have a number of incommensurable forms, and no intrinsic principle of unity. More than one dimension of divine life is recognized, but there is no way to understand them as dimensions of one divine life.¹⁴ (212)

¹⁴ In this passage, Heim criticizes the sort of “ultra-pluralism” that Hick criticizes Heim for advocating. The conclusion I draw from this, is that Hick has misread Heim’s position.

Different religious perspectives, here, are merely associated with one another – they are not in communion. For Heim, this (pluralistic) perspective does not amount to another distinct religious end; it is simply an affirmation that there are a number of different, unrelated religious ends. This is where Christianity comes into play; it is the second possible vision for relating human beings to a complex divine reality. (212) It is a means of integrating, into one unified perspective, various religious ends – and, as such is the ultimate religious end.

This second vision is Christian and explicitly trinitarian; here the complex divine reality is seen as a “communion of persons,” and, again, Heim sees this as offering a pattern for understanding religious diversity:

The variety of human relations with God then in principle may find integration, communion in difference being the very means, the necessary means, to fully relate with a God who is a communion of distinct persons. (213)

In other words, the pattern of communion or “unity in distinction” that obtains in the triune God is also the pattern for integrating the various different ways of relating to God.

Christian salvation is the integration of the various different ways of relating to God, and as such a unique religious end. By entering into communion with Christ, Christians enter into the communion of the divine life or the various dimensions of the divine life that are related to differently in different religions: “Salvation is a relation with God in which humans connect with these varied dimensions of the divine life in a unified way.” (213) Nonetheless, even though Heim insists that various religious ends have an “integral unity in God,” and that this is realized through Christian salvation, he also insists that integration (i.e., Christian salvation) cannot be forced on religious others, and

that the constituent elements of salvation (other religious ends) have their own “reality and stability.” (213)

Heim sees the impersonal dimension of the divine life as “basic,” the personal dimension as “a further addition,” and communion or “trinitarian complexity” as a “culmination.” (213) And, yet, he is reluctant to see a simple spiritual hierarchy, since it is possible to have a good understanding of a “higher dimension” without a parallel understanding of a “lower dimension” – think of moralistic traditions that suppress mystical elements. And, the same goes for Christianity. Even though it is ultimately cumulative and integrative, this does not mean that it has a superior understanding of all the dimensions it subsumes; indeed, traditions with exclusive focus on one particular dimension of the divine life are likely to have a better understanding of this than Christians. Thus, “Christians need humble apprenticeship to other religions in regard to dimensions of the triune life that those faiths grasp with profound depth.” (213) In this regard, Heim is similar to our two other neo-inclusivists who believe that Christians might need to pay attention to other religions, but Heim turns this possibility into an imperative.

Heim says that it is typical for religious traditions to focus on only one dimension of divine reality – and says that this is also true of Christianity which focuses on communion. But he adds that communion is an unique focus insofar as it inherently includes the other ways of relating to the divine life *as* other – and it bestows coequality on these other religious ends. Even so, communion (or Christian salvation) has “characteristic dangers and limitations.” For Heim, the great danger for Christians is to lose touch with the other concrete religious ends that are integrated in Christian salvation

– to see Christianity as standing over and against these others instead of as that which reconciles them in the fullness or their otherness. (213)

Heim sees this “composite” view of salvation impacting Christian dialogue and mission in two ways. On one hand, it means that Christians will have to pay attention to what other traditions have to teach – and even be attentive to their criticisms of Christianity. On the other hand, it means that Christians will share their Christian witness with others; a witness that is a “distinctive affirmation *that* these varied dimensions with God can cohere in coequality and mutuality” and a confession of how this comes about. (214) In other words, Heim sees Christianity teaching others an authentic form of religious pluralism, wherein the different religious ends are preserved and regarded as equal.

Heim’s view – of various religious ends as coequal – is explicitly Christian and trinitarian, and this prompts him to ask about the state of religious others who refuse to have their own religious ends subsumed within this Christian vision. Heim’s view is that these others should be seen as attending to their own religious ends – and, not as those involved in alternative means to the same salvation, or those on their way to Christian salvation. (216) In rejecting the view that non-Christians provide means to the same salvation, Heim is rejecting humanistic religious pluralism. Heim rejects this position because he sees salvation as Christian; as a singular (albeit complex) religious end that is not the same as other religious ends.

It is easy to distinguish Heim’s position from humanistic religious pluralism, but not so easy to see how he is not simply seeing other religions as stations on the way to Christianity. Heim actually sees this way of thinking more typical of other religions, who

are also aware of the different dimensions of the divine life and have their own ways of reconciling these: “Usually this involves an explanation that one of these dimensions is ultimately real and the others represent prefigurations or cruder approximations on the path from misunderstanding toward that truth.” (216) This is the classic expression of inclusivism, and one that Heim sees his more pluralistic trinitarian inclusivism moving away from. It moves away from traditional inclusivism by integrating different religious elements in an egalitarian, rather than hierarchical, way – and, by preserving rather than reducing religious differences:

The distinctive Christian feature is not simply recognition of these dimensions. It is trinitarian communion as the pattern of their integration. The particular claim is that these dimensions can be coordinated with co-equality. When brought together through communion, each of these relationships is not only affirmed as valid, but maintained as rooted in a real dimension of the divine life itself, with its own particularity. They become one, but each remains itself. This is the trinitarian pattern, encompassing the various relations as all grounded in the divine nature, as all real, without recourse to reduction or dissolution. (216-217)

Although Heim identifies communion as one of the three ways relating to God, and sees Christian salvation as a unique religious end he also comes close to voiding Christianity of any particular content by seeing it simply as a way of uniting other religious ends. Christianity becomes the equivalent of the trinitarian way of thinking about God – the concept of the trinity does not add more content to the divine but provides a way of thinking about various aspects of the divine as different but equal:

The peculiar thing about the Trinity is not that it adds or multiplies types of relations with God beyond those that might be found individually somewhere in other religions. The Trinity is striking in its stubborn refusal to subtract from these relations, its refusal to unify by reduction or absorption. If there is a unique added relation – communion – its hallmark is its peculiar recognition of the individual particularity of the others. (217)

This is somewhat confusing because the concept of communion serves a dual function in Heim's thought; it is both a particular type of relationship with God (alongside the impersonal and the personal) and it is a way of unifying these different relations (in the same way that the concept of the trinity unites the three persons of the triune God). In contrast, the impersonal and personal relationships with God don't function in this dual capacity; in other words, they are not also ways of unifying the various ways of relating to the divine – even though Heim says that traditions focused on the personal and impersonal dimensions of God do have their own particular ways of making sense of other possible relationships with God. Generally, Heim sees these traditions as judging others in terms of what they are, and thus being incapable of incorporating others as they are.¹⁵ Thus, for example, from an impersonal perspective personal relations with God are seen as less ultimate realizations of God; and, from a personal perspective, impersonal relations with God are impossible or unreal. (217)

Interestingly, Heim frames the impersonal and personal accounts of the spiritual universe as ways of *truncating* the Trinity from different directions. (217) Presumably, what Heim means by this is that the impersonal religions try to dissolve all otherness or all personhood within the Trinity, and that the personal religions try to deny the

¹⁵ This is the same criticism that Heim makes of pluralists.

complexity of the divine and the immanence of God in “others.” And this, it seems to me, shows the limitation of Heim’s pluralism.

To say that other theologies truncate the Trinity is another way of saying that these theologies – in themselves – are bad, truncated versions of the Trinity. Thus, Heim is not only criticizing the theologies of religions held by impersonal and personal religions, he is also criticizing their theologies and, so, it cannot be said that he incorporates these theologies *in their fullness* into his theology of religions. Alternative concepts of God can only enter Heim’s vision as dimensions of the Trinity – and this necessarily alters them.

But even if Heim is more successful than I think he is at incorporating other perspectives, *as they are*, into his own trinitarian perspective, it is clear that his end point is singular rather than plural; thus, his theology of religions is not pluralist. Heim’s position is a form of Christian inclusivism because it sees other religions participating in Christian truth, and it is a strong form of Christian neo-inclusivism because it sees Christianity in need of the truths of other religions.

5. Conclusion

Paul Griffiths, Gavin D’Costa, and S. Mark Heim can all be classified as Christian neo-inclusivists. They are inclusivists because they, implicitly or explicitly, posit a single ultimate religious end (in which different religions participate), and they are neo-inclusivists because they ascribe, possible or actual, positive value to other religions or other religious ends. They are also unanimous in criticising (humanistic) pluralists for not

being authentically pluralist and for doing violence to the particularity of different religions.

Paul Griffiths does not offer a full-fledged theology of religions – but his theology seems to be organized around the universality of Christian salvation, and includes an acknowledgement that non-Christians *may* contribute positively to the attainment of Christian salvation – even for Christians. This acknowledgement that non-Christians might have truth that Christians need for (Christian) salvation is the hallmark of Christian neo-inclusivism.

In Gavin D’Costa’s theology, we see the possibility that other religions may have truth that Christians need envisioned very clearly; indeed, D’Costa incorporates the religiosity of other religions into his Christian theology by seeing in religious others manifestations of God. Specifically, he acknowledges the possibility that the Spirit (the third person of the triune God) may be working within other religions to lead them to Christ, and may even teach things to Christians that they do not yet know explicitly about Christ. All of this is incorporated within Christian eschatology – wherein the Spirit leads humanity to the truth of Christ and Christ leads humanity to the Father or the kingdom wherein God is all in all – but, even so, there is a theoretical possibility that other religions might have something to teach Christians *on their own terms*. I suggested above that D’Costa’s Christian vision of the ultimate religious end is sure to limit what truths, coming from other religions, will be heard and incorporated into Christianity; nonetheless, a principled recognition that others may have truths that Christians do not have, is a significant step away from saying that non-Christians can only have truths explicitly known by Christians; this is the step from inclusivism to neo-inclusivism.

Mark Heim, makes the strongest claim regarding the validity of other religions. He does not stop at saying that other religions may have truths that Christians need; he says that other religions have *the* truths that Christians (and all others) need for salvation. Christian salvation unifies, without reducing, the very truths or religious ends that other religions have realized. Indeed, this is the unique thing that Christianity brings to religion – a way of unifying religious ends without destroying their particularity. As such, Christians are dependent on knowing the religious ends that are realized in other religions; otherwise they could not properly integrate them. And, in this respect, Christianity must humbly acknowledge that other religions may (and probably will) have a better understanding of the particular religious ends that Christianity aims to unite. Other religions may know these ends better than Christians because they are focused (almost) exclusively on one particular end. But, in the end, the final and ultimate religious end is Christian communion, wherein God is known under all possible dimensions.

Thus, in the end, Heim is an inclusivist, because religious fulfillment is singular – fulfillment is the attainment of Christian salvation or communion. And, yet, Heim's ultimate religious end is complex – and, he claims, is able to enfold multiple religious ultimates or ends *as they are*.

The complexity, or inherent diversity, of Heim's ultimate religious end makes his theology of religions difficult to classify. Nonetheless, I maintain that his position is best understood as inclusivist (rather than pluralist) because the ultimate end, though complex, is singular; it is an end that can be achieved or realized by one and all. In the next

chapter, we will examine theories of deep or metaphysical pluralism that are pluralist, to the end, and claim that there is no single unifying perspective.

I also maintain that Heim's theology is a straight forward example of neo-inclusivism because his theology of religions ascribes positive value to other religions – other religions have knowledge (of God) that Christians do not have, but do need for (Christian) salvation. Moreover, unlike Griffiths and D'Costa, Heim claims that Christianity's need of other religions is not just a possibility but an actuality – without the other religious ends there is no Christian end, because the Christian end is the unification of these particular ends.

If the message of humanistic pluralists is “you're just like us,” the message of neo-inclusivists is “you're not like us, but you (may) have something to teach us.” But neo-inclusivists are not willing to hear the message that others may have something to teach us, but if we want to learn it then we have to become like them. This would be the upshot of a deep or radical religious pluralism, and we will now examine theories that push in this direction.

6

Metaphysical Religious Pluralism

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we will examine three versions of metaphysical religious pluralism: John Cobb's Whiteheadian complementary pluralism, Stephen Kaplan's pluralistic model based on holography and some of David Bohm's insights into the nature of reality, and three of my own arguments for religious pluralism, one of which is based on the mathematical and metaphysical insights of George Spencer-Brown. Interestingly, each of these versions of metaphysical pluralism grounds itself in the speculative philosophy of a "hard scientist" – Whitehead and Spencer-Brown are mathematicians and Bohm is a physicist.

Theories of metaphysical religious pluralism reject the unitary metaphysics common to exclusivism, inclusivism, and humanistic pluralism, in favour of a pluralistic metaphysics. These theories, unlike humanistic pluralism, are able to accept the idea of strong identity between religion and Ultimate Reality; indeed, I believe, that the argument of metaphysical pluralism is dependent on a concept of "divine religion." The argument of these theories is that religions are deeply different because Ultimate Reality is itself deeply different; religions reflect these deep differences and can never overcome them because they are permanently embedded in Ultimate Reality.

2. John Cobb's Metaphysical Religious Pluralism

We will begin this chapter with an examination of John Cobb's Whiteheadian complementary pluralism, as seen through the eyes of David Ray Griffin.¹ In Chapter 3, we examined Griffin's critique of identist pluralism. For Griffin, identist pluralism is superficial because it can only affirm the validity of multiple religious traditions by positing a religious commonality; thus, it nullifies the very religious pluralism that it seeks to authenticate. Following Heim, Griffin sees the better approach to religious diversity as trying "to find a fruitful way of combining recognition of truth or validity *and* difference across the religions."² In other words, a better religious pluralism would validate different religions with respect to their differences. Griffin sees John Cobb's Whiteheadian complementary pluralism, a form of pluralism that Cobb has been developing since 1967,³ as an example of this better kind of religious pluralism.

Griffin calls Cobb's pluralism "Whiteheadian" (because it adopts Whitehead's metaphysics) and, therefore, introduces Cobb's pluralism by presenting Whitehead's metaphysics and thoughts about religious diversity. Whitehead sees Buddhism and Christianity as "the two Catholic religions of civilization."⁴ But he also sees both religions as being in a state of decay, as a consequence of remaining mutually exclusive with respect to their own truths, and as a result of a powerful new tradition – science.

¹ I have decided to let Griffin speak for Cobb (and Whitehead) because Griffin's representation of Cobb constitutes a clear expression of "deep religious pluralism." Furthermore, I will make no distinction between Cobb's pluralism and Griffin's pluralism. For Cobb's own writings on religious pluralism see especially Cobb, *Transforming Christianity*. For a comprehensive bibliography of Cobb's writings on religious pluralism see Center for Process Studies, "Process Thought and Pluralism."

² Heim quoted in Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 51.

³ Dating Cobb's pluralism from 1967 is, perhaps, Griffin's way of legitimising this form of religious pluralism.

⁴ Whitehead quoted in Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism", 40.

Whitehead sees science as belonging to the same category as Buddhism and Christianity because it now plays the part of theology insofar as it suggests a cosmology; and, “whatever suggests a cosmology suggests a religion.”⁵ Whitehead says that Christianity and Buddhism, i.e., religion, has lost its power to science because it has not been willing to flexibly adapt to the world. Nonetheless, he cautions that science is not a replacement for religion, and suggests that religion without science will remain superficial, and science without religion will remain crude. His ideal is that religious doctrines should be modified in light of the insights of science and vice versa.⁶

Griffin believes, and presumably so does Cobb, that Christianity needs to incorporate into itself the “universal truth” of modern science; however, he cautions that it must be circumspect with regard to what parts of the scientific worldview it takes as universal truth.⁷ Griffin points out that Whitehead himself rejected a number of scientific, so-called, universal truths; specifically 1) the mechanistic theory of matter, which makes divine influence in the world impossible; 2) the idea that all perception is through the sensory organs, which rules out all possible moral and religious experience; and, 3) Darwinian evolution which argues that evolution proceeds without any divine influence.

Griffin, likewise rejects these ideas but says there are many true scientific ideas; some factual, others more philosophical. Of the more philosophical truths, Griffin emphasises the doctrine of naturalism, which says there can be no supernatural interruption of the world's normal causal processes. Whitehead affirms the possibility of

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 41; cited in text by page number hereafter.

⁷ Griffin's appropriation of modern science, in this context, is limited to “naturalism” and he does not discuss the limits of scientific claims apart from saying that these need to be appropriated cautiously from a religious perspective. For a discussion of questions about the validity of scientific claims about reality and Ultimate Reality, see Khun, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

divine influence in the world, but rejects the possibility of the cause and effect structure of the world being interrupted by divine influence. Thus, Griffin sees Whitehead's metaphysics as a form of a naturalistic theism and draws the conclusion from this that Whitehead accepts naturalism as a universal truth of modern science.

Griffin makes it clear that the naturalism accepted by Whitehead is not the naturalism that “has passed, since the time of Darwin, for the ‘scientific worldview’.” (43) This form of naturalism is based on sensationalism, atheism, and material, and Griffin calls this naturalism SAM. Griffin calls the naturalism that he, Cobb, and Whitehead support, naturalism PPP. The first P in this designation stands for Whitehead's *prehensive* doctrine of perception. Unlike, sensationalism, the idea of prehensive perception says that all sensory perception is derived from deeper “nonsensory prehension.” The second P stands for *panentheism*. Panentheism is Whitehead's attempt at a compromise between traditional religious theism and scientific atheism; it says that there is no omnipotent being with the power to determine all events in the world, but that there is divine being that influences the world. The third P stands for *panexperientialism* which allows one to overcome materialism by making a distinction between the brain and the mind.⁸ (43)

Griffin emphasises the differences between these two types of naturalism because he recognises that pluralism has grown out of Western liberal religious thought, or enlightenment thinking, and thus is prone to the dangers of naturalism SAM – or, what Raimundo Panikkar calls the “modern Western myth” that includes belief in individualism, social Darwinism, and the neutrality of technology. Griffin argues that neither naturalism SAM nor the modern Western myth belong to pluralism as such; the

⁸ For a further explanation of panexperientialism, see Oord “Of Meontic Freedom & Panexperientialism.”

only two modern ideas that belong to religious pluralism are 1) naturalism PPP and 2) the rejection of an authoritarian mode of determining truth. Since pluralism is based on naturalism it is based on a universal truth (or proposition) uncovered by modern science; indeed, Griffin blends epistemological motifs by saying that naturalism is a truth *revealed* by modern science:

I would argue that pluralism (in the generic sense) is based on a distinctively modern revelation of a universal truth, revealed primarily through modern science and reflection thereon – the truth of naturalism NS (which the divine spirit, as the spirit of truth, has led us to see). (44)

He further adds to this sense that scientific and religious truths are on the same epistemological plane by saying that every great tradition – including the enlightenment that begat naturalism – is based on some insight or revelation into the nature of things.(44)

With this move, Griffin grounds pluralism – both identist and deep – in the modern scientific universal truth of ontological naturalism. This means it is impossible to ground an understanding of religious diversity (and religion altogether) in a supernatural occurrence – and this authenticates both epistemic naturalism and naturalistic theism, i.e., efforts to explain religious diversity, and God, without recourse to supernatural revelation.

Having argued that naturalism (as opposed to supernaturalism) is the only legitimate way for moderns to think about religion, God, and, of course, religious diversity, Griffin turns his attention to the particulars of Whitehead's naturalistic theology because this is the basis of Cobb's complementary religious pluralism.

Whitehead makes a distinction in his naturalistic theology between God and creativity. Creativity is the term that Whitehead uses for what is typically called the Godhead in Christian theology, and what Aristotle called Prime Matter. Griffin describes it as the “twofold power to exert efficient and final (or self-) causation” which means it is the creative ground of all things but has no ground itself. Moreover, this twofold power of being is embodied in both God and a “world of finite actualities.” The idea that creativity is embodied in both God and the world, or the idea that both originate in creativity, is significant because it means that God is not a causal force that can alter other causal forces in the world. According to this view, God is the great example of embodied creativity not an exception that is able to interrupt parallel embodiments of creativity in the world of finite actualities: “‘God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles’ but as ‘their chief exemplification’.”⁹ Thus, Whitehead and Griffin reject the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) because it suggests that God creates being out of nothingness (understood as simply nothing rather than creative emptiness) and therefore can alter the course of being at will – and their position is that God cannot interrupt the normal causal processes of the world. Griffin, in contrast, sees the world emerging out of creativity as naturally and necessarily as God:

Because creativity is embodied in the world as naturally and necessarily as it is embodied in God, there can be no divine interruptions of the principles normally involved in the causal processes between finite beings. Those causal principles, being simply the principles inherent in creativity as such, are metaphysical principles, inherent in the very nature of things, including the nature of God. (45)

⁹ Whitehead quoted in Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 43.

This distinction between creativity and God – apart from serving as a justification for naturalism and naturalistic theism – is also central to Cobb’s version of pluralism insofar as he uses these different aspects of Ultimate Reality to account for deep religious differences.

Griffin prepares the way for Cobb’s pluralistic hypothesis, grounded in a pluralistic metaphysics, by showing the problems inherent to John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis which is grounded in a unitary metaphysics.

Hick argues that the concept of Ultimate Reality as personal (God, Allah, Yahweh, etc.) and the concept of Ultimate Reality as impersonal (Emptiness, the Absolute, nirguna Brahman, etc.) are different perceptions and conceptions of the same singular, transcendent reality; indeed, these are the two primary ways that human beings have related themselves to ultimate reality. Hick, according to Griffin, also says that religious experience is cognitive (i.e., connected to perceiving and conceiving of God) and that no one experience (i.e., perception and conception) of Ultimate Reality is superior to any other. Hick reconciles all of these ideas by saying that no experience of Ultimate Reality is an experience of Ultimate Reality in itself, or as such, and, therefore, no experience (i.e., neither of the dominant ways of perceiving and conceiving God) is more correct than any other. But, for Griffin, this is the same as saying that each is equally mistaken, and this is relativism; indeed, he says that this relativism flows directly from Hick’s unitary metaphysics.¹⁰ (45)

What Griffin wishes to emphasize is the quandary of identist pluralism; namely, it cannot make a strong connection between Ultimate Reality and religion because this leads to the conclusion that religion is one. If God is one and religion is God, then

¹⁰ For Griffin the charge of “relativism” seems to automatically invalidate a theory of religious diversity.

religion must also be one. The identist solution to this problem is to cut the tie between religion and God, but this makes religion relative or merely human; it is no longer something ultimately true that one could commit to whole-heartedly.

Apart from raising the “spectre of relativism,” Griffin finds Hick’s solution to be empirically problematic because he believes that the impersonal and personal experiences of Ultimate Reality are radically different. And, even though Hick never makes the claim that personal and impersonal experiences of Ultimate Reality are the same, Griffin and Cobb find it meaningless to say that deeply different religious experiences are experiences of the same reality. (46-47)

For Cobb, the evidence of deeply different experiences of Ultimate Reality call for a different hypothesis, and Griffin identifies three components of this hypothesis. First, Cobb says that the totality of reality is very complex and exceeds what we can know about it. On this point, Cobb is similar to Hick but Hick uses this insight to disqualify all claims to religious ultimacy, whereas Cobb uses it to suggest that present knowledge of Ultimate Reality can be greatly expanded. Second, at times people have learned things about Ultimate Reality that are actually about Ultimate Reality itself. The upshot of these two conditions is that religion or human knowledge about Ultimate Reality is dualistic; on one hand, it is characterised by error and distortion, and, on the other, by penetrating and profound insights into the actual nature of Ultimate Reality itself. Third, emptying/emptiness (or the impersonal experience of ultimate reality) identifies one important aspect of ultimate reality, while God (or the personal experience of ultimate reality) identifies another. In other words, the experience of God in Christianity and the experience of emptiness and Buddhism are not different experiences

of the same thing; they are ultimately true experiences of different aspects of the same thing. (47)

With respect to the third point, this ties in with Whitehead's distinction between God and creativity, and more generally to his pluralistic metaphysics. Cobb's thesis is that there are at least two ultimate realities, and Griffin uses this insight to bifurcate the spiritual universe as follows:

One of these [ultimates], corresponding with what Whitehead calls "creativity," has been called "Emptiness" ("Sunyata") or "Dharmakaya" by Buddhists, "Nirguna Brahman" by Advaita Vedantists, "the Godhead" by Meister Eckhart, and "Being Itself" by Heidegger and Tillich (among others). It is the *formless* ultimate reality. The other ultimate, corresponding with what Whitehead calls "God," is not Being Itself but the *Supreme* Being. It is in-formed and the source of forms (such as truth, beauty, and justice). It has been called "Amida Buddha," "Sambhogakaya," "Saguna Brahman," "Ishvara," "Yahweh," "Christ," and "Allah." (47)

The positing of two ultimate realities offers a simple solution to the problem of two radically different types of religious experience; both can be thought of as equal in the sense that both equally coincide with ultimate reality.

For Griffin, religious pluralism is intimately connected to interreligious dialogue, and so he discusses the implications of this idea of two ultimate realities for interreligious dialogue. More specifically, he says that it leads to recognition of two different types of interreligious dialogue. One, which he calls the *dialogue of purification*, is dialogue between those attending to the same ultimate; for example, Christians, Jews, Muslims,

and theistic Hindus. The other, which he calls the *dialogue of enrichment*, is between those focused on different ultimates; for example Christians and Buddhists. In the dialogue of enrichment one's own religious vision is expanded, and the idea of complementarity is important to this process. (47)

Cobb suggests that the idea of complementarity replace the idea of a common ground as the basis for interreligious dialogue. Thus, the goal is not to see how the different traditions are really saying the same thing but to see that they are saying different but complementary things. He suggests that contradictory statements can usually be overcome by understanding that they are answers to different questions; and, here different questions and answers stem from focus on different aspects of ultimate reality. (48)

But even though Cobb's metaphysics has focused primarily on the distinction between creativity and God – because his main interest has been in trying to reconcile theistic Christianity with nontheistic Buddhism – the metaphysics or naturalistic theism that he adopts is actually tripartite. The third aspect of Ultimate Reality is “the cosmos, the universe, the totality of [finite] things.” (49) Cobb links these three aspects of Ultimate Reality with the three types of religion that Jack Hutchison called “theistic, acosmic, and cosmic.” (49) Religions that focus on God are theistic, religions that focus on creativity are acosmic, and religions that take the cosmos as sacred are cosmic. These cosmic religions, such as certain forms of Taoism and Native American spirituality, are as true as theistic and acosmic religions because they too are related to something ultimate: “By recognizing the cosmos as a third ultimate, we are able to see that these

cosmic religions are also oriented toward something truly ultimate in the nature of things.” (49)

Of course, these different religions can only be seen as equally ultimate if the different aspects of Ultimate Reality are taken as equally ultimate; so, Griffin moves forward by defending this idea. This defence is especially important here because while the idea that God and the Godhead are both ultimate has precedents within Christian theology, the idea that the cosmos is equally ultimate does not. Griffin begins his argument by acknowledging that the Christian doctrine of *creation out of nothing* precludes the possibility of seeing the cosmos as ultimate. But this is not a problem because Whitehead’s naturalistic theology allows for this possibility – and, for Cobb and Griffin, naturalistic theology has more legitimacy than supernaturally revealed theology. The Whiteheadian argument used here is that, although any cosmic reality is contingent, the fact that there is cosmic reality is not. The cosmos is ultimate not by virtue of what it is but by virtue of the fact that it is.¹¹ Thus, for Griffin, the world becomes a divine manifestation in much the same way that scientific insight becomes religious revelation:

What exists necessarily is not simply God, as in traditional Christian theism, and not simply the world understood as the totality of finite things, as in atheistic naturalism, but God-and-a-world, with both God and worldly actualities being embodiments of creativity. (49)

Moreover, the different aspects of ultimate reality, though distinct are not separable: Griffin quotes Cobb, as follows, to make this point:

¹¹ Ludwig’s Wittgenstein’s concept of the mystical expresses a similar idea: “6:44 Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that*, it is” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 187).

I would propose that without a cosmic reality there can be no a cosmic one, and that without God there can be neither. Similarly, without both the cosmic and a cosmic features of reality there can be no God.¹²

At this point, the naturalistic metaphysical thinking of Griffin and Cobb resembles that of Christian Trinitarian apologists, and appropriately Griffin turns his attention to defending this theology against possible charges of polytheism. Cobb defends his pluralistic metaphysics against the charge of polytheism by arguing that the three ultimates do not exist on the same level; God or the Supreme Being, is not the same as the cosmos or the many finite beings, and this is not the same as Being Itself (i.e., creativity) which is embodied in God and finite beings. Being Itself is not another God alongside God, and has no reality apart from its embodiments in the Supreme Being and finite beings; in other words, God and creativity are not comparable and so it makes no sense to speak about superior and inferior realities. (49-50)

This line of reasoning works well with respect to God and creativity, but not so well with respect to the cosmos. Cobb acknowledges that among actualities, God is ultimate, which means that the world of finite being is not equal to God. This is useful for distancing Cobb's metaphysics from pantheism, but it compromises his ability to affirm the ultimacy of cosmic religions. Griffin doesn't face this problem head on and I can suggest three possible reasons for this. One, he is satisfied that the ultimacy of the cosmos is established by the fact that it is. Two, he sees no way to reconcile the claim that God is superior in the world of actualities with the idea that God and the cosmos are equally ultimate. Three, he is more troubled by the idea of his theology being equated with pantheism, wherein God is just another being alongside other beings, than he is with

¹² Cobb quoted in Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 49.

the idea of Native American religions and certain forms of Taoism being regarded as equal to the great world religions grounded in God and creativity. In any case, Griffin feels the need to distinguish between the Supreme Being and other beings, and does so with Whitehead's concept of God as "worldsoul":

As the "worldsoul," understood as "a unity of experience that contains all the multiplicity of events," God is "the being that includes all beings." (50)

In any case, Griffin is satisfied that a "pluralistic ontology" that includes Being Itself/Creativity, God/ the Supreme Being, and cosmos/universe can be used to authenticate a wide variety of religious experiences. Religious differences can be explained in terms of concentration on different features of ultimate reality. If Creativity is the focus of religious life acosmic religion will result; if the Supreme Being is the focus of religious life theistic religion will result; and, if the universe is the focus of religious life cosmic religion will result. Cobb, however, notes that pure forms of religion rarely obtain; religious language often blurs the distinctions between the different aspects of Ultimate Reality and religious traditions often relate themselves to more than one of the three ultimates. He says that this is particularly true of theistic Christianity which has been heavily influenced by acosmic Neo-Platonic sources, and is thus a unique blend of theism and acosmism. (50) But in cases of both pure and mixed pedigree the pluralistic ontology, or the idea of three ultimates, allows for an understanding and appreciation of a wide variety of religious traditions:

Cobb's view that the totality of reality contains three ultimates, along with the recognition that a particular tradition could concentrate on one, two, or even all three of them, gives us a basis for understanding a wide variety of religious

experiences as genuine responses to something that is really there to be experienced. “When we understand global religious experience and thought in this way,” Cobb emphasizes, “it is easier to view the contributions of diverse traditions as complementary.” (51)

This ontology allows to Cobb to overcome the common problem of inclusivist and identitist pluralist theories of religious diversity that collapse all of religious diversity into one form of religion. Cobb’s pluralism is able to assert that different religions are true *with respect to their differences*. This is the heart of deep religious pluralism or metaphysical pluralism and “helps those who accept it to acknowledge the deep differences among religious traditions without denying that each has its truth.”¹³

Griffin continues his presentation of John Cobb’s pluralism by contrasting it with the “semi-pluralism” of Schubert M. Ogden. Griffin calls Ogden a semi-pluralist because Ogden acknowledges the possibility that there might be true religions other than Christianity, but does not acknowledge that there actually are true religions other than Christianity. (52) Griffin uses this comparison to highlight four different aspects of Cobb’s pluralism; specifically, 1) its pluralistic metaphysics, 2) its understanding of “true religion,”¹⁴ 3) its norm, and 4) its sensitivity to the current pluralistic situation.

To begin, Cobb and Ogden clearly have a different understanding of ultimate reality. Although Cobb affirms a tripartite or pluralistic metaphysics he is, more generally, of the view that Ultimate Reality is “indefinitely complex,” and that a full understanding of it is a work in progress that can be aided by interreligious dialogue.

¹³ Cobb quoted in Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 51.

¹⁴ In Part 1, I said that all exclusivists, inclusivists, humanistic pluralists, and metaphysical pluralists adopt the notion of “true religion,” even if the meaning of true religion changes when used by the respective parties. Griffin’s contrast of Cobb’s understanding of true religion with Ogden's provides a nice example of this.

Ogden, on the other hand, speaks of one ultimate reality, and identifies this with God; moreover, he links salvation directly with this one ultimate, and therefore there is only one salvation. Cobb's pluralistic metaphysics leads to the possibility of multiple salvations, and Ogden's unitary metaphysics limits salvation to one form.

The idea of true religion plays a central role in Ogden's main work on religious pluralism called *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* In this work, Ogden claims that "every religion, at least implicitly, claims to be the true religion."¹⁵ Griffin points out that the use of the definite article (the) predetermines things from the start, and makes the question as to whether there is one true religion or many nonsensical – if Christianity is *the* true religion, then how could there possibly be others? Nonetheless, Griffin delves deeper into this issue by trying to understand exactly what Ogden means by "true religion." (53-54)

Ogden distinguishes between formally true and substantially true religions. A formally true religion represents the meaning of human existence, and other religions must agree with it in order to be true religions. Religions that agree with the formally true religion may be said to be substantially true. Griffin says that when a religion claims to be the true religion – as Ogden says all religions do – then it must be claiming to be the formally true religion. And this means that other religions can, at best, be substantially true. The true religion stands as the formal norm by which all other religions, if any, are determined to be substantially true religions. (54)

Cobb rejects the idea that Christianity, or any one religion, can be understood as the formally true religion. He does this by rejecting the foundational idea that God could reveal to a particular religious community complete and infallible religious truth. This

¹⁵ Ogden quoted in Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 53.

means, for Cobb, that there is “no basis for the assumption that Christianity’s understanding of reality expresses the *whole* truth about the essential structure of reality.” (55) Even so, Cobb would not object to Ogden's idea that it is of the very nature of religions to claim to be the formally true religion, and the norm by which other religions can be judged. Granting religions their claim to formal truth avoids relativism, and is consistent with the idea that other religions are “expressing different but complementary universally valid truth, so that this religion would be normative with respect to that part of the full truth that *it* has seen.” (55) This is a significant qualification; formal religious truth relates only to a part of Ultimate Reality and so cannot claim to be the whole of religious truth. *Formal religious truth is multiple*. Ogden, of course, didn't mean this; for him, a claim to be the formally true religion means being *the* one and only formally true religion, and *the* norm by which others can be judged as substantially true. Thus, even if Ogden were to affirm the truth of religious pluralism, he would be an identist pluralist because he is only willing to see other religions as true insofar as they conform to the formally true religion of Christianity. (55-56)

Griffin suggests that Ogden may be open to Cobb's pluralism insofar as he seems open to the idea that some philosophy could serve as the norm for making reasoned judgements about the truth of the various religions. Griffin says that this is (arguably) what Cobb does in employing Whiteheadian philosophy as the norm for understanding religions. In other words, Whitehead's concept of Ultimate Reality as creativity, God, and cosmos is a universal norm by which all religions can be understood.¹⁶ Griffin says that

¹⁶ In “*Beyond ‘Pluralism’*” Cobb suggests a “relative norm” for all religions; namely, the capacity to expand to its comprehension of reality while remaining faithful to its heritage. As far as I know, Cobb has never explicitly identified Whitehead’s concept of Ultimate Reality as a norm for all religions; but Griffin is right that an argument for this can be made.

Cobb would not object to this idea, on one hand, because Whitehead's metaphysics is a "Christian natural theology" and, on the other, because this metaphysics is a *deep* Christian theology because it is informed by the truths of other religions, particularly Indian and Chinese. (56-57)

Finally, Griffin shows that Cobb's religious pluralism is different from Ogden's insofar as Ogden's is insensitive to the current pluralistic religious situation. For Cobb, a religion needs to be true to its heritage, but it also needs to be "fitting to its situation."¹⁷ And, one part of the current situation is the existential reality of religious diversity and the fact that many Christian theologians find religious pluralism to be an appropriate response to this diversity. Cobb suggests that this new situation demands a more modest claim from Christians, with respect to the truth of their religion. Griffin suggests that it is more appropriate for Christians to see their religion as *a* formally true religion rather than *the* formally true religion –and, even that this is "more appropriate to their founding events." (58) He also adds that many Christians have already come to this conclusion implicitly (that Christianity is a true religion rather than the true religion); however, Cobb provides a new way to explicitly express this view, without the relativism that characterizes identist pluralism.

With this Griffin ends his comparative analysis, and closes his presentation of Cobb's pluralism by showing how Cobb is able to articulate a theory of religious pluralism that is not relativistic.

Griffin adopts Alan Race's definition of (debilitating) relativism as "the view that all religions are equally true, and therefore equally false." Several pluralists have accepted that relativism is a necessary part of pluralism, because there is simply no

¹⁷ Cobb quoted in Griffin, "John Cobb's Pluralism," 58.

logical way to affirm the absoluteness of one religion while asserting its “rough parity” with others.¹⁸ He notes that Hick tries to overcome relativism by establishing an ethical norm, but undermines this norm by refusing to attribute anything to Ultimate Reality *as such*. According to Griffin, this makes Hick’s definition of salvation, as alignment with ultimate reality, entirely vacuous, and gives him no grounds to claim an ethical norm.¹⁹

(59)

Cobb was aware that his own deep pluralism could be seen as “an unqualified relativism”; a situation in which different religions would simply keep to themselves with their own ultimate truths. Cobb rejects this situation, and says that it is not acceptable to any of the great religious traditions to believe that their own religion is truth but irrelevant to others. (59)

Griffin frames Cobb’s non-relativistic pluralism by contrasting it with John Hick’s relativistic pluralism. The heart of the difference between Cobb’s pluralism and Hick’s pluralism, is that Cobb distinguishes between God and creativity and sees both as aspects of ultimate reality, and Hick sees God and creativity (or God as personal and God as impersonal) as different ways of conceptualizing the same singular ultimate reality. From Cobb’s perspective, Hick demands that both Christians and Buddhists dissolve everything unique about their own perspectives in order to see that they are perspectives of the same thing. (60)

Griffin notes, in defence of Hick, that he does try to avoid dissolving God into emptiness (or emptiness into God) by seeing both God and emptiness as phenomenal conceptions of the same transcendent Real. Griffin also, however, points to an earlier

¹⁸ See, for example, Langdon Gilkey’s “Plurality and its Theological Implications”; Dianna Eck, *Encountering God*.

¹⁹ For an alternative reading of Hick, on this point, see, Chapter 4, “Is Hick a Pluralist?”.

time in Hick's career when he more or less said that Advaita Vedanta has understood something more profoundly than Christianity and the theistic traditions; namely, the distinction between God as such (nirguna Brahman) and God as known to human beings (saguna Brahman).²⁰ But later, according to Griffin, he would try to overcome this favouritism by seeing impersonal concepts of the Real, such as nirguna Brahman, as simply that – conceptions of the Real as impersonal that are no more the Real itself than conceptions of the Real as personal. But Griffin says that what Hick says about the Real itself remains remarkably similar to what he says about nirguna Brahman (and Sunyata). The implication of this, for Griffin and Cobb, is that everything distinctive about the biblical concept of the Real as personal deity is lost. Griffin comes to this conclusion by assuming that what Hick says about the Real as such is really the same thing as a nirguna Brahman and Sunyata, and that Hick takes the Real as such to be a higher reality than God as experienced. Finally, Griffin criticizes Hick's position because it denies that personal and impersonal conceptions of the Real have counter-parts in the Real as such. For Griffin, the complete dissociation of the Real as such from religious constructs of the Real makes it impossible to forge a strong link between morality and religion, which Hick does try to do by saying that authentic concepts of the Real lead to moral fruits. (60-61)

For Griffin, Cobb's Whiteheadian pluralism overcomes these problems, but before discussing Cobb's solution I want to argue that Griffin has misunderstood an aspect of Hick's theory – even though this would not change his more general criticism of Hick's pluralism. Hick does not subordinate Christianity to Advaita and Buddhism; he subordinates all religions to his concept of the Real. And even if what Hick calls the Real

²⁰ See, for example, Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 144.

is very similar to nirguna Brahman and Sunyata, Hick denies that Hindus and Buddhists actually have direct experiences of these as they claim to.

In *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) Hick does suggest that Advaitins understood something very important that Westerners missed; the distinction between God as entirely transcendent and God as knowable. In Hinduism, the unknowable aspect of God is known as nirguna Brahman and the knowable aspect of God is known as saguna Brahman:

Theologically, the Hindu distinction between Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman is important and should be adopted into western religious thought. Detaching the distinction, then, from its Hindu context we may say that Nirguna God is the eternal self-existent divine reality, beyond the scope of all human categories, including personality; and Saguna God is God in relation to his creation and with the attributes which express this relationship, such as personality, omnipotence, goodness, love and omniscience.²¹

As for overcoming the implication that Hinduism represents a higher understanding of Ultimate Reality than Christianity, Hick, at this point says that both traditions see God as impersonal (unknowable) *and* personal (with knowable attribute):

It will be a sufficient reminder of the strand of personal relationship with the divine in Hinduism to mention Iswara, the personal God who represents the Absolute as known and worshipped by finite persons. It should also be remembered that the characterisation of Brahman as *satcitananda*, absolute being, consciousness and bliss, is not far from the conception of infinitely transcendent personal life. Thus there is both the thought and the experience of the personal

²¹ Ibid.

divine within Hinduism. But there is likewise the thought and the experience of God as other than personal within Christianity. Rudolph Otto describes this strand in the mysticism of Meister Eckhart.²²

In *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1983), however, Hick's thinking shows some significant changes. First, the distinction between God as unknowable and God perceived and conceived is recognized, by Hick, as the foundation of his theory of religious diversity and as something which finds widespread recognition in all the world's religious traditions:

In Hindu thought it is the distinction between *nirguna* Brahman, the Ultimate in itself, beyond all human categories, and *saguna* Brahman, the Ultimate as known to the finite consciousness as a personal deity, Ivara. In Taoist thought, 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao' (*Tao-Te Ching*, 1). There are also analogous distinctions in Jewish and Muslim mystical thought in which the Real *an sich* is called *en Soph* and *al Haqq*. In Mahāyana Buddhism there is the distinction between the *dharmakāya*, the eternal cosmic Buddha-nature, which is also the infinite Void (*ūnyatā*), and on the other hand the realm of heavenly Buddha figures (*sambhogakāya*). and their incarnations in the earthly Buddhas (*nirmāzākāya*). This varied family of distinctions suggests the perhaps daring thought that the Real *an sich* is one but is nevertheless capable of being humanly experienced in a variety of ways. This thought lies at the heart of the pluralistic hypothesis which I am suggesting.²³

²² Ibid.

²³ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 39-40.

Second, Hick stops identifying the unknowable aspect of the Real as such with the impersonal; now, the impersonal is one particular way of perceiving and conceiving the Real. In fact, it is one of the two great ways by which human beings have typically related to the real; the other being the Real as personal. Following are some tradition specific examples of the Real conceived as the personal:

Thus the Real as personal is known in the Christian tradition as God the Father; in Judaism as Adonai; in Islam as Allah, the Qur'anic Revealer; in the Indian traditions as Shiva, or Vishnu, or Paramātmā, and under the many other lesser images of deity which in different regions of India concretise different aspects of the divine nature. This range of personal deities who are the foci of worship within the theistic traditions constitutes the range of the divine *personae* in relation to mankind.²⁴

And here are some examples of Real conceived as impersonal:

Here the general concept, the Absolute, is schematised in actual religious experience to form the range of divine *impersonae* — Brahman, the Dharma, the Tao, *nirvana*, *sunyatā*, and so on — which are experienced within the Eastern traditions. The structure of these *impersonae* is however importantly different from that of the *personae*. A divine *persona* is concrete, implicitly finite, sometimes visualisable and even capable of being pictured. A divine *impersona*, on the other hand, is not a 'thing' in contrast to a person. It is the infinite being—consciousness—bliss (*saccidānanda*) of Brahman; or the beginningless and endless process of cosmic change (*pratitya samutpāda*) of Buddhist teaching; or

²⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

again the ineffable ‘further shore’ of *nirvāna*, or the eternal Buddha-nature (*dharmakaya*); or the ultimate Emptiness (*sunyatā*) which is also the fullness or suchness of the world; or the eternal principle of the Tao.²⁵

This represents a shift for Hick, and creates the problems of distinguishing The Real as such from the impersonal concepts of the Real which Hick had hitherto conflated. Griffin is not convinced that Hick ever succeeds in doing this and, therefore, believes that Hick takes impersonal concepts of God to be higher than personal ones. This is not accurate, and Hick makes his position very clear in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) where he interprets mystical union with God (*satchitananda*) as a manifestation of the Real to human consciousness – not an experience of the Real itself. Thus, this experience is understood as a form of religion related to *saguna Brahman* – not *nirguna Brahman* (which Hick continues to identify with the Real as such):

In advaitic Hinduism, then, the Real is experienced through inner union with the spiritual reality of the *ātman* which we become conscious of being as we transcend our separating ego. And in this mystical experience we, now merged into the unitary *ātman*, discover our true nature as *satchitananda*. In offering this proposal from the standpoint of the pluralistic hypothesis I am treating the trans-personal reality of *satchitananda*, experienced in *moksha*, and the personal reality of *Ishwara*, experienced in *bhakti*, as alternative manifestations of the Real to our human consciousness. Thus in this formulation the Real *an sich* is equated with

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

nirguna Brahman, whilst both *satchitananda* and Ishwara are identified as forms of *saguna* Brahman.²⁶

In other words, the experience that Hindus may think of as an experience of *nirguna* Brahman is really an experience of *saguna* Brahman. Hick similarly reinterprets Nirvana for Buddhists; it is not transcendence of the ego such that Void (ultimate reality) is attained, but an experience of the Real in an egoless way:

From the point of view of a pluralistic hypothesis Nirvana is the Real experienced in an ineffable ego-lessness, unlimited and internal which can be entered by the moral and spiritual path to God by the Buddha.²⁷

Hick does similar work with the concept of Sunyata or Emptiness. Hick says that, for the most part, Buddhist's use the term Sunyata in the same way that he uses the term the Real in the pluralist hypothesis.²⁸ But Hick parts way with Buddhists when they claim the possibility of achieving satori or an "unmediated mystical experience of the Real."²⁹ Hick denies this possibility because the Real itself is always beyond human consciousness; in other words, if it is experienced by a human being then it is not an immediate experience of the Real. But even though it is predetermined, for Hick, that satori cannot be a direct experience of the Real, he offers an argument to prove this point based on empirical evidence. The evidence is that different mystical traditions have different ultimate experiences: Zen Buddhists experience satori, Christian mystics experience the *visio dei*, Hindus become jivanmukti, etc. Hick concludes from this that none of these mystical traditions produce direct experience of the Real because,

²⁶ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 292-283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

otherwise, they would be having the same experience. Hick doesn't consider the possibility that they are all directly experiencing the Real but are using different terms to describe this experience. In any case, Hick's final conclusion is that all such, so-called, direct experiences of the Real as such are not this at all but really experiences related to manifestations of the Real:

This lends considerable support to the hypothesis that even the profoundest intuitive mysticism of the mind operates with culturally specific concepts and what is experienced is accordingly a manifestation of the real rather than the postulated real *an sich*.³⁰

In short, Buddhists who are related to the impersonae of the Real are not really experiencing what they think they are experiencing, in the same way that Hindus who are related to the impersonae of the Real are not really experiencing what they think they are experiencing.

Thus, I do not agree, with Griffin that Hick, like some Buddhists and Advaitins, subordinates the personal God to the formless ultimate; Hick submits both to his concept of the ineffable Real to ensure that no religion is absolute.

Returning to Cobb, his solution to this problem is to say that particular religious experiences correlate directly to Ultimate Reality itself; in other words, Emptiness is an experience of Ultimate Reality itself, just as relationship with God is an experience of Ultimate Reality itself. Moreover, these differences stem from differences in Ultimate Reality itself, not from different human ways of constructing a uniform and ineffable ultimate reality. Thus, Cobb's pluralism avoids the sort of relativism that Hick's does not.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

But it does raise the question as to whether Whiteheadian Christian pluralists are “imperialistically imposing” their norm, i.e., their pluralistic metaphysics, on others and thereby undermining the pluralism they seek to affirm.

To address this question Griffin first looks at how it is addressed by Marjorie Suchocki, a colleague of Griffin and Cobb at the Claremont School of Theology. Suchocki asks if it is possible to reject the idea of using one religion as a norm to judge all others, and still avoid a relativism wherein each religion is governed by its own norm and there is no normative critique of religious norms (relativism). Suchocki approaches this problem with a practical solution; namely, by positing a norm that legitimately judges all religions. In this respect, Suchocki is doing something very much like Troeltsch did 100 years earlier; but the historically derived norm that Suchocki suggests is *justice*. Suchocki suggests using justice as a norm, even though it may not receive global assent, would not be an imposition on other religions because the eschatological visions of the “perfect mode of existence” in all religions shows justice to be an “internal norm within each religion.”³¹ But Suchocki seems less than convinced by her own solution; as Griffin puts it: “She admits, however, that this solution does not completely overcome the charge but only “mitigates” it, because “the norm is hardly culture-free.” (62)

Cobb’s problem with Suchocki’s solution is that even if all religions contain a vision of justice, they certainly do not all regard justice as the most important thing – and, therefore, would not accept justice as a universal norm. Griffin concludes from this that it would be imperialistic to assert justice as a norm for all traditions. Griffin's solution here

³¹ Suchocki quoted in Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 62.

is similar to his solution with respect to Ogden's concept of the true religion; speak of justice as *a* norm for judging religions rather than *the* norm:

It would, therefore, be imperialistic for Suchocki to propose “justice that creates well-being” as “*the* fundamental criterion of value and *the* focus of dialogue and action among religions” (emphases added). However, this problem could be overcome, without lapsing into relativism, by changing the definite articles in this statement to indefinite ones. (63)

For Cobb this move is necessary but he says it doesn't require Christians to abandon their ultimate commitment to justice; instead, it requires them to see emptiness as equally important. Thus, the solution to the arrogance of exclusivism and inclusivism is not to deny the ultimacy or universal validity of one's own religious truth – i.e., the solution is not relativism – but to affirm other truths as also universally valid. (63) And, of course, this follows the same pattern as recognizing God and emptiness as complimentary truths about the same pluralistic ultimate reality.

Griffin asks if Cobb's solution is not avoiding imperialism by simply positing a more subtle form of relativism; after all, what's the difference between saying, like Troeltsch, that all religions are true within their own cultural spheres, and saying that all religions are true because they are related to different aspects of ultimate reality? Cobb says that his solution would indeed be relativism if it held that the different truths obtained, by relating to different aspects of ultimate reality, could not be appropriated by everyone. This situation, according to Cobb, would stimulate the “corrosive acids of

relativism”³² because it would undermine the sense of completeness that each religion has about itself, and the total commitment that this generates. (64)

Cobb, of course, rejects the idea that the truths of religious communities are exclusive. Still, he recognizes the potential problem created by acknowledging that one's own (Christian) faith is just one among others; and, more especially, that one's own (Christian) religious goal of “the indivisible salvation of all world” is aided by religious truths that, at present, are better known in other religions than in Christianity.³³ This acknowledgement or recognition, according to Cobb, is what makes him pluralist.³⁴ (64) This, of course, is not a recognition shared by all pluralist. John Hick, for example, does not say that other religions have truth that Christians need, but that other religions have different varieties of the same sort of truth that Christianity has.³⁵

According to Griffin, Cobb's solution to this problem involves recognizing two things about Christianity; 1) that it is a living, continually changing, movement, and 2) that Christians should not be devoted to any particular form of religion but to “the living Christ.” This, says Cobb, does relativize all particular forms of Christianity but not “the process of creative transformation by which it lives in which it knows as Christ.”³⁶ By identifying Christianity with an evolving process Cobb makes it permissible for

³² Cobb quoted in Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 63.

³³ In this respect, Cobb's position is indistinguishable from Heim's, and similar to D'Costa's.

³⁴ As already discussed, Cobb expanded and generalized this idea to suggest that the capacity to expand its comprehension of reality while remaining faithful to its heritage is a norm for all religions.

³⁵ This is why Gavin D'Costa believes that his Christian trinitarianism theology of religions provides a better framework for Christians to appreciate the truths of other religions than does religious pluralism. This seems valid, at least, with respect to Hick's pluralism: D'Costa needs the world religions to better understand the truth revealed by Christ; Hick doesn't need the other religions for anything (except perhaps to keep Christians company in the new world religions' fraternity). A question for D'Costa though: Are other religions distorted by seeing them as manifestations of the Spirit, whose main function is to illuminate the wisdom of the Son? There are parameters around what the others can reveal in D'Costa's theology.

³⁶ Cobb quoted in Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 64.

Christians to incorporate the truths of other religions into Christianity, and by doing this effectively pushes the issue of the fullness of Christianity” into the future:

The fullness of Christianity lies in the ever-receding future. One can be a whole-hearted participant in the present movement as long as one believes that the particular limitations to which one is now sensitive can be overcome.³⁷

The present task of Christians, then, is to turn Christianity into a “global theology” by incorporating into it the truths of other religious traditions; and, according to Cobb, this is a process that Christians have barely begun. Cobb also hopes the other traditions will engage in the process of “globalizing” their theologies, from the starting points of their own traditions. As such, the different religious traditions will move towards “greater semblance,” although particularities will remain as each tradition employs the pluralistic strategy, of incorporating the truths of others into its ultimate truth, from its own particular vantage point. Thus, the pluralistic enterprise will be quite different for Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and so on. (65) According to Griffin, if such a situation obtains there will be “pluralism without relativism in all of the universalist traditions.” (66)

This pluralistic situation, however, is not permanent; it is a situation that in the fullness of time will give way to a singular understanding of Ultimate Reality and the “indivisible salvation of the whole world.” In the end, Cobb’s position, soteriologically and epistemologically, is unitary rather than pluralistic. Cobb's final position is, therefore, similar to what Mark Heim calls “picture-puzzle pluralism.” In picture-puzzle pluralism, each tradition specializes in particular knowledge about God, and in the end, come

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

together to form a complete picture of God.³⁸ Again, Cobb postulates the existence of religious plurality up until the end, but in the end all come together to produce a single vision of God (epistemological unity) that leads to an indivisible salvation (soteriological unity).

Thus, in the end, Cobb is not a pluralist even though he holds onto the idea of pluralism right up until the end; he is a pluralist until unitary fulfillment is achieved. In this regard he is very similar to neo-inclusivists such as Mark Heim – except for the fact that Cobb doesn't insist on religious fulfillment being Christian. I suggest that Cobb, in the end, reduces diversity to unity because he equates permanent religious diversity with relativism; nonetheless, Cobb's initial argument for religious pluralism is a form of deep pluralism or metaphysical pluralism, although his second argument is for the ideal of religious unity.

We will now examine two further versions of metaphysical pluralism that are more radically pluralist insofar as they maintain pluralism, even in the end.

3. Stephen Kaplan's Metaphysical Model for Religious Pluralism

Stephen Kaplan's pluralistic hypothesis is found in his work called, *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism*. The title of this book is a play on the well-known metaphor for religious diversity that says there are different paths but only one summit, which is a way of saying that religions may be different, but are ultimately the same because they have the same goal. In this way of looking at things, religious diversity is transcended when all arrive at the same goal or the same summit.

³⁸ For Heim's description of "picture-puzzle pluralism," see Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way?*, 114-117.

Kaplan, with his metaphor of different paths and different summits is making a different claim; that, even in the end, religious diversity obtains.

According to Kaplan, the metaphor of “different paths, one summit” is the normative metaphor for religious pluralists, but one that the critics of religious pluralism find “deceptive.” The critics see pluralism as “crypto exclusivism” (see D’Costa above) or “crypto inclusivism” (see Heim above) since they “envision a single and final universal end” or one summit.³⁹ Kaplan considers possible options in the face of this critique: 1) abandon pluralism in favour of more religiously authentic versions of exclusivism and inclusivism; 2) accept pluralism just because it is more politically correct or more suited to the times; 3) abandon the quest for a religious universal in favour of relativism; 4) abandon the idea of religion altogether because religious truths are relative. Kaplan suggests that there is at least one option better than all of these; namely, his ontological and soteriological pluralism. (2)

I have argued that humanistic pluralists do *not* say that there is a single and final universal end for all religions; instead, they posit a religious universal that can be expressed in a diversity of ways. Thus, humanistic pluralists never collapse, or bring to an end, religious diversity in the same way that inclusivists do. Nonetheless, the pluralism affirmed by humanistic pluralists is, as noted by Griffin, relatively superficial; it is akin to the diversity between different brands of cars or toothpaste. But, more seriously, the universalism of humanistic religious pluralism demands conformity that can require a significant change in a religious tradition’s understanding of what it is all about (Think of John Hick’s demand that Zen Buddhists give up their notion of experiencing Sunyata directly, and accept that they are *really* involved in a culturally mediated experience of

³⁹ Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits*, 2; cited in the text by page number hereafter.

the Real as impersonal.) In humanistic pluralism, religions are accepted as true religions only in so far as they are expressive of the same religious universal. Consequently, Kaplan's quest for a pluralism that allows one to affirm the truth of multiple religions, *with respect to their differences*, is a valid goal in the sense that it is something that has not yet been achieved.

Kaplan's proposal is that there can be, within one metaphysical universe, different ontological natures; in other words, there can be different states of being within one ultimate reality. Moreover, these different ontological natures provide an opportunity to achieve different soteriological ends, which means different forms of salvation or liberation can be worked out in relation to the different states of being within (the same) ultimate reality. Or, to employ Kaplan's metaphor, there are different paths *and* different summits. The particular model that Kaplan proposes as a means for understanding Ultimate Reality does not, however, allow one to see an endless number of salvations/religions as true. Kaplan uses his model, very specifically, to argue for the equal ultimacy of three different forms of salvation; specifically he argues for the equality of “a theistic salvation, a monistic non-dualistic liberation, and a process non-dualistic liberation.”⁴⁰ (2)

Like many other forms of religious pluralism, Kaplan understands true religion as one that delivers salvation (which he sees as a multiform reality). For Kaplan, soteriology is concomitant with the ontological structures of ultimate reality; thus, his pluralism is

⁴⁰Kaplan's academic specialty is Indian religion and, so, he is more sensitive than most pluralists about the distinctions between Hinduism and Buddhism. John Cobb's pluralism seems content to collapse the “Eastern traditions” into religions that relate themselves to creativity; likewise, my own metaphysical pluralism sees the non-dualistic realization of God and the transcendence of causal processes and the attainment of Nirvana as essentially the same thing.

grounded in the claims that religions make about Ultimate Reality and the soteriological experiences they claim to have in relation to ultimate reality.⁴¹ (3)

Kaplan sees the primary virtue of his pluralism as being that it allows a person to affirm the truth of their religion, without this being an implicit affirmation of the falsehood of other religions. This means that affirming the truth of religious others does not mean abandoning (or even toning down) one's own truth; the only thing that needs to be abandoned is the positive claim that others are wrong. This is a virtue with practical implications because, according to Kaplan, maintaining the truth of one's own religion is very important to religious persons. (3)

Kaplan recognises the difficulties inherent to his project of constructing and using a model to show that the I-thou relationship of theism, the dissolution of the self into the Self of monistic non-dualism, and the realization of no-self in process non-dualism are equally true. For one, there is the logical problem of affirming mutually exclusive truths about the same ultimate reality⁴²; for another, there is the problem of the model used to account for different religious concepts of Ultimate Reality being seen as just another concept of Ultimate Reality itself, and thus being in competition with the religious concepts. (3)

Cobb's religious pluralism faces the second problem but not the first. With respect to the second problem Griffin identifies Cobb's Whiteheadian tripartite metaphysics as a naturalistic Christian theology that can be appropriated by other traditions; it is a theology made for the modern world since it is grounded in a universal

⁴¹In this regard Kaplan conforms to Schmidt-Leukel's definition of true religion and says that this is normative for pluralism (and exclusivism and inclusivism).

⁴²Aristotle's well known non-contradiction says that contradictory statements cannot at the same time be true.

truth of modern science applicable to the new pluralistic situation. In this respect Griffin and Cobb are atypical of pluralists (John Hick in particular) who claim that their pluralism is a “metatheory” that stands above particular religions. In turn, such pluralists have been criticized from opposite directions – from one side they are accused of being crypto-Christian, and from the other of being anaemically Christian. Griffin boldly faces this criticism by claiming that his naturalistic theology is simply a better Christian theology that is more suited to the present (scientific and pluralistic) age. Griffin, however, does not face the epistemological problem that Kaplan tries to overcome; he never attempts to validate pluralism on epistemological grounds.⁴³ Or, at least, not beyond arguing that the three aspects of Ultimate Reality are equal and, therefore, acosmic, theistic, and cosmic religions are equal. But in the end, knowledge of Ultimate Reality becomes singular, and all religious persons attain the same singular knowledge in the same way; religion becomes one even though Ultimate Reality is tripartite. Kaplan offers a solution to this epistemological/logical problem (indirectly) by seeing the plurality of religious truth as an expression of ontological and soteriological plurality. Kaplan summarizes the logical problems he tries to resolve as follows:

How can some individuals achieve salvation in an I-Thou relation while others overcome all such relations – all such duality? How can there be two different ways of overcoming duality—a non-duality of Being and a non-duality of becoming? How can Ultimate Reality be both Being – undivided and unchanging –and becoming – constantly changing – at the “same time” and in the “same

⁴³ When I refer to the epistemological or logical problem, I am referring to the problem of finding a way to *think* about different claims (about the same thing) being equally true, which Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction says is logically impossible.

place”? And furthermore, how can Ultimate Reality be both non-dualistic (nonrelational) and dualistic (relational) at the “same time” and in the “same place”? How can there be three different ultimate realities supporting or underlying three different soteriological possibilities? How can three different visions of salvation/liberation with their three concomitant and allegedly mutually exclusive views of Ultimate Reality be simultaneously possible and equally ultimate? (5-6)

Kaplan’s solution for overcoming this logical problem is a model based on holography and some of David Bohm’s metaphysical insights. This model allows one to see religious pluralism in terms of different paths to different summits, and even transcends this metaphor because it does not require the summits to be visualized as spatially distinct domains. (6)

Kaplan makes two significant qualifications or declarations with respect to his project. First, he says that the truths about Ultimate Reality that he is trying to validate as equal, are actual claims found in the history of religions; in other words, he is not simply making these up to fit into his model. Second, he says that he has no way of knowing whether or not these particular claims about Ultimate Reality are true. But this isn't Kaplan's concern. His concern is to find a way to validate the truth of different religious truth claims and soteriologies – or, discovering a way whereby “we can conceptualize how more than one of these truth claims can be simultaneously possible and equal, but yet not the same.” (6) Clearly his motive in this effort is to overcome the negative effects of exclusivism and inclusivism, and not to promote a pluralistic commitment to different religions.

As for the problem of using a model, Kaplan's initial response is to suggest that the problem is not with models as such, but with the particular pluralistic models that have been put forth so far. None of the models proffered by pluralists has overcome the conceptual problem of affirming different truths as equally valid – and this is the unique feature of Kaplan's model for religious pluralism. This, of course, doesn't explain how Kaplan's model is not a meta-theology that would have to be accepted by the three types of religion that he says are ultimate, and, therefore how it is not the ultimate religious perspective itself – or, at least not directly. But, by saying that this perspective demands the affirmation of multiple ultimate truths it says that there is no ultimate *singular* perspective. What this perspective demands is not a wider recognition of the same sort of singular truth in others, but a wider recognition of religious truth itself; it is not about recognizing one's truth in others but about *also* recognizing (or not denying) the truth of others. This is a different goal than the goal set by humanistic pluralists and, hence, Kaplan's model is necessarily different.

A Holographic Model of Religious Pluralism

To see how Kaplan's holographic model can be used to understand Ultimate Reality and religious pluralism, it is necessary to understand both holography (the model) and the specific religious diversity that the model is meant to account for. On the other hand, one does not have to understand either, as well as Kaplan does, to appreciate his project – and to reflect on its value. In other words, it is relatively easy to imagine a project like Kaplan's (the construction of a conceptual model to explain Ultimate Reality and different but equally true soteriologies) and to think about the implications of the model,

if successful. Nonetheless, we will try to understand Kaplan's specific model as best we can before proceeding to further analysis.

Holography is a way of producing three dimensional optical images on an imageless film. The fact that the film of holography is imageless makes it different from photography, where what is on the film (the negative) corresponds directly with both the object and the final picture. (This is not the case with holography.) Holography produces three-dimensional images that consequently cannot be displayed on flat surfaces (pieces of paper, computer screens, walls, etc.) the way two-dimensional photographic images can be. But holographic images, unlike photographic images, allow the viewer to change viewing angles in order to see different aspects of the recorded object – the way one can in real life. The hologram is the medium on which the information needed to reproduce a 3D image is recorded (a super high resolution film). The film records “interference patterns” but, as indicated, these inference patterns do not in any way resemble the object or the final image. (7)

Holographic interference patterns are produced with a laser beam (the light source in holography). In photography, the film records the varying intensities of light reflecting off the object; the hologram, likewise, records this, but also the “phase relations” of the light reflecting off the object. The laser that is used to create the hologram is first aimed at a device that splits the laser beam into two beams: 1) the reference beam which is directed towards the film; and, 2) the object beam which is directed at the object and reflects from the object back toward the film. At the hologram, or the film, the two beams converge to create the aforementioned interference patterns. Kaplan describes these as

being “like waves created in a pool of water into which two stones are thrown.” (7) And, again, there is no image captured on the film; just waves.

To reconstruct an image of the object, a laser beam (that is the same frequency of the one used to construct the hologram) is directed toward the film. In other words, another reference beam is aimed back at the now encoded film, and this decodes the film to create a three-dimensional optical image (or the conditions that allow one to see this). When this is done the image appears suspended in space and has the same qualities of our ordinary visual world; there is height, width, and *depth*, and when we change positions we see the object from a different angle. (7-8)

Kaplan provides a delightful example that shows the life-like characteristics of holographic images and, how these images appear different when viewed from different angles. The image he describes is of two things; a magnifying glass that is placed six inches in front of a computer panel with silicon chips. From one angle this is what you see. But if you shift perspectives to look through the magnifying glass you will see a corresponding part of the computer panel magnified. And, if you shift again to look through the magnifying glass from a different angle, you will see a different part of the computer panel magnified. If you shift focus again, to look past the magnifying glass, rather than through it, nothing is magnified; you see the magnifying glass in front of the computer panel as before. Of course, if you reach out to touch the objects they are not there; only their image is there. Then if you step to the side, so that you are parallel with the image, the image disappears; and, if you step back further the image disappears and you see only the film with its interference patterns. So, in this example, the hologram allows you to see two images that are not really there, and even to see one image

magnified by another, when neither is really there – and all of this is produced on a film without images. (8-9)

Kaplan suggests that the hologram might be used as a useful model for understanding religious pluralism; and, specifically for affirming the truth of different ontological and soteriological perspectives. But to appreciate the model it is not necessary to understand all of the technical details of holography, as much as it is to understand some of the unique features of holography, and in this regard Kaplan emphasizes three. First, the hologram or the film that records interference patterns does not have the same characteristics as the objects recorded on it or the images that can potentially appear; most importantly, it does not show the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes our regular spatial and temporal world. The film enfolds the potential to represent this world of subjects and objects but does not in itself have these. Second, the film “exhibits redundancy.” As Kaplan describes it, each piece of the hologram (the film) can reproduce the entire image, while the entire hologram produces only one image:

Concretely illustrated, one can tear a hologram into four parts, for example, and each part will reproduce the entire holographic image. Recall, the film has no images; rather, only interference patterns are recorded on the film and they are spread throughout the film. (9)

This means that the sum of the parts equals the whole, while the parts in themselves also equal the whole. Third, a single hologram can record multiple scenes, which is done by changing the angle at which the laser hits the film, or the frequency of the laser used to encode the film. In this situation, two domains can be identified and differentiated; one that can be called the *explicate domain* and the other the *implicate*

domain. The explicate domain refers to both the filmed objects and the reproduced images; the implicate domain refers to the film, with its unique characteristics. (9-10)

The ideas of the explicate and implicate domains are key to understanding Kaplan's model because these are the domains that Kaplan suggests have correspondents within ultimate reality; thus, Kaplan's metaphysics and ontology mirror his understanding of the explicate and implicate domains that obtain in the holographic situation. This means that whenever he is talking about characteristics of the implicate and explicate domains within respect to holography, he is also talking about characteristics of ultimate reality. Bearing this in mind, Kaplan explains the explicate domain, as it relates to holography, as the domain with which we are already intimately familiar; it is the world in which objects stand in relation to other objects: "Distinctness, difference, duality and relationship of the chief characteristics of the explicate domain." (10) In contrast, the implicate domain (the film), is one in which each part is enfolded into all the other parts; there are no subjects and objects with relations between them: "the non-duality of subject and object, and of part and whole, is the appropriate language of the implicate domain." (10)

If we recall the three truths that Kaplan seeks to affirm as equally true – the I-thou relationship of theism, the dissolution of the self into the Self of monistic non-dualism, and the realization of no-self in process non Dualism as equally three – we can see how he is going to use holography as a model for religious pluralism: The I-thou relationship of theism is connected to the explicate domain, and the two non-dualistic salvations are connected to the implicate domain. (10)

But before spelling this out in more detail Kaplan explains three presuppositions about his holographic model. All of these presuppositions make Kaplan's model more useful for affirming multiple religious truths. First, it is presupposed that the implicate and explicate orders logically demand one another, i.e., you can't have one without the other:

In this model there would be no implicate domain without something explicate to implicate, and there would be no explicate domain without the implicate domain from which it unfolded. Therefore, this model presupposes that neither domain is ontologically prior or more important, in any way, than the other. (11)

The first presupposition establishes equality between the domains, and the next two support this idea by showing how the domains are equal – temporally and spatially. The second presupposition is that the two domains exist simultaneously; in other words, neither domain temporally precedes the other, and, consequently neither can exist independent of the other. The third presupposition is that the two domains are “mutually interpenetrating” meaning there is no separation between the two domains. Here the implicate domain is taken to be “coextensive with the totality of existence – whether that of Being, Emptiness or both Being and Emptiness.” (11) Because the implicate domain is the totality of existence there is no place separate for the explicate domain to unfold, except within the implicate domain, and this implies that there is no absolute spatial distinction between the two domains. (11)

Each of these presuppositions is put forth for the same reason; to establish the equality of the explicate and implicate domains. This is necessary because it is on the

ground of metaphysical equality that Kaplan tries to establish the ontological and soteriological equality of religious experience, or the truth of religious pluralism.

We will now examine how Kaplan understands the monistic non-dualistic position, the process non-dualistic position, and the theistic positions by utilizing this understanding of the implicate and explicate domains, and the relationship between two.

For Kaplan, Advaita Vedanta typifies monistic non-dualism. Monistic non-dualism says that there is only one reality or one Being that is everywhere and everything. This one Being (Brahman) is identical to atman or the true nature of every individual. From this perspective, the distinctions that are typically made between subject and object, self and other are an illusion. Salvation or liberation comes in the form of recognizing this illusion, and realizing the great truth that one's own self (atman) is identical to God (Brahman). Thus, the great truth is that there is only one reality or that reality is not dualistic: The self and God are not two, but one. Kaplan suggests that the implicate domain of holography can be used as a model to understand this non-dualistic realization of God, most simply because there are no subjects and objects in the implicate domain, in the same way that there are no subjects and objects in the non-dualistic realization that atman is Brahman. But to appreciate the full power of the model one needs to imaginatively identify with the being of this domain. As such, one does not stand outside of the implicate domain to notice that it (as something separate) has a non-dualistic quality; instead, one realizes (because *everything* is coextensive with the implicate domain) that the one observing the non-duality of the implicit domain is also a part of this non-duality. Kaplan also suggests that the redundant quality of holography can be used to understand, analogously, the concept of the individual self or atman being

identical to Brahman. In holography, each part of the film can be used to represent the whole; similarly, then, each individual person can “represent” Brahman. (12)

To understand the other type of non-dualism – process non-dualism – Kaplan, again, focuses on the implicate domain of holography. This time, though, his aim is *not* to show that everything is the same non-dual reality, but to show a “dynamic web of interrelationships that exhibit neither subject nor object.” (13) The hologram shows this in the series of interference patterns that emerge as a consequence of converging light sources. Kaplan, speaking analogously, says that the process non-dualist looks at this pattern differently than does the monistic non-dualist. The monistic non-dualist reifies “the interference patterns into a static film like nature.” (For the religious non-dualists this means reifying the interference patterns as God or the Self.) In contrast, the process non-dualist views the interference patterns as a dynamic process; “as an ongoing process in which the explicate entities are unfolding and enfolding.” (13) The important thing about this idea of explicate realities unfolding and enfolding in the ongoing dynamic process of the implicate domain, is that this dynamic process is taken as coextensive with all and, therefore, ultimate; in other words, to experience this process is to experience the ultimate. (13)

Kaplan continues by explaining that from this second non-dualistic perspective the implicate domain is seen as the all-pervasive condition from which all things appear, but it does not in itself show how things appear. Thus, the implicate domain lacks specific things, or subjects and objects, but is not simply nothing (in the sense of mere absence); it is the interference patterns. On the other hand, the implicate domain cannot be called “something”; it is, rather empty of all things. As Kaplan puts this, “it is without

particularly, without subject and object. It is empty of anything that looks like a self-nature. (In this sense, we can say it is emptiness.)”(13-14)

With the implicate domain of holography understood as a dynamic process that is ultimately “empty,” Kaplan moves on to show how this can serve as a model for understanding the process non-dualism of a tradition such as Yogacara Buddhism. The Yogacarins believe that reality is constantly changing and consequently *no thing* has a fixed nature, i.e., there is no self or no atman. Similarly, all things are without a fixed nature, i.e., there is no unchanging Being, or no Brahman. Reality is best understood as “dynamic web of interrelationships that lack the duality of subject and object – that lack particularity.” (14) Reality is ultimately empty and, thus, Yogacara Buddhists, use the term Emptiness or Sunyata to refer to ultimate reality. Continuing to apply the model, Kaplan explains that Sunyata is no more mere nothingness, than the interference patterns of the implicate domain are mere nothingness. Sunyata is, like the interference patterns, the dynamic pattern from which all things arise. Or, more accurately, the interference patterns are like the relative nature of all things (paratantra nature) – which are said to be Sunyata. Paratantra nature holds the causes and conditions of all things (like the interference patterns). Kaplan describes paratantra nature as *what* appears, rather than how it appears; how things can appear is as subjects and objects, as is characteristic in the explicate domains.⁴⁴

This maneuver or insight, to see what appear to be subjects and objects as emptiness, allows the Yogacara Buddhist to see the self as emptiness – and, this recognition of the self as emptiness is liberation/salvation, also called Nirvana. (14) In

⁴⁴ Consider, again, Wittgenstein’s description of the mystical as that the world is rather than what the world is. Here Kaplan describes emptiness as a *what* as opposed to a *how*, but I think he means “what” in the sense of “what can be.”

the end, the Buddhist and the Advaitin come to the same point – a realization of non-duality. Or, in terms of the model, to a realization of the implicate domain. The difference between the two, is that they come to this point by recognizing different features of the implicate domain. The Buddhist recognizes its dynamic nature, and the Advaitin recognizes its all-encompassing or inclusive nature. Nonetheless, the important thing is that both are equally true because both are saying something true – *but different* – about the implicate domain, or (the same aspect of) ultimate reality.

Finally, Kaplan uses his holographic model to account for theistic positions; specifically, “classical” theism and (Whiteheadian) panentheism. In this case, the model is used to establish truths about the relationship between the implicate and explicate domains, in order to establish truths about the relationship between God and humanity, as conceived in theistic religious traditions.

Kaplan highlights two aspects of the relationship between the implicate and the explicate domains in holography, that make it a useful model for understanding theism. First, is the fact that the implicate and explicate domains simultaneously exist, which means that both domains are ultimate. The important thing to take from this, is that at least one explicate domain can be taken as ultimate, and this is important because theism, in this model, pertains to the explicate domain only; specifically, to the relationship between different explicate domains. Second, in holography, the implicate domain has the capacity to enfold and unfold multiple explicate domains, shown by the fact that one holographic film can record multiple explicate scenes. (15) What Kaplan is suggesting here is that both God and humanity can be represented by the explicate domain; as such both come from the implicate domain, and both stand in a subject-object dichotomy.

Moreover, because the explicate and implicate domains exist simultaneously they are equally ultimate, and, so, the relationship between the different explicate domains can be taken as ultimate.

Kaplan identifies the following essential features of theism: 1) the self or individual person is real; 2) the person is fulfilled in relationship to God (who both creates and sustains the person); 3) the one who guarantees personhood or individuality (God), is a person or individual; 4) God must be an individual because, otherwise, God could not stand in relationship with human beings and, therefore, God must be explicate: “Particularity, individuality, and relationship are the essential characteristics of the theistic view. They are also essential characteristics of the explicate domain.” (15)

Kaplan says that the great questions for theists is how can the world relate to a transcendent God, and how can human beings best actualize this relationship – and, he discusses two theistic answers. First, there is classical Western theism which makes a radical separation between God and the world, and yet paradoxically affirms that God interacts with the world. Second, there is panentheism, which says that God dwells in all things, but paradoxically God is also transcendent. For Kaplan, classical theism focuses more on God's transcendence, and panentheism focuses more on God's immanence, but both face the same problem; namely, where is God who transcends the world? (15-16) Kaplan thinks that holography can help solve this problem.

The main feature of holography that helps shed light on the relationship between God and human beings is the fact that more than one explicate domain can be enfolded within the same implicate domain. What follows from this is that God's explicate domain can be understood as radically different from the world's explicate domain, even though

both are enfolded in the same implicate domain. Thus, both are separated by the fact that they are of different explicate domains, but both can stand in relation to one another because they are enfolded in the same implicate domain. This allows us to analogously understand how God can be simultaneously apart from the world of humanity and also a part of it.

Kaplan solves this theological quandary, by positing a metaphysical reality beyond both world and God in which both dwell; namely, the implicate domain in which both the explicate realities of God and world are unfolded. Kaplan says that classical theists have tended to focus on the explicate domain(s) only have and paid little attention to the implicate domain; they have focused on God as the Great Being who stands in relation to other beings, and not very much on God as the all pervading reality. In contrast, Kaplan seems to suggest that panentheists have a broader vision since they see that both God and world come from the implicate domain, and that these two explicate realities are distinct. In any case, Kaplan is willing to conflate these two views because the main thing he wants to stress is that theistic views are radically different from non-dualistic views. They find salvation in a personal relation with God – in an I-thou relation in which all parties are explicate.” (17)

Thus, Kaplan’s model presents three views of ultimate reality, and their three resulting soteriologies, as equally true. More specifically, the model argues for the equality of the I-thou relationship of theism, the dissolution of the self into the Self of monistic non-dualism, and the realization of no-self of process non-dualism. Kaplan does not say, however, that his holographic model is limited to three true views of ultimate reality, or that the holographic model can account for all true views of ultimate reality.

He simply says that it works for these three types of religion; if it can work for more this would have to be shown, and if it can't account for some other type(s) of ultimate religion then a different model would have to be developed. (19)

We have just reviewed Kaplan's introductory summary to his pluralistic model. The main text spells out the model more explicitly (Chapter 4) and shows how the model works by applying it to specific cases of religious diversity (Chapter 5). To determine whether or not Kaplan's model really works as a way of conceiving three religious soteriologies as equal, it would be necessary to carefully review this material. We will not do this here. I am willing to grant that Kaplan has constructed a model that works, i.e., that he has constructed a model that lets us conceive of different (and real) soteriological options as equal with respect to their differences: I am more interested in discussing the implications of Kaplan's model if it does, in fact, work. Most especially, I want to ask questions about what sort of pluralism Kaplan has constructed; what it accomplishes and how; what sorts of demands it makes on those who adopt it, etc. Thus, we will now turn to questions such as these, and will begin this process by looking at some of Kaplan's own responses to some anticipated questions.

Questions and Issues Related to Kaplan's Model

Although Kaplan affirms three views of Ultimate Reality as true, he does not accept what those who hold these views have to say about each other; in other words, he accepts what religions say is true but rejects what they say is false. This may seem like arbitrary cherry picking but Kaplan argues that it is not, and he says that this position is the "epistemological foundation" of his religious pluralism. He argues that religious

traditions have not been pluralist in the past and, therefore, have necessarily conceptualized other soteriological options as non-ultimate. In other words, the rejection of others is tied to a non-pluralistic framework; if this framework is dropped in favour of a pluralistic framework then the rejection of others can also be dropped. Fortunately, the truth claims made by the traditions are not tied to a non-pluralistic framework; these claims can be carried over into a pluralistic framework. (17-18)

The problem that Kaplan is really dealing with is a logical one; it is whether or not the logic of a holographic model can replace Aristotle's law of non-contradiction. Following Aristotelian logic, any religion that takes itself to be ultimate, will conclude that any religion that is different from it will be non-ultimate. In practice, this will mean every religion, because no religion will be at the same time and in the same respect the same as the ultimate religion. Kaplan is asking religious traditions to abandon a particular form of logic and the conclusion that is drawn from it (i.e., that all other religions are non-ultimate) in favour of a different logic with a different conclusion (i.e., that there are different ultimately true religions). And the question is whether or not religious traditions would be willing to do this; would they be willing to abandon their conclusions that other religions are soteriologically inferior by abandoning the (Aristotelian) logic that leads them to this conclusion? Or, positively expressed, would they be willing to embrace Kaplan's logic and the pluralistic conclusion that this would lead them to?

Kaplan says that real commitment to a real religious path is necessary in order to realise an ultimate religious end; he also says that it requires choice. But Kaplan is not just saying that one must choose some specific religious path in order to have an

authentic religious experience – Schleiermacher and Rahner say as much – he is saying that one must choose because there is *always* a choice to be made. One must choose between the ontological options available:

In this model, individuals can strive for that which they want and they can achieve that which they seek. There is more than one ontological option. One's ultimate "state of existence" is not metaphysically dictated; it is not ontologically limited. One's ultimate "state of existence" is a matter of choice. This form of religious pluralism is metaphysical democracy. (19)

Traditionally the only religious choice to be made is between truth and error. Kaplan's pluralism, rooted in a holographic-like metaphysical structure, demands a further choice; between truth and truth. The forms of humanistic pluralism that we have examined emphasize diversity, but not choice; perhaps, this is because the diversity they emphasize isn't much different? As in any democracy, the choices available in Kaplan's pluralistic democracy are of equal value, meaning that whichever ultimate state of being one chooses it is equally an ultimate state of being.

Like Griffin and Cobb, and unlike Hick, Kaplan is suggesting that religious diversity obtains because Ultimate Reality is diverse; in other words, there is actually diversity to be experienced in an experience of ultimate reality. (159)

The advantage of Kaplan's approach – as discussed above in connection with Cobb's pluralism – is that it is not necessary to tell religious practitioners that they are not really experiencing what they think they are experiencing. For example, one does not, like John Hick, have to tell Advaitins or Zen Buddhists that they are not really having an unmediated experience of the Real because the metaphysical foundation of a pluralistic

theory demands it. As Kaplan puts it, “Here each tradition can have its own cake, not some generic cake that no one wants, knows or experiences. In this model, having one’s own cake does not entitle one to belligerence. It does not entitle one to shove that cake in someone else’s face. Each can have its cake and eat it, too.” (161)

It is one thing to say that different religions have different perceptions of different ultimate realities, and that these experiences lead to (or are) different soteriologies that are equally and ultimately true, but what about other religious differences such as moral differences and different moral systems? How, for example, can it be said that the idea of a personal God who serves as moral judge can be equally true to the idea of karma? Or how can it be said that the idea of reincarnation, and the idea of only a single birth, are equally true? Kaplan’s short answer is that these issues are not relevant to his particular project. His longer answer is that he is not dealing with ideas that are bound to particular religions or geographical regions. In this, he is saying that his project deals with trans-religious realities – since there is theistic salvation in Eastern religions, and there is non-dualistic salvation in Western religions – and that one would still need to reconcile these even if one could come to some concordant conclusion about karma versus God’s watchful eye, or whether we have one birth or multiple births. In other words, as important as these issues may be, the ontological issues still persist independent of these, and these are Kaplan’s main concerns. (162-163)

Kaplan also discusses a number of theological issues. The first theological issue that he addresses is related to the question of whether or not religions can affirm their own soteriological truth without affirming other soteriological options as false. It is a question related primarily to theists who claim that God is responsible for the salvation of

all individuals. It is the question of whether or not God can really be affirmed as the Lord of all if God is only responsible for those who want theistic salvation. Such an idea suggests that God is limited to a particular people and not, therefore, the universal God of all; Jews, Christians, and Muslims have all rejected this henotheistic concept of God. Certainly these traditions have, at times, limited salvation to those who actually do belong to them, but in this they are expressing the conditions that God place's on human salvation, not the limitations of God's ability to save. Kaplan's pluralism places a limitation on God's salvation – not by saying that not everyone could choose it – but by saying that there are other soteriological choices. The question then becomes – does God demand that all people seek theistic salvation only? And, moreover, would this infringe on God's universal power and sovereignty? In answer to these questions Kaplan employs an argument typical of humanistic pluralism by implying that a “loving God” would not make such a demand; that a loving God would “want individuals to overcome the limitations of existence in any possible way.” (164) This argument, of course, presupposes that “overcoming the limitations of existence” is an acceptable way to express the ultimate religious end, and that theistic salvation(s) and non-dualistic liberations are equally valid tokens of this type.

The possibility of non-dualistic liberation, as opposed to theistic salvation, raises another issue stemming from the fact that the individual immortal soul of salvation does not remain individual and “immortal” in liberation. The Buddhist realization of no-self or Emptiness requires a transcendence of the I-thou dichotomy that is the foundation of theistic salvation. Thus, Kaplan asks, “is it conceivable to imagine that immortal souls would not remain immortal?” (165) Kaplan answers this question in the same way by

suggesting that a gracious God would allow human beings to overcome the limitations of human existence in any way possible.

But despite this possible answer, Kaplan's final response is that he does not know the answers to such questions, and that this doesn't really matter because it does not affect his task of developing a model that allows one to see different soteriologies as equally and ultimately true.

Another problem connected with theism is the problem of determining who or what is God – since there seem to be so many different Gods. Kaplan follows Hick, to a point, in dealing with this problem. Hick sees the various Gods as different perceptions and conceptions of the Real that have arisen in religions that have traditionally conceived of the Real as personal. Kaplan is fine with this idea, and can accommodate it within his holographic model. But he rejects the idea that the various *personas* of the Real have a status secondary to the Real itself. For Kaplan, of course, the Real is identified with the implicate order and the implicate order does not have an ontologically higher status than the explicate order.

The last theological problem that Kaplan addresses is in regard to the notion of incarnation, which is found predominantly in Christianity and Hinduism. Kaplan argues that his model can handle the idea of incarnation, but only if it is not tied to exclusivist and inclusivist theologies of other religions. He cites Raimundo Panikkar's incarnational theology as one that would be compatible with his pluralistic model, and indeed, Kaplan finds Panikkar's way of reconciling the ultimacy of Christian truth with other religious truths strikingly similar to his own holographic proposal. To illustrate this he uses Panikkar's idea of seeing the whole from one perspective: When one does this one is

truly seeing the whole but this does not mean that there are other perspectives from which the whole can be perceived (that are just as true). Nonetheless, Kaplan's main point is that his model stands with or without theistic notions of the incarnation.

The final question that Kaplan addresses is, perhaps, the most important one; it is the question of the relationship between those choosing different soteriological options. He addresses this question by addressing the more specific question of whether or not it is possible for the same individual to realize more than one ultimate end, and by discussing the conditions under which this could be achieved. Starting with saved theists, he asks what would happen if they tried to realize a non-dualistic ultimate (as ultimate). Would they be forced to renounce their feeling of dependence on God or even their very idea of God? And, if they did shift their attention away from God to the non-duality of Being or the emptiness of all reality would they still be theists? Similarly, would non-dualists, who shift away from realizing the one Self or the not-self (Emptiness), in order to realize the ultimate experience of the I-thou relationship, still be non-dualists?

On this point, Kaplan departs from Cobb and Griffin and affirms religious diversity as a permanent condition, not one that is eventually overcome in epistemological unity, by saying that such shifts would entail a change in soteriological perspective. Thus, Kaplan's position is that it is possible to experience one ultimate, and then another, but one cannot experience both at the same time because they are independent realizations of different ultimate realities:

It seems that each Ultimate Reality can be realized independently of the other ultimate realities and each remains soteriologically distinct. This would imply that the final state of different individuals could be different. Having followed

different paths and having achieved different ultimate goals, different individuals can end up in different places—there are different paths to different summits.

(169)

In this pronouncement, Kaplan affirms an even deeper pluralism than Cobb and Griffin.

Diversity is a condition that cannot be overcome; a choice must be made.

A Comparison of John Cobb's Pluralism and Stephen Kaplan's Pluralism

The general problem that Cobb and Kaplan address is how to affirm the truth of multiple religions with respect to their differences. Both authors are convinced that traditional forms of religious pluralism have failed to do this; these forms of pluralism allow for only a superficial recognition of religious plurality by seeing all religions as particular expressions of a religious universal. Moreover, the common aim of Cobb and Kaplan is to affirm a pluralistic situation without resorting to relativism; in other words, they are struggling to affirm what seems to be a logical possibility – multiple ultimate religious truths or multiple ultimate religious states of being.

The other commonality of the two theorists is that they both use a pluralistic metaphysics to legitimate a religiously diverse situation, i.e., to affirm that this situation is pluralistic in the sense of having multiple, equally valid but different religions.

Despite these commonalities, these two forms of metaphysical pluralism also have significant differences. First, the two authors start with different theories of religion or different understandings of true religion that lead to different levels of commitment to religious pluralism; second, they aim to solve different problems; third, they focus on

different pluralistic contexts; fourth they use different methodologies to construct different metaphysical structures.

Different Theories of Religion and Different Commitments to Pluralism. The different understandings that Cobb and Kaplan have of true religion go a long way in explaining the pluralistic problem they try to address, the particular solution they come up with, and their end commitment to religious pluralism, thus, we will start our comparison here.

Cobb says that different religions focus on different aspects of ultimate reality; Kaplan says that his model allows one to imagine the realisation of different ultimate states within ultimate reality. Although these may seem like small differences, they reflect a profound difference in the two pluralisms. Cobb's pluralism is epistemological and Kaplan's is ontological; in other words, true religion for Cobb is knowledge of Ultimate Reality and true religion for Kaplan is a state of existence. For Kaplan one's ultimate state of existence is salvation, and so his approach could more fully be called ontological *and* soteriological.

This leads to what is perhaps the most significant difference between the two theories: Kaplan maintains a radical pluralism, while Cobb's seems to renounce pluralism in the end. What I mean by this is that Kaplan maintains that religious diversity (ontological diversity) is a permanent condition, while Cobb maintains that religious diversity (epistemological diversity) is eventually overcome in a singular state of knowledge. For Cobb religious diversity is, in the end, overcome by unified human knowledge of ultimate reality; for Kaplan human experience must always conform to the landscape of pluralistic ultimate reality. For Cobb religion is about appropriating other

truths in order to expand one's own truth; for Kaplan, religion is about existential ontological choice.

Is not entirely clear if Cobb believes in final religious fulfillment or not. What is clear is that he holds either one or the other of the following two positions: 1) religious fulfillment is possible through the attainment of complete knowledge of God; or, 2) complete knowledge of God is impossible, but human beings should continually strive for ever more accurate knowledge of God, or ever higher religious fulfillment. Speaking of the fulfillment of Christianity Cobb says that: “The fullness of Christianity lies in the ever receding future. One can be a wholehearted participant in the present movement as long as one believes that the particular limitations to which one is now sensitive can be overcome.”⁴⁵ Whether fulfillment ever comes to an end is not clear, but Cobb certainly imagines Christianity coming to (relatively more) complete knowledge of God, and so overcoming its present state of incomplete knowledge.

Cobb assumes that knowledge is singular and is averse to the very idea that one could be shut out from particular human knowledge about God, as this would create a relativistic situation.⁴⁶ In other words, knowledge is continuously moving to a single point that transcends plurality.

This raises questions about the depth of Cobb's pluralism. Does he believe that pluralism is in the end, overcome by complete knowledge of God? Or, does he maintain that pluralism is a permanent condition because it is impossible to have complete knowledge of God – even though one should try to overcome pluralism as much as possible through a unified knowledge of God? In either case, Cobb tends toward an

⁴⁵ Cobb, *Transforming Christianity*, 45.

⁴⁶ See Griffin, “John Cobb's Pluralism,” 63.

affirmation of religious unity rather than religious plurality; in the former, unitary knowledge of Ultimate Reality is an attainable goal, and in the latter unity is an ideal goal. On the other hand, the practical religious situation in both scenarios is pluralistic – either because pluralism cannot be overcome or because it will not be overcome for a very long time.

Perhaps Cobb could be called a “practical metaphysical pluralist,” but still an “ideal inclusivist.” Understood as inclusivism, Cobb's position is very similar to Mark Heim's. In both theories different religious traditions provide radically different knowledge of God that is an essential component of complete knowledge of God. But these two forms of “Christian inclusivism” are very different in at least one respect; namely, that in Heim's theory ultimate knowledge of God is Christian, and in Cobb's theory it is not necessarily Christian. Indeed, for Cobb, ultimate religious fulfillment may require the renunciation of Christ:

In faithfulness to Christ must I be open to others... I must be prepared to give up even faithfulness to Christ. If that is where I am led, to remain a Christian would be to become an idolater in the name of Christ. That would be blasphemy.⁴⁷

For Heim, the truths of other traditions are united in the Christian truth of communion with God; for Cobb, the truth of all religions, including Christianity, are put together to compose a complete picture of God. (Picture-puzzle pluralism.) If “complete” knowledge of God remains Christian in any sense for Cobb, it is a radically transformed Christianity. Nonetheless, Cobb seems more inclined to a vision in which the various religious traditions – the cosmic and the theistic and the acosmic – come together to create something new that is not identified with any particular religion, and this

⁴⁷ Cobb, *Transforming Christianity*, 45-46.

effectively overcomes the problem of seeing one particular religion as superior to all others. Thus, even if Cobb is in an ideal inclusivist, rather than a practical pluralist, his inclusivism is unique in that true religion is not tied to any particular religion.

As for why Cobb's theory of religious pluralism tends towards inclusivism I suggest that this is connected to his epistemological approach to the idea of true religion, and specifically to two common ideas about knowledge: 1) that the principle of non-contradiction is valid, and, 2) that knowledge is universal.

Cobb has no way of overcoming the principle of non-contradiction at the level of true religion or religious knowledge. Or rather, he is not satisfied with his own solution that different religions are equally true because they focus on different aspects of ultimate reality. Cobb does use this solution in order to say that different religions have equally valid religious truths, but then he assumes that these different truths can be brought to a single point of knowledge. For Cobb, this means that they can be understood *in the singular* as complementary. Cobb's idea of complementarity does not overcome the principle of non-contradiction; it brings contradictions into a unified field where they can be held simultaneously as different parts of one truth. The unified field of religious truth is capable of holding all truth; indeed, truth outside must be brought within it, and what cannot be brought within it must be false. In other words, religious truth or true religion is universal. This is why Cobb cannot accept the possibility of other truth, and this is why he is not as radically pluralist as Kaplan. For Cobb, to maintain pluralism, by refusing to reconcile different truths within one universal understanding, is to capitulate to relativism.

For Kaplan, true religion is salvation and salvation is an ultimate state of existence. His approach is soteriological and ontological rather than epistemological. The significance of this, for Kaplan, is that pluralism is the “natural state,” and this is a state that cannot be overcome. This is drawn from the fact that one cannot experience different states of existence at the same time, in the way that one can synthesize pieces of knowledge into a greater knowledge. For Kaplan, one can be in an ultimate religious state, but one cannot at the same time be in another ultimate religious state. To attain this other ultimate religious state, one would have to leave one's current state. In other words, the particularity of existence, guarantees the particularity or plurality of religion. Kaplan's work, then, is not to argue that there is religious plurality, but to argue that there is religious pluralism, in the sense of the equally ultimate religions (that are, of course, different).

Thus, these two different theories of religion lead to different perceptions about the problem of religious diversity, and different ideas about how this can be solved.

Different Objectives. The main objective of Cobb's pluralism is the achievement of greater religious truth, i.e., greater knowledge of God. This is a two-step process for Cobb. First, he finds a way to acknowledge that religions other than Christianity have truth about ultimate reality. Then, having established, that there is truth outside of Christianity, Cobb works to integrate these different truths into a more comprehensive truth about God. In the first movement, Cobb authenticates deep religious pluralism; in the second movement, he seeks to overcome religious pluralism in a unified perspective. But both movements are enacted for the same purpose of coming to greater religious truth. This is consistent with Cobb's vocation as a philosophical theologian.

The main objective of Kaplan's pluralism seems to be a more amicable religious plurality. Again, for Kaplan religious plurality is a given condition, and there is no way to overcome this. What can be overcome, however, is the conclusion that being in one ultimate state, means that others in different religious states are in a false or less ultimate state. Kaplan says that traditionally these have gone together, but that there is no reason that they must go together. And he has found a way to think about or to conceive of one's own religious state as ultimate, while thinking about other religious states as equally ultimate. This is not the same as relativism. In relativism everyone is required to see their truth as less; in Kaplan's vision everyone is required to see more truth. Why is this desirable? Presumably, it is desirable because a world in which religious persons maintain their own truth but acknowledge the truth of others (pluralism) is better than a world in which the affirmation of one's own truth requires a positive rejection of another's truth (exclusivism and inclusivism), or a world in which all must renounce their own truth to some extent (relativism). This objective is consistent with Kaplan's vocation as a philosopher of religion.

Different Pluralistic Contexts. Cobb and Kaplan are trying to reconcile different pluralistic contexts (because each sees the totality of human religiosity differently). It could be said that both theorists are trying to validate the pluralistic situation that they are able to see. Cobb aims to reconcile three types of religion; the acosmic, the theistic, and the cosmic. His primary focus though has been the reconciliation of the truths of (theistic) Christianity and (acosmic) Buddhism. Kaplan aims to reconcile three types of religion; one Self non-dualism, no-self non-dualism, and theism; and, he focuses on Advaita

Vedanta, Yogacara Buddhism, and Christian mysticism as representatives of these positions.

Different Metaphysical Structures Built Using Different Methods. As said above, the common solution that Cobb and Kaplan employ for the problem of religious pluralism is a pluralistic metaphysics; but because both are trying to authenticate different pluralistic situations both construct a different pluralistic metaphysics. Cobb's metaphysical construct is built to understand acosmic, theistic, and cosmic religions as equally true; Kaplan's metaphysics is built to understand monistic non-dualism, process non-dualism, and theism as equally true.

Cobb and Kaplan also construct different sorts of metaphysical structures, or they approach their task with different methodological tools. Cobb's metaphysics is a naturalistic or philosophical theology, and Kaplan's metaphysics is a philosophical model or a philosophy of religion.

Cobb's metaphysics or philosophical theology is meant to express the truth about ultimate reality; it is a meta-religious perspective that is fuller and richer than the particular theologies that are used to construct it. Cobb's metaphysics is pluralistic; it has different but equally ultimate realities; however, Cobb provides no way for thinking about different but equally valid truths – including religious truths – in and of themselves. Cobb's substantial argument for different but equally ultimate truth takes place at the level of his pluralistic metaphysics. His claim that there are different but equally ultimate religions is made by referring religion to ultimate reality; religions are different and equally ultimate because they focus on different aspects of Ultimate Reality that are

equally ultimate. In other words, he shows how different aspects of Ultimate Reality are different but equally ultimate, and then uses transitive logic to argue that religions are likewise equal and ultimate. Cobb's pluralism involves commitment to this particular pluralistic theology.

Kaplan's metaphysics functions differently. He claims to know nothing about the truth of Ultimate Reality or ultimate states of being realised within, or in relation to, ultimate reality. The only thing he claims, is that he has a pluralistic metaphysical model that allows one to see different religious claims about ultimate states of being as equally true. By looking at Kaplan's pluralistic metaphysical model we can see a pluralistic situation – i.e., a situation in which there are equally true ultimate states of being – even if we have no knowledge of the situation that the model is meant to represent, and even if the situation doesn't actually exist.

Kaplan is like someone who has constructed a model of Toronto's skyline to show that the CN tower is the tallest building in Toronto. Anyone who looks at this model can see that the CN tower is the tallest building in Toronto, even if they have never seen Toronto's actual skyline, and even if Toronto's skyline is imaginary. Cobb, in contrast, is like someone who has built a model of the CN tower only; he may say that his model is of the tallest building in Toronto, but one could not see this without referring the model back to Toronto's actual skyline. In other words, without reference back to Cobb's pluralistic theology (i.e., actual knowledge of ultimate reality) one cannot see religious pluralism; but with Kaplan's model one can see (something like) religious pluralism even if his metaphysics does not have an actual referent, or is not grounded in actual ultimate reality.

Cobb takes his pluralistic metaphysics from Alfred North Whitehead. In Whitehead's pluralistic metaphysics Ultimate Reality consists of creativity, God, and cosmos, and Cobb uses these different states of Ultimate Reality to confer equality and ultimacy on acosmic, theistic, and cosmic religions respectively. Cosmic religions focus on creativity, theistic religions focus on God, and cosmic religions focus on the cosmos. In this metaphysical structure the three different aspects of ultimate reality, though different, are equally ultimate; thus, acosmic, theistic, and cosmic religions are different because they are related to different aspects of ultimate reality, and they are ultimate and equal, because these different aspects of Ultimate Reality are ultimate and equal. Again, Cobb's metaphysics provides no means for seeing the equality of acosmism, theism, and cosmism in themselves; they are only seen as equal because they reflect the equality of ultimate reality, conceived as creativity, God, and cosmos. In other words, the ability to see the equality and ultimacy of the different religions is gained by being able to see ultimacy and equality in creativity, God and the cosmos; if you can't see it there you won't see it in the religions.

Kaplan uses holography and insights by physicist David Bohm about the implicate order and the explicate order, to construct a pluralistic metaphysical model. In the holographic model there are two domains – the explicate domain and the implicate domain. The implicate domain is all pervading or coextensive with all being, meaning that it is ultimate; however, because it exists simultaneously with the explicate domain, and cannot exist without the explicate domain, the two domains are equal. This means that the explicate domain is also ultimate. Or, more accurately, it means that there is at least one explicate domain that is equal to the implicate domain, since the implicate

domain can enfold more than one explicate domain. These assumptions about the implicate and explicate domains are then applied to holography, where the hologram (or the interference patterns that are recorded on the holographic film by laser beam lights) is taken as the implicate domain, and the filmed scene and resultant image are understood as the explicate domain. So, if we accept the idea that the implicate and explicate domains are both necessary for the holographic situation then we can accept that the recorded film, the filmed object, and the resultant image are all “equal” and “ultimate.”

Kaplan then draws on a number of unique features of holography which allow us to imagine “different states of being.” A hologram is unlike the scene that it records and the image that it produces, in that it contains no subject-object dichotomy – there is no picture, just interference patterns that appear on the film when the reference laser beam and object laser beam converge. In other words, the implicate domain of holography is non-dualistic. In this respect it is the opposite of the explicate domain which is the domain of subjects and objects – of separate persons. The hologram is also unique in that any part of the holographic film is capable of reproducing the whole scene that is recorded on the film. And, finally, holography is unique in that multiple explicate domains can be enfolded in the same.

The implicate domain in holography which is non-dualistic and yet enfolds all things allows us to imagine a state of being in which there is only one Being that is not ultimately other than anything else (because all arises within it). The interference patterns that give rise to dualistic images, but are themselves empty of all content, allow us to see the implicate domain as “emptiness.” This allows us to imagine a state of being in which all being ultimately dissolves into emptiness. Both of these perspectives are ultimate

because both are truths about the nature of the implicate order; the implicate order is both the only Being, and emptiness. Finally, the fact that different explicate domains can be enfolded in the same implicate domain allow us to imagine how human beings can be related to God but still be infinitely different from God. They can relate because they are both explicate and because they are both enfolded in the same implicate domain; and, they are different because they belong to profoundly different explicate domains.

If we see that the hologram enfolds both the scene that it captures and the image that it is able to project – or, that it is coextensive with all being, we can say that it is (in a sense) the one ultimate condition or being. If we see how the hologram enfolds all images, but is in itself devoid of all images, we can say (in a sense) that it is empty. These can be taken as two different but coequal truths about the same reality. Finally, if we understand that different holographic images are enfolded in the same hologram, we can say that the images are different but related. Moreover, if we understand that the implicate and explicate domains of the holographic situation are equal or that they are both ultimate, we can say that this truth about the different explicate domains (that they are different but related) is an ultimate truth. Thus, with respect to the holographic situation the following claims are equally and “ultimately” true: 1) the implicate domain is the one ultimate condition (in which all else is enfolded); 2) the implicate domain is empty because while it gives rise to all subjects and objects it is itself void; 3) different explicate domains are intimately related to each other (even though they may be deeply different) because they are enfolded in the same implicate domain.

By accepting Kaplan’s argument, one is able to see these three different truths about the holographic situation as “equally ultimate” – and, one can see this independent

of any religious content. But, as shown above, Kaplan wants us to use this model as a way of imagining parallel truth claims made by different religious communities. Specifically, he wants us to see the Advaitin realization that there is only one Being who is not separate from anything else, the Buddhist realization that all being is ultimately Emptiness, and the Christian experience of communion with God as different but equally true states of being. Kaplan wants us to think of these religious states of being as similar to the equally ultimate truths that can be “realized” in the holographic-like metaphysical structure that he creates.

Even if one is not entirely convinced that Kaplan's model works, or cannot really understand how it works, it is easy to imagine a successful model along similar lines. Such a model would allow one to see three different states as equally ultimate, and the ultimate states within the model would run parallel to religious states, claimed to be ultimate, by actual religious communities; specifically the states realizing the one Self, of realizing no-self, and of attaining communion with God.

In any case, Cobb’s method is that of a naturalistic theologian who claims knowledge about ultimate reality, and Kaplan’s is that of philosopher who constructs a model to show how we might analogously think about equally ultimate soteriologies.

We will now examine another version of metaphysical pluralism that makes three distinct but complementary arguments for religious pluralism.

4. Three Complementary Arguments for Religious Pluralism

In the Introduction and in Chapter 2, I mentioned that I had produced a version of metaphysical pluralism called *Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity in Terms of*

“Non-Dualism,” Divine Unity,” and “Trinitarianism” Together: A Tripartite Theory, Philosophy, and Theology of Religions. I will now present a truncated version of the three arguments I developed in this work that aimed to show that religions grounded in the God-concepts of non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarianism are equally true. Before doing this, though, a few preliminary remarks about the particular problem I was trying to solve and the main influence on my solution are in order.

The problem that I sought to resolve in *Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity* was an existential one. It was grounded in my feeling (at the time) that three different religious communities, or religions, embodied radically different, but equally valid, truths about ultimate reality. These three religions were Adidam, the Baha’is Faith and (a Tillichian interpretation of) Christianity.

Adidam revolves around the teachings of an American-born Guru who last assumed the title of Adi Da Samraj (1939-2008). Adi Da’s spiritual path is dedicated to realizing the non-dualistic truth that there is only God, or transcending the ego so that one may “dissolve” into God. Adi Da claims to be a perfect God-Realizer and that his goal is to transmit his perfect state to all sentient beings. The Baha’i faith revolves around the teachings of an Iranian-born Prophet who assumed the title of Baha’u’llah (1817-1892). Baha’u’llah’s spiritual path centres on belief in, and obedience to, the laws of God’s Manifestation, such that one may manifest the qualities (names and attributes) of God in oneself (as these are perfectly revealed in God’s Manifestation). Baha’u’llah claims to be a Manifestation of God and that his spiritual laws constitute the means for all human beings (in the present age) to fulfil their highest spiritual destiny. But even though Baha’u’llah claims to be the Manifestation of God’s names and attributes he denies that

he is the Essence of God, and insists that these two realities are profoundly distinct. The Essence of God is in itself one and unknowable – and what can be known about God is attained through knowledge of the (singular reality) of God’s Manifestation. In other words, the great truth is that God is one, and nothing but God is God. According to Tillich, Jesus, the Christ, represents the “New Being” insofar as he was able to maintain his unity with God *under the conditions of existence*. As such, he represents a perfect blend of humanity and divinity – or “concrete spirit” – and the way to this state (i.e., salvation) for all human beings.

Each of these “perspectives” makes a very different claim about God and about the relationship between God and humanity. In Adidam, God is the only reality (non-dualism) and the ultimate destiny of all human beings is to realize that they are God and dissolve into this great Reality. In the Baha’i Faith, God is one and completely other (divine unity) and the ultimate aim for all human beings is to become God-like by manifesting the qualities of God, while recognizing that they can never become the great One. In Christianity, God is a complex relational being (trinitarianism) and the ultimate aim for all human beings is to participate in, or commune with, this complex Ultimate Reality by blending one’s humanity and divinity.

In short, each religious perspective delivers a contradictory message about a human being’s ultimate state: 1) you are God; 2) you are not God but manifest God’s likeness, 3) you are related to God. At different times each of these perspectives seemed true to me, and at such times the implication seemed to be that if one perspective was true than the other two perspectives had to be false – or, at least, less true. Moreover, this view seemed to be consistent with each perspective’s theology of religions.

From Adi Da's perspective, non-dualism is the ultimate religious perspective and thus he recognizes non-dualistic traditions such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta as higher forms of religion. At the other end of the spectrum are the dualistic traditions (such as the exoteric forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam); these traditions are only nominally religious. In the middle, are the qualified forms of non-dualism that are found in theistic mystical traditions (in the mystical streams of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the theistic streams of Hinduism); these are authentic religions but have not gone far enough in realizing the complete identity between God and all else.

From the Baha'i perspective, divine unity is the ultimate religious perspective and thus religions that maintain the purest form of this message are most highly regarded. Thus, Baha'is regard Islam as the purest religion among past divine revelations/religions. Next come Christianity, even though it has corrupted the original message of divine unity with its doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation - and Judaism, even though it is tainted by not recognizing the "more recent" Manifestations of God. Furthest away from the pure message of divine unity are the non-dualistic traditions of the Far East such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which are generally regarded as hopelessly old and corrupt.

The theology of religions in Adidam and Baha'i value religions in an inverse proportion.

The Christian theology of religions offered by Tillich seems to strike a middle-ground between these two perspectives. Like the complementarianism of Cobb, it claims that the more "mystical" traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and the more "ethical" traditions such as Judaism and Islam (and with qualifications Christianity) are more or less equal insofar as they capture elements of truth or true religion. But, in the

end, these religions are fulfilled in the highest form of religion which unites these mystical and ethical elements. Tillich would originally identify this unification of the mystical and the ethical with Christ as the New Being, and then with his Pauline theology in philosophical form, or more specifically his concept of the religion of the concrete spirit – but, in both cases, other forms of religions are fulfilled in Christianity.

In *Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity* I set myself the task of arguing that all three of the above conflicting theologies are true. The most difficult part of this task was the logical problem of *thinking* about three contradictory statements about the same thing as equally true. How can we logically claim that the following statements are all equally true? 1) Ultimate Reality is radically identical to all else, 2) Ultimate Reality is radically separate from all else, and 3) Ultimate Reality is radically related to all else. To solve this logical problem I turned to the work of mathematician George Spencer Brown, who had already done much to shape my way of thinking about religious diversity.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Spencer-Brown completed two complementary works 1) *Laws of Form* and 2) *Only Two can play This Game*. Spencer-Brown describes *Laws of Form* as “an account of the emergence of physical archetypes, presented as a rigorous essay in mathematics.”⁴⁸ *Only Two can play This Game* is, to some extent, a translation of the insights of *Laws of Form* into metaphysical/religious language.

Spencer-Brown claims that “Form” necessarily emerges from “Void,” and that every form is necessarily a “trinity.” Thus, “ultimate reality” consists of two orders, the “Zero Order of Being” (Void) and the “Unity of Order of Being” (Form). He says that in traditional religious/metaphysical language the Zero Order of Being is referred to by such names as Nirvana (by Buddhists), the Godhead (by Christians), the unnameable Tao (by

⁴⁸ Spencer-Brown, *Only Two can play This Game*, 109; cited in text by page number hereafter.

Taoists), and so on. And, as for the Unity Order of Being this is traditionally referred to as God: “It is known to eastern doctrine, as it is to western, as the Triune God or Trinity. In western books of magic it is called the One Thing. In China it is called the nameable Tao. In Tibetan Buddhism it is called the densely-packed region.” (124)

For Spencer-Brown, the cultures of the world can be divided into two large camps; the Western and the Eastern. He identifies Western culture with “the mode of life, at least nominally Christian, of civilized residents in Russia, Europe, occupied parts of Africa, Iceland, North and South Americas, New Zealand, the Philippines, and occupied parts of Australia.” (10) And he identifies Eastern culture with “Buddhist, Confucianist, Taoist, and Hindu civilizations.” As for the rest or the other cultures – the most notable other being “Islam” – he says that these stand “somewhere between.” (10)

For Spencer-Brown, the main identifying characteristic of a culture is identification with one or the other of the two great “Orders of Beings.” Western culture is predominantly identified with the Unity Order of Being and Eastern culture is predominantly identified with the Zero Order of Being.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Spencer-Brown does not see the two cultures as mutually exclusive and, indeed, his ideal is a culture which is able to see things from both perspectives. (9-14)

Thus, Spencer-Brown uses his bipartite metaphysics to sort out two different cultural/religious perspectives; moreover, he legitimates the equal truth of these two different perspectives by grounding them in the two Orders of Ultimate Reality. I was attracted to Spencer-Brown’s approach of explaining cultural and religious diversity in terms of different aspects of Ultimate Reality, but obviously could not use his bipartite

⁴⁹ Presumably, Spencer Brown sees Islam as a weak form of either cultural type, because he never cites it as a balance between the two.

metaphysics because I wanted to validate the truth of *three* ultimate religious perspectives.⁵⁰

To overcome this problem I re-examined Spencer Brown's metaphysics, and his conclusion that the Unity Order of Being is necessarily a trinity (or tripartite structure). And, I came to the conclusion, that “the Trinity” cannot stand for the Unity Order of Being *only*, because once Something appears in Nothing, there is no other place for Nothing to be, apart from within Something; in other words, Nothingness must be enfolded within the Trinity. This means that the totality of Ultimate Reality is the Trinity (and not just the First Thing as distinct from Nothingness). In other words, Ultimate Reality is tripartite.⁵¹

With this insight that Ultimate Reality is tripartite I moved forward with the writing of *Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity in Terms of “Non-Dualism,” “Divine Unity,” and “Trinitarianism” together: A Tripartite Theory, Philosophy, and Theology of Religions*. This work consists of two parts.

In Part One, I outline three theories of religious “inclusivism”: The theories of non-dualism (typified by Adidam); of divine unity (typified by Baha’i); and, of “trinitarianism” or “divine relationship” (typified by a Tillichian version of Christianity).

In Part Two, I argue that the non-dualism “scheme” can be used to accurately account for Adidam, Buddhism, and Hinduism; that the divine unity scheme can be used to accurately account for Baha’i, Babism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism; and, that the divine

⁵⁰ For a similar non-Western approach to religious/cultural diversity consider the work of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro, who argues that the Western religion and culture is grounded in Being, and Eastern religion and culture is grounded in Nothingness, see, Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*. Also, see Carter, ed., *God the Self and Nothingness*, for some attempts for explain religious/cultural diversity in terms a bipartite metaphysics.

⁵¹ This will be discussed further in the course of presenting my philosophy of religious pluralism

relationship scheme can be used to account for Judaism, Christianity, and all other expressions of the religion of divine relationship. Then, I argue that none of these theories, *alone*, can account for the totality of religious diversity because, when applied universally, they distort the self-understanding of several of these religions. Finally, I argue that *together* these three schemes can accurately account for all religions. To do this I make three separate arguments for the equal ultimacy of each founding truth or perspective of the three “inclusivist” schemes.

More specifically, I use three different methodologies, or three different epistemological modes, to make the same argument. The first argument is scientific or historical, the second is metaphysical, and the third is theological. The overall argument presumes an epistemological hierarchy in which empirical knowledge is transcended by metaphysical knowledge, and metaphysical knowledge is in turn transcended by religious knowledge (or direct knowledge of ultimate reality). However, even if this presumption is rejected, the three (complementary) arguments can stand on their own merit and don't require this presupposition. Each argument tries to prove the same thing – that non-dualism, divine unity, and divine relationship are equal truths about the same ultimate reality, from different points of identity within ultimate reality.

In the first mode, I make an argument based on empirical observation of religious history, and a comparative analysis of this material. More specifically, I argue that the concepts of Ultimate Reality in Adidam, Baha'i, and Christianity are the same, but the three religions disagree about the nature of the relationships within the “divine economy,” and about their ultimate place within this. Each claims a different point of

identity within Ultimate Reality and this, I suggest, leads to different truths about the (same) ultimate reality.

In the second mode, I develop a metaphysical model that can be applied analogously to the truths of non-dualism, divine unity, and divine relationship to show how these truths, though different, are equally true. This metaphysical model is not based on observation of anything in the empirical world, but strictly on mathematical insight about the structure of existence and a projection of this insight onto Ultimate Reality. I call this a philosophy of religions.

In the third mode, I argue that ultimate religious knowledge – or true knowledge of Ultimate Reality – is obtained through identification with one of the three aspects of Ultimate Reality. And further, that although one cannot be identified with more than one aspect of Ultimate Reality at one time, one must be able to recognize those identified with other aspects of ultimate reality. Indeed, the ultimacy of one's own perspective is shown by the capacity to recognize ultimacy in religious others. I call this a theology of religions.

I will now reconstruct the sorts of arguments I put forth in *Understanding Religious Unity and Diversity*.

A Theory of Religious Pluralism

Here I will construct a theory of religious pluralism based on data collected from the history of religions, or claims that different religions make about themselves. More specifically, it will be based on claims about the nature of Ultimate Reality and the ultimate religious state made in Adidam, Baha'is and Christianity. This theory claims no

knowledge about whether or not any of these claims are true, but it does make an argument that these different claims, though different, are (or at least could be) equally true.

The first part of this theory is a thesis that Ultimate Reality is a tripartite structure constituted of Void, Creative Distinction/Creativity, and Form. This is a generalized conclusion drawn from the existence of parallel claims about Ultimate Reality being tripartite made in Adidam, Baha'i, and Christianity. Again, the generic terms we will use for these are different aspects of Ultimate Reality are – *Void*, *Creativity*, and *Form*. Void is the source condition of all else; Creativity is the power that creates Form (or Being) out of Void⁵²; Form is the first (divine) appearance. Following are the actual theologies from which this generalized theology is constructed:

Adidam has a very clear concept of Ultimate Reality as tripartite. In this case, the three elements are *Consciousness Itself*, *Universal Spirit Energy*, and *Divine Form* (or the *Centre of the Cosmic Mandala*). Consciousness Itself or Consciousness is the empty ground of all that arises; Universal Spirit Energy is a modification of Consciousness that creates all apparent beings within Consciousness; Divine Form or the Centre of the Cosmic Mandala (a brilliant white five-pointed star) is the first form of Consciousness and becomes further modified as all other words. The specific form of the generic Void-Creativity-Form in Adidam is Consciousness-Universal Spirit Energy-Divine Form.⁵³

According to Baha'i theology, Ultimate Reality consists of *three* elements: *the Unknowable Essence of God*, *the Most Great Spirit of God*, and *Universal Matter*. The Essence of God is the ground and source condition for all else; the Most Great Spirit, also

⁵² I am obviously using Creativity differently than Whitehead. For Whitehead, Creativity is what I call Void, and God is what I call Creativity.

⁵³ For the most consistent and accessible presentation of Adi Da's metaphysics, see Da, *Nirvanasara*.

called the Primal Will of God and the Manifestation of God, is the creative element in the Godhead that brings forth being out of nothingness; Universal Matter is the first created form and the primal matter from which all other created forms are made. This concept of Eternal Reality as Divine Essence, Primal Will, and Universal Matter clearly mirrors the generic concept of Ultimate Reality as Void-Creativity- Form; thus, Baha’is also affirm that Ultimate Reality is tripartite.⁵⁴

The Christian case is, on one hand, the easiest and, on the other, the most difficult to see as having a concept of Ultimate Reality that can be understood as Void-Creativity-Form. It is easy because Christians obviously take Ultimate Reality to be tripartite, as shown by its trinitarian concept of God. What is difficult is that the concepts of Void, Creativity, and Form don’t *exactly* match up with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father as “Super Essential Godhead” or as “the God beyond the God of theism” can be identified with Void. Similarly, the Son as the Eternal Logos can be identified with Creativity. But the Holy Spirit as First Form is a stretch even though the two can be correlated insofar as both pertain to God *in existence*. Here, I take creative theological license (for the first time) and identify the Holy Spirit (of Christian doctrine) with the First Form of God because both are connected with existence. And, thus, affirm that the Christian Trinity lines up with the generic concept of Ultimate Reality as Void-Creativity-Form.

We have now established that there are consistent concepts of Ultimate Reality, as tripartite, in Adidam, Baha’i, and Christianity; they are consistent in that the three aspects of Ultimate Reality in the three different theologies have the same functions or are

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between the Manifestation of God and the Essence of God see Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, LXXXIV. For a description of Universal Matter, see Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, 53.

described in the same way. Thus, we can generalize as follows: Void is the original ground of all Reality: Daists call this Consciousness Itself; Baha'is call this the Unknowable Essence of God; and Christians call this the Super Essential Godhead or God the Father. Creativity is the act that creates Form from Void: Daists call this Universal Spirit Energy; Baha'is call this the Most Great Spirit of God, the Primal Will of God, or the Manifestation of God; Christians call this the Logos or God the Son. Form is the First Existence that appears as a result of the First Creative Act within Void: Daists call this Divine Form or the Centre of the Cosmic Mandala; Baha'is call this Universal Matter; and, Christians call this God the Holy Spirit.

Because of these parallels we can now deduce that these concepts all refer to the *same* ultimate reality. But if this *is* the case then why do these religions make very different claims about, or have very different experiences of, the exact nature of the constituting elements of Ultimate Reality? In order to answer this we need to know how Daists, Baha'is, and Christians actually do experience Ultimate Reality, and what they say is true about it.

Daists claim that the three elements of Ultimate Reality are identical, or more specifically that the apparently other elements of Ultimate Reality are identical to Consciousness Itself. Baha'is claim that the three elements of Ultimate Reality are radically distinct, or more specifically that the other elements of Ultimate Reality are radically distinct from the Unknowable Essence of God. Christians claim that the three elements of Ultimate Reality are radically related, or more specifically that the other elements of Ultimate Reality are related to God the Father.

Since the third element of Ultimate Reality in all three religions extends to the world these same truisms extend to the world. Since the Divine Form is God or Consciousness Itself, human beings are also God, and so the great truth of Daism (and other non-dualistic religions) is that *there is only God*. Since Universal Matter is not God, human creatures are not God, and so the great truth of Baha'i (and other religions of divine unity) is that *only God is God*. Since the Holy Spirit is related to the Father, human beings are related to the Father as expressed in the great truth that *God is all in all*, or as expressed in the idea that all human beings are children of God.

Now, we will try to answer the question of why they come to these different conclusions about Ultimate Reality. Our thesis is that each religion comes to a different conclusion because each assumes a different identity within (the same) Ultimate Reality. More specifically, we can say that the *identity experience* of Daists is rooted in identification with Void/Consciousness Itself; the *difference experience* of Baha'is is rooted in identification with Creativity/The Most Great Spirit of God; and, the *relational experience* of Christians is rooted in identification with Form/The Holy Spirit. And, like our empirically derived theory of Ultimate Reality, these claims are made on the basis of actual claims made by Daists, Baha'is, and Christians.

Adi Da says that he *is* Consciousness Itself (Void). Bahá'u'lláh (the founder of the Baha'i Faith) says that he *is* the Most Great Spirit of God (Creative Distinction). Christianity is, again, problematic. Christians identify Christ with the Logos or Creativity and not with Form, as expected. So, again, I will take creative theological license and argue that Christ is better identified with (Divine) Form on account of Christianity's doctrine of Christ's Incarnation in *human form*, its doctrine of *bodily* resurrection, the

Pauline ideal of becoming a spiritual *body*, the Synoptic ideal of the Kingdom of Heaven on *earth*, and the lack of Divine *Law* in Christianity (which would be prominent in a Logos-based religion). Given these different points of identity within ultimate reality, the different experiences and conceptions of Ultimate Reality are understandable.

Thus, we can say that each religion is having the particular experience that it is having because it is grounded in a different aspect of ultimate reality, and is even having the experience it *should* be having.

Finally, with reference to this claim – that these different religions make different truth claims about Ultimate Reality because they are identified with different aspects of Ultimate Reality – we can make the further claim that the *identity experience* of Daists, the *difference experience* of Baha’is, and the *relational experience* of Christians are all of equal value because they are grounded in one of the three inherently equal elements of Ultimate Reality.

Putting together all of the elements of this theory we can say the following: Adidam, Baha’i, and Christianity, are equal ways of being religious because they are grounded in one of the three inherently equal elements of the same tripartite Ultimate Reality. Adidam, grounded in Void, realizes the identity between all elements of Ultimate Reality, and the corollary that all human beings are identical to God. Baha’i, grounded in Creative Distinction, recognizes the differences between all elements of Ultimate Reality, and the corollary that all human beings are distinct from God. Christianity, grounded in Form, sees the relationship between all elements of Ultimate Reality, and the corollary that all human beings are related to God.

A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism

Now I will try to prove the same thing from a different epistemological mode. This mode, similarly, does not require a religious identity, and its argument is not deduced from empirical knowledge about particular religions. Indeed, this argument could be made without knowing anything about any actual religions and without being at all religious. On the other hand, this argument can be used to complement the theoretical argument just made – the argument that there are three different but equally ultimate forms of religion resulting from identification with different aspects of ultimate reality.

Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction says that it is not logically possible to say of something that it is, and is not, this thing in the same respect and at the same time. But *things* are more complex than Aristotle supposed.

Mathematician George Spencer-Brown, in his *Laws of Form*, says that all *things* come into being when a space is severed or taken apart, in order to create two separate states.⁵⁵ Prior to such an act of severance, or act of distinction, nothing can be indicated; thus, *things* necessarily emerge from *no-thing* (or form emerges from void).⁵⁶ Moreover, Spencer-Brown says that all things are necessarily tripartite. This is so because we cannot create anything without co-creating what it is not, and these two states plus the boundary between them constitute the three elements of any thing, no matter what. The easiest way to represent this is through some sort of closed curve, like a circle. Here, an inside is separated from an outside – so the inside, the outside, and the line that divides them, represent the three elements of the thing.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form*, xxix.

⁵⁶ Spencer-Brown, *Only Two can play This Game*, 123-124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 125-26.

Thus, “nothingness,” or “void,” or “unbroken space,” or “emptiness” is the original source condition for all things; an “act severance,” or an “act of distinction,” is the creative act that makes something out of nothing; and, “things,” or “form” obtain when a creative act is made in unbroken space. This could be represented by a blank canvas (no-thing) the brush strokes of an artist (act of distinction), and the resultant picture (some thing). And, as discussed above, all some-things are necessarily tripartite.

Another interesting thing about things is that they can’t be seen unless you stand apart from them. You can demonstrate this to yourself by creating something (i.e., by drawing a circle, a starfish, the gingerbread man, or whatever) and standing apart from it. When you start to visualize your circle as an object – perhaps as a ball or a groundhog hole – pay attention to what you are doing, and you’ll notice that your circle becomes an object only when your attention becomes continuous with its ground or with what is outside of it; in other words, you can’t see the circle as an object unless you identify with its outside. You can also demonstrate this to yourself by noticing that you can have no experience of a building as an object unless you stand outside of it (and look at it) – while inside the building you experience it as *space*. And, as for things we can see, we can see that the three elements of these things are *necessarily related*; we can’t imagine one element without the others. Try to visualize the figure of the thing you have drawn without its ground, or try to visualize the ground without the figure: it can’t be done. Thus, from the outside, where we *can* see things, the three elements of a thing appear as a *relational unity* or as a “triunion.”

True as this may be, this is not the only way that we can experience the elements or aspects of a thing. In the same way that we can identify ourselves with the outside of a

thing, we can also imaginatively identify ourselves with its inside, *or* with the dividing line between inside and outside. Let us now do this, starting with the act or line of distinction.

If we imagine that we are the line that distinguishes an inside from an outside in our drawing, we are obviously no longer in a position where we can see a figure-ground picture with necessarily related elements. (It's necessary to be outside to see this.) From this perspective, we can look *either* at the inside *or* at the outside (but not at both at once) and so we experience and conceptualize the inside and outside as radically separate states. You can demonstrate this to yourself by sitting in a window sill that is large enough that you can't see both the inside and the outside at the same time, but have to turn to see either one or the other. From this vantage point, the inside and outside are clearly separate spaces because you can't see them together. So, from the perspective of the "line of distinction," the only conclusion that makes sense is that inside and outside are *different*, and this is the case because this is the element of a thing that literally *creates* separate states.

Finally, if we move our attention to the inside of some-thing, we once again experience this thing differently. Here our attention is not outside looking at an object, and it is not on the dividing line between inside and outside recognizing separate states; in this case, we are identified with an interior space and from this point of view we can realize that the space we are identified with would not substantially change if the line that enclosed it was modified in some way, or even if it disappeared. This can also be demonstrated with a house/building example. If we are inside our house we experience this thing as space, and this space could be modified by moving walls, and so forth,

without altering our overall sense of being spatially located within it. But even more radically, our feeling of identification with space would not be altered even if the walls of our house fell down. We might suddenly get hotter or colder but we would not lose our sense of being spatially located or spatially present – what would happen, in this case, is that *our* space would simply expand. This is the case because our house was originally constructed within a space that did not disappear when it was modified by the builders who put up walls to construct an inside (and therefore, outside) space within it. Given this phenomenon, it is possible to affirm that there is *no difference* between the inside and the outside of a thing, because these differences are arbitrarily made within the same unbroken space (or condition of no-thing) that continues to underlie all apparently separate states. But, perhaps, a better example of how we experience inside and outside states as *identical* is found in the case of driving a car. Our car is something that we experience as an object when we view it from the outside (as evidenced by the fact that some of us admire our car); our car also creates separate spaces (as evidenced by the fact that many of us stop singing when we get out of our car); but, we also drive our car and we do this on the premise that the space we occupy inside the car is absolutely identical with the space that is outside of it (and this is why cars have windows). Without this conviction that the spaces inside and outside of our car are *identical* we could not drive, and so our car would be reduced to a fetish or a place for singing alone. Nonetheless, the point here is that it is possible to realize that a thing's inside and outside are identical.

I have now shown that it is possible to coherently hold the views that the elements of a thing are radically *related*, radically *different*, or radically *identical* – and this would seem to contradict Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction. But Aristotle didn't

recognize the tripartite nature of things and so was in no position to see how different elements of a thing could be viewed differently from different perspectives within it, and so his principle of non-contradiction *can be* irrelevant for identifying possible contradictory claims about things. This is certainly the case with respect to the claims that the elements of a thing are *related, distinct, or identical* as discussed in the cases above. Thus, Spencer-Brown's insight into the emergence and nature of things opens up new possibilities for dealing with apparently contradictory claims about things.

This, of course, raises the question as to whether or not Spencer-Brown's insights into the emergence and nature of things (that seem to have enlightening ramifications when talking about houses and cars) have any bearing on complex "things" such as people or God. Spencer-Brown thought that they did, and so describes his *Laws of Form* as a rigorous essay in mathematics that demonstrated the emergence of physical archetypes, or of how a universe comes into being. Moreover, in his companion to *Laws of Form*, called *Only Two can play This Game*, he attempts to reconcile the great religious and cultural divide between the East and West on the basis of his mathematical metaphysics.

I also think that Spencer-Brown's mathematical insights have metaphysical implications and that these can be used to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable religious experiences, and will now try to use them to this end.

In his *Laws of Form*, Spencer-Brown has (at least) two mathematical insights with metaphysical implications: 1) things necessarily emerge from no-thing, or form emerges from void; 2) all things are tripartite. In *Only Two can play This Game* Spencer-Brown explicates the metaphysical implications of these mathematic insights, using one to

explain the great religious and cultural divide between East and West and the other to explain the Christian Trinity. Spencer-Brown believes that the patterns he sees, and represents mathematically, are divine archetypes that explain the origins of the universe (or of any universe as he would put it).⁵⁸ Thus, Nothingness or *Void* is the great original condition from which the First Existence or *Form* (or God) emerges.

As mentioned earlier, Spencer-Brown calls these, the two original orders of being: the Zero Order of Being and the Unity Order of Being, and he *authenticates* Eastern and Western ways of being religious by virtue of being grounded in one or the other of these original orders of being. The East is the way it is religiously and culturally because it is grounded in the Zero Order of Being, and the West is the way it is religiously and culturally because it is grounded in the Unity Order of Being. Spencer-Brown also uses his other insight – that all things are tripartite – to explain the Christian Trinity. He argues and demonstrates that if all things are tripartite then the First Thing or God (which emerges from Void) must also be tripartite.⁵⁹

I will now produce a philosophy of religions, in much the same way that Spencer-Brown did, by assuming that mathematical insights have metaphysical implications, and that religious diversity can be accounted for in terms of metaphysical diversity. Where I differ from Spencer-Brown, is that I make a broader interpretation of his insight that all things are tripartite, and use this to account for greater religious diversity.

Spencer-Brown sees triplicity as an attribute of Form, and Form as a state distinct from Void. I think this is a mistake because if Form emerges from Void as a result of an Act of Distinction made in Void, then Form must necessarily enfold Void and the Act of

⁵⁸ Spencer-Brown, *Only Two can play This Game*, 109; Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form*, xxix.

⁵⁹ Spencer-Brown, *Only Two can play This Game*, 125-126.

Distinction within Itself; indeed, *if* Form emerges, then Void and Distinction can *only* persist as elements within It. For example, if we create a form by drawing a distinction (a line in the shape of a circle) in void (on a blank page), the blank page (void) no longer persists as a blank page but only as it is now modified by the line of the circle (the distinction). Similarly, the distinction does not persist as something in and of itself but only as that which gives shape to form. Thus (in metaphysical terms), once Form emerges, Void-Distinction-Form are bound together and stand as all that is the case, or as the totality of Reality. In other words, the “First Thing” must be the totality of reality or Ultimate Reality and, indeed, this is why it is tripartite. (This is why I take Form to be an element of the “First Thing”/Ultimate Reality and not as a synonym for it.)

Starting from the premise that the First Thing is Ultimate Reality altogether, we can now affirm a number of truths about Ultimate Reality. Here, I will follow Spencer-Brown’s lead and claim that we know these truths about Ultimate Reality because we know certain truths about things in general. First, we know that Ultimate Reality is a tripartite structure consisting of Void, Creative Distinction, and Form, because we know (from Spencer Brown’s work) that all things are tripartite and identically constituted. The other truths we know about Ultimate Reality are likewise drawn, analogously, from what we know about things in general. We know that the three elements of Ultimate Reality can be identified with, and we know that such identification allows the different elements of Ultimate Reality to be experienced as *identical*, *different* or, *related*. More specifically, we know that identification with Void allows us to experience the elements of Ultimate Reality as *identical*; identification with Creative Distinction allows us to experience the elements of Ultimate Reality as *different*; and, identification with Form allows us to

experience the elements of Ultimate Reality as *related*. And, because the three elements of Ultimate Reality are of equal value we can affirm that these three different experiences of Ultimate Reality are also of equal value.

This can be boiled down to a simple pluralistic philosophy of religions that states: *Ultimate Reality is a tripartite structure, whose constituting elements of Void, Creative Distinction, and Form can be experienced as identical, different, or related by identifying respectively with Void, Creative Distinction, or Form; and these experiences are of equal value since the three elements of Ultimate Reality are of equal value.*

This pluralistic philosophy of religions has been constructed without any reference to actual religions. I have projected a conceptual understanding of things in general to create a conceptual understanding of Ultimate Reality. In this conceptual model I have also created different but equally true claims about Ultimate Reality, and accounted for these in terms of different perspectives within Ultimate Reality. But, of course, the theory can be applied to actual religions and when this is done the power of the theory is more fully realized.

Thus, we can argue that the claim of identity between the aspects of Ultimate Reality, as realized from the point of view of the Void, is a description of non-dualism as realized in religious traditions such as Adidam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. We can argue that the claim of difference between the aspects of Ultimate Reality, as realized from the point of view of Creative Distinction, is a description of divine unity as recognized in religious traditions such as Baha'i, Islam and Zoroastrianism. And, we can argue that the claim of relatedness between the aspects of ultimate reality, as seen from the point of

view of Form, is a description of divine relationship as experienced in religious traditions such as Christianity and Judaism.

A Theology of Religious Pluralism

I will now switch epistemological modes, again, to try to make the same argument in a different way. I will call this mode “theological” or religious. This argument, unlike the other two, is entirely dependent on being religious, or the ability to imagine being religious, which I will define, for starters, as *identification with (an aspect of) Ultimate Reality*.

I will begin this theology of religions by looking at how Daists, Baha’is, and Christians typically see things theologically, and then consider how they would need to alter their visions in order to be theologically pluralistic.

Theologically, truth is seen, recognized, or realized in oneself when one is identified with Ultimate Reality – or, more commonly for religious people, when they encounter One who is identified with Ultimate Reality. For Daists this One is Adi Da, for Baha’is this One is Baha’u’llah, for Christians this One is Jesus Christ, and so on.

In Adidam, Baha’i, and Christianity, to recognize and acknowledge the state of the One identified with Ultimate Reality (by recognizing that they are identified with Ultimate Reality) is the first requirement of being a devotee, a believer, or a follower. Daists must see and acknowledge that Adi Da is Consciousness Itself; Baha’is must see and acknowledge that Baha’u’llah is the Manifestation of God (for this Age); and Christians must see and acknowledge that Christ is the Son of God.

But one does not become a true devotee, believer, or follower until one also commits to practicing the disciplines, obeying the laws, or following the life prescribed and exemplified by the One recognized as identified with ultimate reality. Daists are obliged to conform their lives to the life-level disciplines, and the devotional and meditative practices that are given by Adi Da. Baha'is are expected to obey both the social and spiritual laws revealed by Baha'u'llah. And, Christians are expected to imitate Christ by following the example of his perfect and blameless life.

In Adidam, Baha'i and Christianity the reason for conforming to the disciplines, obeying the laws, or living a godly life, is so that one can become like the One who is identified with Ultimate Reality. Daists try to become identified with Consciousness Itself, just as Adi Da is identified with Consciousness Itself. Baha'is try to manifest perfectly in themselves all of the names and attributes of God, just as Baha'u'llah manifests perfectly in himself all of the names and attributes of God. Christians try to live a life in relation to God and so become children of God like the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In all three religions, the One identified with Ultimate Reality has a unique divine status, but the devotees are still trying to attain the state of this One, even though they can never surpass it. Attaining the ultimate end of the devotee, believer, or follower is liberation, spiritual perfection, or salvation.

In Adidam, Baha'i, and Christianity the opposite of seeing and acknowledging the One who is identified with Ultimate Reality, is not seeing (i.e., spiritual blindness) and not acknowledging (i.e., rejecting and denying) the great One's divine state.

Those who deny the God-Realizer, the Manifestation of God, or the Son of God will, of course, not take up the discipline that leads to liberation, the law that leads to

spiritual perfection, or the way of life that leads to salvation. The subsequent destiny for those who make this choice is bondage to worldliness, the hell of self, or damnation.

Adi Da claims that his religion is the “only complete way to realize the unbroken light of real God,” and that Adidam is the “true world-religion.”⁶⁰ Baha’u’llah says that He reveals the universal religion of God for this age, and Baha’is claim that Baha’i is the “emerging global religion.”⁶¹ Christ says that he is the way and the truth, and that there is no other way to the Father except through him (JN 14:6), and Christians have long been convinced that God’s salvation through Christ is meant for all human beings, or all human beings who accept Christ.

Nonetheless, in the world view of Daists there are not only worldlings and Daists; there are also those involved in authentic religious practices that lead to lesser realizations of God.⁶² In the world view of Baha’is there are not only believers and deniers; there are also those who adhere to the teachings of previous Manifestations of God.⁶³ In the world view of many Christians there are not just the saved and the damned; there are also religions that contain partial truth, and perhaps even partial truth that is necessary to fully understand Christian truth.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Adi Da’s claim to be the fulfillment of all religions intensified towards the end of the century, and this can be seen in the titles of many of Adi Da’s books that were updated and rereleased at this time. Following are a few examples; see Da, *The Only Complete Way to Realize the Unbroken Light of Real God: An Introductory Overview of the "Radical;" Divine Way of the True World-Religion of Adidam*; Da, *The All-Completing and Final Divine Revelation to Mankind: A Summary Description of the Supreme Yoga of the Seventh Stage of Life in the Divine Way of Adidam*; Da, *The Truly Human New World-Culture of Unbroken Real-God-Man: The Eastern Versus the Western Cultures of Mankind, and the Unique New Non-Dual Culture of the True World-Religion of Adidam*.

⁶¹ See Baha’u’llah, Most Holy Book, 1; Hatcher and Martin, *The Baha’i Faith*.

⁶² *The Basket of Tolerance* is a large compendium of “incomplete paths” to God-Realization.

⁶³ Baha’is consider the following to be authentic *existing* religions: Babism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabeans (Effendi in Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, 414).

⁶⁴ If this is not clear, please review Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6.

But, in the end, Daists believe that one's ultimate spiritual destiny is realized as a Daist; Baha'is believe that one's highest spiritual potential is realized as a Baha'i; and, Christians believe that universal salvation is dependent on Christ. Consequently, all three religions are missionary religions, with universal aspirations.

Given these conditions it would seem impossible for a Daist, a Baha'i, or a Christian to be a genuine pluralist. From their perspectives the non-religious are worldlings, deniers of God, or pagans – and, the truly religious are *less* truly religious.

Still, we can *imagine* what it would be like for Daists, Baha'is, and Christians to be theologically pluralistic and the implications of this.

First, all three religions would have to admit that the three elements of their tripartite metaphysics are equal; second, they would all have to admit that it is possible to identify with each of the three different aspects of Ultimate Reality, which in practical terms would mean recognizing religious others grounded in different aspects of ultimate reality.

In the Daist case, this would involve seeing Consciousness Itself, Universal Spirit Energy, and the Divine Form as equal. And, it would involve seeing and acknowledging other religions identified with the two other (equal) aspects of Ultimate Reality (that it is not identified with). In other words, it would require Daists to not only see and recognize Adi Da's divine state but also the divine state of the divine Others identified with Universal Spirit Energy, and Divine Form. For example, it might require that Daists recognize Baha'u'llah and Christ as divine Others, who are as equally authentic as their divine One (Adi Da).

In the Baha'i case this would involve seeing the unknowable Essence of God, the Manifestation of God, and Universal Matter as equal. And in practical terms, it might

involve seeing Adi Da as identified with the Essence of God, and Christ as identified with Universal Matter – and, consequently, as different but equally authentic divine Others.

In the Christian case this would involve seeing the three persons of the Trinity as equal –something that Christians already do – but, then, also identifying the other two Persons of the Trinity with actual religious Beings equal to Christ. In practical terms, this might involve identifying Adi Da and Baha'u'llah with the other Persons of the Trinity. (Or, perhaps, it would involve recognizing the Buddha and Muhammad as the other Persons of the Trinity.) As discussed above, Christianity presents a difficult case because Christ is usually identified with the Logos or the creative power that brings being out of nothingness. Spencer-Brown's solution to this problem is to identify the Holy Spirit with Void or the Godhead within God, the Father with the realm of omniscience wherein the potentialities of all worlds are enfolded (i.e., the Logos), and the Son with the first appearance or First Existence that is “cleft into and projected out of” the Void. This conforms better to my understanding, of Ultimate Reality as Void, Creativity, and Form, and if Christians adopted this view they could more easily see Christ as Divine Form – and Others as Divine Void and Divine Creativity. In any case, the theology of religions I am suggesting here would require, of Christians, this sort of religious recognition of other divine Beings.

Such recognition, however, would not involve being multi-religious in the sense that one would recognise three divine Beings and follow the three different ways prescribed by them. A distinction would have to be made between (at least) two different types of divine recognition; between subjective recognition and objective recognition. Subjective recognition is made by subjectively identifying oneself with the divine state of

One identified with Ultimate Reality – and demands that one become more and more like this One by doing the practice, obeying the laws, or living the life that they prescribe. Objective recognition is made by objectively knowing the divine state of the (two) divine Others who are identified with the aspects of Ultimate Reality that one is not trying to identify with – and demands that one honour, respect, and let be those religious others trying to attain the liberation, spiritual perfection, or salvation offered by these divine Others.

Thus, a pluralistic theology of this kind would entail, on one hand, seeing and recognizing, in the sense of subjectively identifying with and trying to become more like, a chosen divine One; and, on the other hand, seeing and recognizing, in the sense of objectively knowing, two divine Others. In the latter case, one would not try to become like these Others, but one would necessarily acknowledge and honour them as divine. Moreover, those actively engaged in subjectively identifying with the ultimate realities of these divine Others would be recognized as participating in authentic religious paths.

Obviously, such an imagined pluralistic theology would impact missionary work in Adidam, Baha'i, and Christianity. Each religion would have to modify its sense of universal mission. Each religion could continue to bring its offer of liberation/spiritual perfection/salvation to all persons because all persons would be capable of accepting them. In other words, all persons could attain liberation in Adidam, all persons could attain spiritual perfection in Baha'i, and all persons could attain salvation in Christianity. Moreover, each religion would have an obligation to bring its offer to all persons because all persons would have an obligation to objectively know the (two) divine Others, that

they choose not to identify with – and to honour and respect, as equal, those who choose a different path.

In such a pluralistic situation, religious persons would not insist that others become like them. An offer to become a part of one's religion would be made, but those choosing another religious path would be honoured in their choice and peacefully left to follow this path. Simultaneously, those on each path would learn objectively, or from the outside, about the aspects of God subjectively identified within the (two) other authentic religions – and would confess to the authenticity, or divinity, of the divine Others who have founded these other religions. In short, one would try to subjectively become one aspect of Ultimate Reality by following one's own religion while simultaneously learning objectively about the two other aspects of Ultimate Reality as shown in (the) other (two) ultimate forms of religion.

A pluralistic theology – or really a tripartite theology – of this sort could only be generated by actually identifying with one aspect of Ultimate Reality, and objectively recognizing that two Others are identified with two different aspects of Ultimate Reality. By recognizing one aspect of Ultimate Reality subjectively and two aspects of Ultimate Reality objectively, a religious person could come to the conclusion that Ultimate Reality is tripartite and that there are three equally valid religious options.

Thus, it is possible to envision religious pluralism theologically or religiously. We will now summarize the main elements of my pluralistic arguments as compared with the metaphysical pluralisms of Cobb and Kaplan.

The Three Complementary Arguments Compared with Cobb's Pluralism and Kaplan's Pluralism

Cobb, Kaplan, and, I all try to articulate a pluralism that is not relativistic; we each try to make the seemingly impossible claim that there are multiple ultimately true religions. Moreover, we all employ a pluralistic metaphysics as a means to this end. There are, however, differences in the three approaches. We each work with a different theory of religions that determines how pluralistic we actually are. We each have different aims for our arguments. We each account for different pluralistic situations. And, we each construct different metaphysical structures using different methods.

Different Theories of Religion and Different Commitments to Pluralism. Cobb's understanding of true religion is epistemological, and Kaplan's understanding of true religion is ontological. My understanding of true religion – or the understanding I employ in the imagined theology of religions – is both epistemological and “ontological.”

For Cobb, true religion is knowledge about God, and Cobb assumes that knowledge is universal, in the sense that everyone can know everything that can be known. This epistemological understanding means that Cobb is not a pluralist in the end – his ideal is complete and unitary knowledge of God that is shared by everyone.

For Kaplan, true religion is an ontological state, a state of being identified with a different aspect of Ultimate Reality. Kaplan assumes that the differing ontological grounds of different soteriologies (i.e., religions) leads to fixed and hard religious differences that cannot be overcome at this level; one cannot have the same ultimate religious experience as another. The only option in this situation is to try to conceptually

or philosophically bridge the different truths realized from the different and unbridgeable ontological states.

In the pluralistic theology that I envision, I employ a dualistic understanding of true religion, and this might be described as a dualistic epistemology or a combined epistemology/ontology. True religion is both recognition of Ultimate Reality as subjectively realized in oneself, and recognition of Ultimate Reality as objectively shown by others. I employ hard lines the way Kaplan does insofar as I say that one cannot subjectively identify with more than one aspect of Ultimate Reality at one time. But I soften these lines, as does Cobb, by saying that one can objectively know about the other (two) aspects of Ultimate Reality by objectively knowing the other religions. But the lines are not blurred completely as they are for Cobb, since different religious subjectivities cannot be unified. My final theological vision remains pluralistic.

Different Objectives. Cobb's main objective is to construct a truer and more complete theology/religion. Thus, he needs a metaphysical structure that can accommodate maximum truth. Kaplan wants to find a way to overcome problems created by religious exclusivity and inclusivity (religious inspired violence) – and, he believes that these problems can only be resolved by acknowledging multiple truths, since religious diversity is a permanent condition. My theology of religions (and complementary philosophy of religions and theory of religions) looks for a way to authenticate one's own religious experience while simultaneously authenticating the religiosity of others – and to have the favour returned.

Different Pluralistic Contexts. Cobb, Kaplan and I try to authenticate different pluralistic situations. Cobb is interested in authenticating acosmic, theistic, and cosmic religions. Kaplan is interested in authenticating monistic non-dualism, process non-dualism, and theism. I aim to reconcile non-dualism, the religion of divine unity, and trinitarianism (or the religion of divine relationship).

In practical terms, Cobb is concerned with reconciling the truths of Buddhism and Christianity (while recognizing the need to include Native American religions in the mix). Kaplan is concerned with reconciling the ontological states of Advaitins, Yogacara Buddhists, and Christian mystics. I am, most practically, concerned with reconciling Adidam, the Baha'i Faith, and a Tillichian version of Christianity.

Different Metaphysical Structures Built Using Different Methodologies. Each of our metaphysical structures is built specifically to account for different pluralistic contexts and are, therefore, different. Cobb employs a Whiteheadian metaphysics consisting of creativity, God, and, cosmos; these different aspects of Ultimate Reality correspond respectively with the acosmic, theistic, and cosmic types of religion. Kaplan employs a holographic-like metaphysical structure that employs David Bohm's metaphysical concepts of the implicate and explicate domains. The implicate domain shows the ontological possibilities of monistic non-dualism in process non-dualism, and the implicate domain(s) show(s) the ontological possibility of theism.

I build three complementary pluralistic metaphysical structures. The first is constructed by studying and generalizing the tripartite theologies of Adidam, Baha'i and Christianity. The second is constructed by projecting George Spencer-Brown's

mathematical insights about the emergence of physical existence, onto a concept of Ultimate Reality. The third pluralistic metaphysical structure is constructed by imagining that it is possible to subjectively identify with one aspect of Ultimate Reality and objectively recognize, or know, two other aspects of Ultimate Reality – and, thus, (directly) see Ultimate Reality as tripartite.

Cobb's metaphysics is a naturalistic or philosophical theology and claims to refer to Ultimate Reality. Kaplan's metaphysics is a philosophy of religion, or a metaphysical model that shows Ultimate Reality without direct reference to actual metaphysical reality. My three metaphysical structures are all different: The scientific tripartite metaphysical, or theory of religions, is an analytical generalization based on actual theological claims about the structure of ultimate reality; it is not based on any direct knowledge of Ultimate Reality itself. The mathematical-metaphysics, or philosophy of religions, claims knowledge about Ultimate Reality by virtue of mathematical knowledge about the structure of physical existence (based on the assumption that Ultimate Reality is an archetype of physical existence). The theological tripartite metaphysics, or theology of religions, is based on a real or imagined claim that one can directly recognize Ultimate Reality as tripartite by recognizing one aspect subjectively and the other two aspects objectively.

5. Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I will highlight the main features of my three pluralistic arguments as a way of highlighting the main feature of metaphysical pluralism more generally.

The Argument of Religious Pluralism

Each of my three arguments tries to show that it is possible to hold the view that three very different types of religion are equally true. The theory argues this indirectly by saying that the different religions must be equally true because they are related to different aspects of Ultimate Reality. (This is basically Cobb's argument.) The philosophy argues this analogously by showing how it is possible to think about different truth claims, about the same thing, as equally true – and, then, saying that we can do likewise for different religious truth-claims about Ultimate Reality. (This is basically Kaplan's argument.) This argument is particularly significant in that it succeeds in overcoming the logical quagmire created by Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction. The theological argument says that it is possible to actually recognise that there are three aspects of Ultimate Reality because a person can subjectively recognize one of these in their own religion (or religious being), and can objectively recognize the other two in two other religions. Neither Cobb nor Kaplan propose or envision a pluralistic theology of this kind.

Saying that there are different types of religion that are equally true could also be expressed in the following terms: The ultimate form of religion is plural or multiform. This is a claim made by humanistic and metaphysical pluralists alike, so we cannot say that it is a unique characteristic of metaphysical pluralism. What is unique to pluralistic metaphysics is the means of validating this claim; namely, a pluralistic metaphysics coupled with a concept of divine religion. Although each of my pluralistic arguments is made in a different mode, each is also dependent on a pluralistic metaphysics. In all of

the arguments, the different religions are equal because they participate in the same pluralistic Ultimate Reality.

Each of my arguments also assumes strong identity between religion and Ultimate Reality or the concept of divine religion. In each argument, religion is understood as identification with one of the three aspects of Ultimate Reality; thus, religion is diverse because it shows the diversity of Ultimate Reality. We see this same type of argument in Kaplan's model, and in Cobb's pluralism. In Kaplan's model, religion is experience of one (of three possible) dimensions of Ultimate Reality – and, this ontological understanding of religion means the following: 1) there is religious diversity (because Ultimate Reality is diverse); 2) religious diversity is permanent because Ultimate Reality is (obviously) ultimate. Cobb, of course, also assumes strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion (otherwise the diversity of Ultimate Reality would have no bearing on the diversity of religion) even though his position is complicated (and his pluralism is compromised) by his views that religion is unitary, albeit never complete, knowledge of Ultimate Reality. Nonetheless, I maintain that strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion is also a main characteristic of metaphysical pluralism; indeed, it is a necessary premise of the argument of metaphysical pluralism.

The combination of a pluralistic metaphysics and strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion, ensures that religious plurality is deep, enduring, and permanent.

Further Characteristics of Metaphysical Pluralism

Having discussed the argument of metaphysical religious pluralism I will now discuss two other identifying characteristics of metaphysical pluralistic theories: 1) that they are “non-distorting” conceptual frameworks; 2) that they encourage positive inter-religious relationships.

In saying that metaphysical pluralistic theories are non-distorting conceptual frameworks, I mean that they do not require religions to define themselves or their ultimate ends in terms that do violence to what they are, or what their actual ends are (the way that humanistic pluralistic theories seem to). For example, a Baha’i could continue to believe that only God is God, that Baha’u’llah is a Manifestation of God bearing the most potent Revelation in human history, and that the goal of life is to seek moral perfection and become God-like – while also holding the view that this is *their* perspective within Ultimate Reality and that non-dualists and trinitarians hold different but equally valid views from their perspectives within Ultimate Reality. This does not require an abandonment of one’s own position, just an acknowledgement of the positions of others within a wider framework. Kaplan makes a similar claim when he says that the only thing he requires religions to give up is their view that other religions are wrong; he calls on religions to embrace *more* truth. Cobb, likewise, tries to see the truth of other religions, as they are, with his notion of “complementary pluralism.”⁶⁵

The claim that metaphysical pluralistic theories encourage positive inter-faith relationships might be taken as ironic by humanistic pluralists (such as Knitter) and neo-inclusivists (such as Heim) who foresee the danger of radical isolation in this approach. David Griffin tries to quell this fear with the notion that deep or complementary pluralists

⁶⁵ In the Conclusion, I will raise questions about the “non-distorting” nature of metaphysical pluralistic theories.

would certainly need to dialogue with religious others in order to gain a more complete picture of Ultimate Reality, and, of course, Cobb makes things even more comfortable, by supposing that these pictures would be visible to everyone.⁶⁶ Kaplan, doesn't address this issue explicitly, but necessarily maintains the possibility of acknowledging the truth of others, while dwelling in the separate state of one's own religious being. And, following, is an account of how things might appear in a religious universe where my theology of religions is in play:

In this scenario there will be mutual recognition among the monotheist, non-dualistic, and trinitarian religions – and this will be more than peaceful isolation. This will be the case because belonging to a “home religion” (by virtue of being subjectively identified with one aspect of ultimate reality) would not preclude one from obtaining *objective knowledge* about Ultimate Reality from *religious others* (subjectively identified with one of the other aspects of Ultimate Reality). Indeed, this will be a prerequisite for maximizing one's experience and understanding of Ultimate Reality. This theology will also allow one the possibility of covering all of the religious “bases” (by identifying with different aspects of Ultimate Reality at different times); however, it maintains that it is impossible to be identified with all three aspects of Ultimate Reality *at the same time*, making a lived super-religious state impossible.

In all accounts, the metaphysical pluralists are saying that it is necessary to maintain the authenticity of your own religion – but also to recognize different religious truth in others. The call is not for isolation, or conversion – but, for recognition of and relationship with the other *as other*.

⁶⁶ And, again, this compromised his pluralism.

Conclusion

I will now close with some arguments for the comparative usefulness of the fourfold typology I have proposed, and some reflections on the possible future of the idea of religious pluralism.

1. Defence of the Fourfold Typology

The conceptual distinctions I have made in this dissertation allowed me to produce a fourfold typology or taxonomy of theories of religious diversity; this was then applied to several cases of late twentieth century religious diversity theorizing. I believe this typology is useful for accurately classifying these theoretical efforts, and so am necessarily critical of other typologies and efforts to distinguish between theories of religious diversity.

In the course of this work, I have hinted at, and sporadically expressed, my dissatisfaction with these differing typologies and differing conceptual distinctions used to sort out theories of religious diversity. But, now, I will proceed with a more systemic critique of these other classifying options, in order to indirectly defend my own distinctions.

In *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, Ernst Troeltsch made a distinction that I contend is still relevant to this discussion about classifying theories of religious diversity. This distinction is between religion understood as a (particular) form and religion understood as a philosophical idea (or an “essence”). I think this distinction is still useful for distinguishing between religious “exclusivism” and religious “inclusivism,”

particularly if we say that inclusivists understand the ultimate form of religion as an idea of religion in the shape of a religious essence or religious end.

This new “inclusivist” way of thinking about religions, that Troeltsch largely identifies with Hegel and Schleiermacher, introduces a new element into thinking or theorizing about religious diversity; namely, the element of relative versus absolute religion. Troeltsch rightly noted that before this new way of seeing religion, the idea of “absolute religion” had no real meaning, since this idea only makes sense in contrast to “relative religion” – and relative and absolute cannot be distinguished unless there is an ultimate religious ideal or an idea of the ultimate form of religion (i.e., the essence of religion) to judge these against. Prior to this abstraction, or idealization, of religion there was no way of seeing many relatively true religions opposed to one absolutely true religion; there was religion and non-religion. In this latter case, true religion is identified with a particular form of religion, and consequently whatever is different from this form is false “religion.” This is religious exclusivism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Troeltsch was of the view that neither the supernatural apologetic (exclusivism), nor the evolutionary apologetic (inclusivism) was an appropriate way of classifying Christianity in relation to other religions. By the end of the twentieth century, Troeltsch’s view was evidently shared by most other religious diversity theorists in the Christian West, as evidenced by the fact that late twentieth century theorizing about religious diversity is characterized by an attempt to move past religious exclusivism and traditional forms of religious inclusivism.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ As far as I can tell, Karl Barth was the last high-profile Christian theologian to embrace exclusivism, and Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich were the last high profile Christian theologians to embrace traditional inclusivism.

This present work adopts Troeltsch's distinction between religion understood as form and religion understood as idea (essence or end) as the main dividing line between exclusivism and inclusivism, but then moves on to make further distinctions. The first, and most significant, distinction it makes is between religious inclusivism and religious pluralism. The starting point of this distinction is the assumption that both inclusivists and pluralists reject the exclusivist understanding of religion as a particular form of religion, and embrace the notion that religion is rightly understood as an idea – for inclusivists and metaphysical pluralists this idea of religion is a religious end or essence, and for humanistic pluralists it is a religious universal. Thus, when inclusivists and pluralists speak of an “ultimate form” of religion, or of “true religion” they are referring to an idea about religion, as such, and not any particular religion; more specifically, they are referring to a religious essence, a religious end, or a religious universal. And, it maintains that both inclusivists and pluralists, whether explicitly or implicitly, always do affirm the idea that there is an ultimate form of religion or true religion.

But, from this common ground of true religion, inclusivists and pluralists make different claims about its nature; *inclusivists claim that the ultimate form of religion is uniform (has one form) and pluralists claim that it is pluriform (has multiple forms).*⁶⁸ This distinction seems simple enough but, as far as I can tell, has never been used to distinguish inclusivism from pluralism in typologies or taxonomies of theories of religious diversity.

The second major distinction this work makes pertains to religious pluralism, and similarly starts from a common ground. In this case, the common ground is the claim of

⁶⁸ Again, when I speak of the ultimate “form” of religion in this context, the ultimate form is an idea of religion and not an exclusive existential form.

all pluralists that the ultimate form of religion is multiform or plural. And, here, the distinction made is based on the *argument* that different types of pluralists use in order to come to the conclusion that the ultimate form of religion is multiform and *not* uniform. Humanistic religious pluralists come to this conclusion by denying the possibility of strong identity between Ultimate Reality (presumed to be unitary) and religion – and, then, positing a religious universal, or ideal form of religion that is inherently multiform. Humanistic pluralists employ a humanistic concept of religion (i.e., a concept of religion conceptualized as humanly “constructed”) to avoid the logical conclusion that religion would be one if there was strong identity between religion and (the one) God; and, it employs a religious universal to conceptualize an ultimate form of religion that is inherently multiform.

Metaphysical pluralists are likewise concerned with the possibility that religion would necessarily be one if Ultimate Reality is one and there is strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion. The solution of metaphysical pluralism to this problem, however, is not a humanistic concept of religion, but a pluralistic metaphysics. In this case, strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion (i.e., a “revelatory” concept of religion or a concept of religion as divine) is upheld, but this is coupled with a divine metaphysics to lead to the conclusion that religion, like Ultimate Reality, is pluralistic or multiform.

For metaphysical pluralism, the conclusion that religion is multiform is a one stage argument: Ultimate Reality is multiform; religion is, or reflects, Ultimate Reality; therefore, religion is multiform. For humanistic pluralism, the conclusion that religion is multiform is a two stage argument. In the first stage, it is not affirmed that (the ultimate

form of) religion is multiform, but it is denied that (the ultimate form of) religion is uniform: Ultimate Reality is one; religion is not identical to Ultimate Reality; therefore, religion is not (like Ultimate Reality) one. In the second stage, it is claimed that, despite the fact there is no one and only divinely revealed religion, there is a religious universal which (only) has reality in its multiple expressions; in other words, the ultimate or universal form of religion is multiform.

Thus, humanistic religious pluralism combines the assumption that Ultimate Reality is one with a humanistic concept of God, in order to conclude that religion is not one and only; and then employs the idea of a religious universal to come to the conclusion that the ultimate or universal form of religion is multiform. On the other hand, metaphysical religious pluralism assumes a concept of religion as divinely revealed (or, minimally, a concept of religion wherein Ultimate Reality is reflected in religion); and, then employs a pluralistic metaphysics to draw the conclusion that the ultimate form of religion is necessarily multiform because Ultimate Reality is multiform.

Putting this all together, there are four different theories of religious diversity: *Exclusivism*: true religion is embodied in a single existential form; all other forms of “religion” are false. *Inclusivism*: there are many relatively true religions and possibly one absolutely true religion, but the ultimate form of religion (as essence or end) is singular or uniform. *Humanistic religious pluralism*: The ultimate form of religion (as a universal) is multiform because no religion is identical to Ultimate Reality, and because the religious universal is real only insofar as it is instantiated in particular forms of religion.

Metaphysical religious pluralism: the ultimate form of religion (as essence or end) is

multiform because religion is a manifestation or reflection of Ultimate Reality, and Ultimate Reality is multiform.

The work of the late twentieth century religious diversity theorists examined in this dissertation have been classified using the above fourfold typology. Now, we will take a critical look at how different typologies, or different concepts for distinguishing different theories of religious diversity, would handle this same context. This critique will focus on the ideas of neo-inclusivists (collectively); Perry Schmidt-Leukel's reworked version of Race's threefold typology in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*; David Ray Griffin's distinction between identist and differential pluralism in *Deep Religious Pluralism*; and, Paul Knitter's fourfold typology in *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.

Neo-Inclusivism: Stopping the Conversation.

Mark Heim, Gavin D'Costa, and (to a lesser extent) Paul Griffiths have argued that pluralists are really no different from other religious diversity theorists. They reject Hick's notion that pluralists theorize from the high ground of meta-theory, which allows them to assert the plurality of religion without getting involved in the particular religions themselves. For D'Costa, all religious diversity theorists are in the same boat; they are all exclusivists. Likewise for Heim; all theorists are inclusivists.

Interestingly, Paul Knitter has adopted this notion that all religious diversity theorists are working on the same plane and, so, faced with the same limitations:

So we're always *including* the other in what we hold to be true and valuable, in what we already are. We don't just look at others from where we stand; we also understand them and evaluate them from where we stand. We may not like that,

but there's really nothing we can do about it. Not to include others in where we stand would require us to somehow stand in some neutral place that would not so "prejudice" us. But in this case, "neutral" would mean "culture-less," or "nonhistorical," or religion-less. Really, it would mean "beyond this world." It would mean finding that often-mentioned Archimedian standing place, in space, outside of any limiting or biasing cultural viewpoint. Unless you're an angel, such a standing spot just doesn't exist.⁶⁹

If the above passage is an accurate summation of the point that the neo-inclusivist critics of religious pluralism are trying to make, in saying that all diversity theorists are exclusivists or inclusivists, then I am in agreement with them; even though I would express things differently. I would say that every religious diversity theorist imaginatively constructs a religious universe, or a world-view of religions. John Hick does this just as much as Mark Heim does, and as much as I do. But it also seems to me that neo-inclusivists use this insight inappropriately; as a way of dismissing the constructive theoretical work of pluralists and validating their own constructive efforts. They seem to reason that, if pluralists are really just as bad as they are, then they are justified in criticizing the "lame," "uninteresting," "un-Christian" and "not really pluralistic" theories of the pluralists – and in producing better, more Christian, and even more pluralistic theories of religious diversity.

But what gets lost in this rhetoric is any careful analysis of how pluralistic theories differ from non-pluralistic theories, let alone how different pluralistic theories differ from one another. In other words, neo-inclusivists use the insight that pluralists are also constructing world views, or religious universes, to justify their own constructive

⁶⁹ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 217.

efforts but not to look at how their own religious universes are different from others. In this respect, they are conversation stoppers.

It seems that neo-inclusivists, primarily, use the insight that all theorists construct world-views to say something like “you’re doing the same thing as I am – only I’m doing it much better.” From my perspective, this insight is better used as a starting point for further inquiry into the sorts of spiritual universes that are being envisioned, and how these differ from one another; indeed, this dissertation is a product of such a disposition and such inquiry. Thus, I am sympathetic to this critical insight, of the neo-inclusivists, as a starting point for classifying theories of religious diversity but not as the bases of an all-embracing – and consequently vacuous – class called “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” or whatever else that effectively stops the taxonomic conversation.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel: Missing the Unity in Religious Pluralism

The most obvious criticism that I could make of Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s threefold typology is that it is missing a type; namely, metaphysical pluralism. I am, of course, critical of Schmidt-Leukel on this point but I see this problem rooted in a more foundational flaw within his typology; specifically, that it doesn’t make an adequate (or complete) distinction between inclusivism and pluralism.

Schmidt-Leukel’s line of distinction between inclusivism and pluralism is that while both claim that there are multiple religions, inclusivism says that there is a “singular maximus” (a singular ultimate form of religion) and pluralism says that there is no singular maximus. My line of distinction is, again, that inclusivism says the ultimate

form of religion is uniform, and pluralism says the ultimate form of religion is multiform or plural.

The obvious question to ask here is whether or not Schmidt-Leukel's singular maximus, means the same things as my "ultimate form of religion." There are two different ways of reading this situation: 1) we mean different things by our terms "singular maximus" and "ultimate form of religion"; 2) Schmidt-Leukel's "singular maximus" means the same thing as my "ultimate form of religion."⁷⁰ I will now discuss both of these scenarios because, I believe, both show taxonomic limitations that stem from Schmidt-Leukel's way of distinguishing between inclusivism and pluralism.

If we mean different things by these terms then this is what I think we mean: By singular maximus, Schmidt-Leukel means a uniform religious end or essence that is (necessarily) best realized in one religion; and, by ultimate form of religion, I mean a unitary religious essence, religious end, or religious universal, which is *either* uniform *or* multiform.

According to these definitions, I agree with Schmidt-Leukel that religious inclusivism affirms the idea of a singular maximus and pluralism rejects it. Thus, with respect to pluralism, I agree that no pluralists say that there is a uniform religious end or essence that is best realized in one religion. Nonetheless, I suggest that this is not a very useful distinction for identifying or classifying theories of religious pluralism, since other positions – relativism, for example – also say that there is no uniform religious end or essence that is best realized in one religion. Not to mention the fact that this *negative*

⁷⁰ I will, of course, not discuss the possibility that my "ultimate form of religion" means the same thing as Schmidt-Leukel's "singular maximus" – because it doesn't.

definition of pluralism eliminates the context for further differentiating the concept of religious pluralism.

Consequently, I think that the idea of a “singular maximus” should give way to the broader concept of the “ultimate form of religion” which captures both the idea of a “singular maximus” (a uniform essence, end, or universal), and a “plural maximus” (a multiform essence, end, or universal). The idea of the ultimate form of religion – understood as an ultimate unity in the form of an essence, end, or universal that is either uniform or multiform – provides a means for distinguishing between inclusivism and pluralism, and for further differentiating religious pluralism.

If, on the other hand, Schmidt-Leukel’s “singular maximus” means the same thing as what I mean by the “ultimate form of religion” then an even more serious taxonomic problem arises. In this case, Schmidt Leukel’s position would be that pluralists say there is no ultimate form of religion, or no ultimate religious unity in the form of an essence, end, or universal that is either uniform or multiform. In my view, all forms of pluralism clearly say that there is an ultimate religious unity (as essence, end, or universal) that is inherently multiform. And, accordingly, no pluralists – be they humanistic or metaphysical – would be classified as pluralists using Schmidt-Leukel’s distinction.

The first of these two scenarios is probably more accurate but the taxonomic problems that arise in both cases stem from the same root; namely, Schmidt-Leukel’s failure to identify the deeper common ground of pluralism and inclusivism, and to positively define pluralism.⁷¹ For Schmidt-Leukel, the common ground of pluralism and inclusivism is the affirmation of many religions. I contend that the common ground of

⁷¹ Schmidt-Leukel does give a positive definition for pluralism, but this is identical to the initial claim made by religious inclusivists.

pluralism and inclusivism is not this, but the whole idea of “the one and the many” that came into being when exclusivism gave way to inclusivism, or when *religion as form* gave way to *religion as idea*. Moreover, I content that it is “the one” of this polarity that serves as the locus of the difference between inclusivism and pluralism. Said differently, both inclusivists and pluralists affirm the reality of “the one,” and their differences arise with respect to the nature of “the one.” Inclusivists say it is uniform; pluralists say it is multiform. And, when pluralists say that “the one” is multiform they are introducing an idea of multiplicity that is entirely different from the idea of “the many” that arises as the opposite of “the one” in inclusivism.⁷²

Thus, if I were to limit myself to one criticism of Schmidt-Leukel’s typology it would be that he misses, or doesn’t acknowledge, “the one” or the religious unity that is the ground of every form of religious pluralism.

I will now conclude this part of the critique with one further point that is not related to taxonomy. I simply want to suggest that Schmidt-Leukel’s polemical attitude towards Christian inclusivists may also be grounded in his failure to see that every form of religious pluralism is grounded in a religious unity.

For Schmidt-Leukel, pluralism is clearly a better option than inclusivism; pluralism is about peaceful coexistence with other religions, while inclusivism is an obnoxious affirmation of the superiority of one particular religion. Consequently, Schmidt-Leukel is highly negative towards Mark Heim’s inclusivism, describing it as an inclusivism “of the less generous sort,” in which the non-Christian religions lead their inhabitants to “...a new, post-modernist kind of pre-modern limbo.”⁷³

⁷² I will discuss this further in my critique of Knitter’s fourfold typology below.

⁷³ Schmidt-Leukel. “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism,” 27.

I don't disagree with Schmidt-Leukel's classification of Heim as an inclusivist, but I am a little puzzled by the negative evaluation of Heim's theorizing. I am puzzled because Heim's theorizing is so highly conciliatory and in line with the aims of religious pluralists; particularly, the aim of recognizing truth in other religions. Thus, I can only attribute Schmidt-Leukel's "ungenerous" view of Heim to what, I believe, is Schmidt-Leukel's erroneous view of the differences between inclusivism and pluralism that misses the common ground shared by these two views.

David Ray Griffin: Obscuring the Unity in Metaphysical Pluralism and the Diversity in Humanistic Pluralism

For Griffin, religious pluralism, in the generic sense, involves a twofold affirmation – the first, negative affirmation, rejects absolutism or the idea that only one's own religion provides saving truths; the second, positive affirmation says that other religions do provide their adherents with "saving truths and values"⁷⁴

From this common ground, Griffin goes on to distinguish two different types of pluralism; identist and differential/deep. Identist pluralism says that all religions are oriented towards the same religious object (God, Ultimate Reality, etc), and promote the same end (the same type of salvation). In other words, all religions have an identical ontology and soteriology. Differential pluralism, in contrast, says that different religions promote different ends, or different salvations as a consequence of being related to different religious objects (different Ultimate Realities). Differential pluralism is *pluralistic* soteriologically and (possibly) ontologically.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Griffin, "Religious Pluralism," 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

Griffin, I think, is unwilling to say that all forms of differential pluralism affirm a pluralistic ontology because he wants to include Mark Heim – who he claims is soteriologically pluralistic (by virtue of saying that different religions have different ends) but ontologically identist (by virtue of affirming the Trinity). I think this is based on a misreading of Heim, whose is also, in the end, ontologically “identist” since he claims that the *ultimate* end is Christian salvation.

In any case, the dividing line between identist and differential or deep pluralism is clear – at least with respect to soteriology. Identist pluralists say that all religions are moving towards the same end or the same sort of salvation; differential pluralists say that different religions are moving towards different ends or different sorts of “salvation.” But, on the ontological point, Griffin’s position is, I believe, inconsistent. He says that identist pluralists claim that religions are oriented towards the same religious object (the same Ultimate Reality), and that differential pluralists claim that religions may be oriented towards different religious objects (different Ultimate Realities). I will move forward by assuming that differential pluralists make the stronger claim, that religions are soteriologically different by virtue of being oriented towards different Ultimate Realities.

The notion I want to challenge, here, is that identists say religions are related to the same Ultimate Reality, and differentialists say religions are related the different Ultimate Realities. I suggest that the ontological positions of identist pluralists (such as Hick) and differential pluralists (such as Griffin/Cobb) are better expressed as follows: identists say that all religions are related to the same Ultimate Reality and claim that this Reality is singular; differentialists say that all religions are related to the same Ultimate Reality, and claim that this Ultimate Reality is plural. Thus, it is not the case that identists

have the same ontology and differentialists have different ontologies; it is that identists have (the same) unitary ontology/metaphysics and differentialists have (the same) pluralistic ontology/metaphysics.

Consequently, I don't find Griffin's twin criterion of distinguishing identist and differential pluralism, on the basis of one claiming that all religions point to the same religious object and the other claiming that different religions point to different religious objects, at all useful. Moreover, I believe Griffin's way of framing the ontological claim of differential pluralism (i.e., that different religions point to different religious objects or different Ultimate Realities) obscures an important dimension of metaphysical pluralism; namely, that the starting point for differentialists is an Ultimate Reality. Allow me to discuss this briefly before critiquing Griffin's second twin criterion.

When Griffin/Cobb adopt Whitehead's tripartite metaphysic – composed of Creativity, God, and Cosmos – they are saying that Ultimate Reality altogether, in total, as a unit, is tripartite. In other words, unity is the basis of their pluralistic metaphysics. And, when it becomes clear that the basis of Griffin/Cobb's differential pluralism is not the seemingly innocuous claim that different religions are oriented to different religious objects, but is a full-blown and very specific metaphysics, some unsettling questions come to mind: Is Whitehead's tripartite metaphysics some sort of ultimate metaphysics and, perhaps, an ultimate religious perspective in itself? Is it not something that all other religions would have to submit themselves to? I don't know the extent to which Griffin has dealt with this issue, but we know that he does think that different religions *could* adopt Whitehead's metaphysical categories without undue distortion.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ I will take up this issue, more substantially when I discuss the likelihood of pluralism succeeding in the Christian West.

In any case, the point I wish to make is that Griffin's way of distinguishing between identist and differential pluralism tends to bury this issue. Thus, I think that it is better to say that both identists and differentialists employ the idea of a common Ultimate Reality; but identists maintain that this Ultimate Reality is strictly unitary, and differentialists maintain that it is plural. By using this distinction, the notion that differential pluralists make metaphysical claims that are of a different order than other religious diversity theorists will not arise. Now, we will turn to look at Griffin's twin soteriological criterion.

Griffin suggests that in some forms of differential pluralism (his own for example), a pluralistic ontology is the ground for a pluralistic soteriology. He does not, however, explicitly link an "identist" – or what I would rather call a "unitary" – ontology with an identist soteriology; nonetheless, I think he implies that there is a link.

I, again, claim that a pluralistic metaphysics is a necessary component of metaphysical pluralism, and that a unitary metaphysics is a necessary component of humanistic pluralism. But my reason for saying this is that these belong to the arguments of humanistic pluralism and metaphysical pluralism, which are both aimed at the conclusion that the ultimate or universal form of religion is multiform. In the case of metaphysical pluralism, a pluralistic metaphysics is combined with a concept of divine religion, to arrive at the positive conclusion that religion, like Ultimate Reality, is plural. In the case of humanistic pluralism, a unitary metaphysics is combined with a concept of human religion to arrive at the negative conclusion that no religion, is one and only, like God is one and only. But, then, in order to make the positive affirmation that there are

many true religions, humanistic pluralists posit a religious universal as the ultimate/universal form of religion, and in all cases this universal is inherently multiform.

Thus, I oppose the simplistic way in which Griffin conceptualizes the common “soteriology” in all forms of identist pluralism. First because the “identical thing” affirmed by identists (apart from their unitary metaphysics) is not necessarily soteriological. Consequently, I suggest it is better to understand the commonality in identist pluralism, with a broader concept such as the ultimate or universal form of religion, or true religion. Second, and more importantly, because the “identical thing” – or the ultimate form of religion – in all forms of identist pluralism this is not strictly unitary, it is a unity that is also inherently plural. This is the case with Smith’s concept of faith, Hick’s concept of salvation, and Knitter’s concept of eco-human well being. Each of these concepts is a religious universal that is only visible when it is instantiated in its many and different (but equally authentic) forms. By not recognizing this, Griffin misses the depth of diversity that is present on all forms of identist or humanistic-universalist religious pluralism.

As for Griffin’s criterion that differential pluralists claim that different religions have different ends I, of course, would rather express this in terms of differentialists claiming that the ultimate form of religion is multiform – as opposed to singular. This distinction allows us to distinguish between theories of religious diversity that appear to be very similar; for example, Heim’s neo-inclusivism and my metaphysical pluralism.

Knitter: Conflating the Relative Many and the Ultimate or Universal Many

As mentioned earlier, Paul Knitter's fourfold typology in *Introducing Theories of Religions* appears to be similar to the fourfold typology I have proposed in this dissertation. Knitter's replacement model, summarized in the phrase, "only one religion," is a new name for exclusivism; the fulfilment model, summarized as "the one fulfills the many" is a new name for inclusivism; the mutuality model, summarized as "many true religions called to dialogue" is a new name for pluralism. The acceptance model, summarized as "many true religions: so be it" is a new type. Similarly my fourfold typology consists of exclusivism, inclusivism, traditional pluralism (now called humanistic-universalistic pluralism) – and a new fourth type called metaphysical pluralism.

Continuing, the two typologies also produce similar results: Karl Barth's theology of religions is a form of the replacement model/ exclusivism; Karl Rahner and Gavin D'Costa typify the fulfilment model/inclusivism; Paul Knitter and John Hick are mutualists/humanistic-universalistic pluralists. Knitter and I, however, classify Mark Heim's theology of religions very differently; I classify Heim's theology as neo-inclusivist, and Knitter uses Heim's theology to exemplify the acceptance model. This suggests that what I call metaphysical pluralism and what Knitter calls the acceptance model are not the same thing.

The first thing to note, here, is that my category of metaphysical religious pluralism is based on the work of Kaplan, Griffin/Cobb, and my own earlier efforts to

articulate an authentic theory of religious pluralism.⁷⁷ None of this work was available to Knitter, when he wrote *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Consequently, we should expect metaphysical pluralism and the acceptance model to be very different types. I will now try to show how they are different, and argue that Knitter's typology involves a conceptual error that makes it difficult to accurately classify theories of religious pluralism.

In this part of the critique, I will continue with a theme that I began to discuss in relation to Schmidt-Leukel's threefold typology; namely, his inability to see the implicit unity in every form of religious pluralism. Knitter seems to notice this (to some extent) in the case of the mutuality model, wherein the religions are envisioned as working together for greater common understanding and well-being. But, in the case of the acceptance model, there is no hint of unity; the religions are simply different, and so be it.

It seems to me that Knitter, like Leukel-Schmidt, fails to see a higher (or secondary) level of abstraction that is present in pluralistic theories of religious diversity.⁷⁸ In *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Knitter sees the fulfilment model employing the concept, or logic, of the "one and many." I, likewise, associate this way of thinking with inclusivism. Moreover, following Troeltsch, I see this way of thinking – in terms of the one versus the many, the absolute religion versus relative religions, the consummate religion versus the preliminary religions, and so forth – stemming from the new way of thinking about religion that began in the eighteenth century, i.e., as an idea (essence or end) rather than a particular form.

⁷⁷ Cobb's pluralism was available to Knitter – indeed Knitter edited Cobb's *Transforming Christianity* – but, I suggest that Cobb's pluralism doesn't take shape as a coherent theory until it is summarized and conceptualized (as differential pluralism) in Griffin's *Deep Pluralism*.

⁷⁸ I don't think Knitter is at fault here, though, because this higher level of abstraction is most obvious in metaphysical pluralism.

The common base of Knitter's mutuality model and his acceptance model is the claim that there are many true religions. Knitter, however, does not distinguish this use of "many" from the many that are fulfilled in the one, in the fulfilment model. I think this is a conceptual error, and that these two concepts are completely different.

In my typology, I claim that inclusivism and pluralism, alike, employ the idea of the ultimate form of religion – conceived as essence, end or universal. Consequently, I say that all forms of pluralism employ the eighteenth century idea of the one ultimate form of religion, that allows for a distinction between the one absolutely true form of ultimate religion and the many relatively true forms of ultimate religion. But, from this starting point, pluralists try to conceptually manipulate the idea of the one, or the idea of the of ultimate form of religion. Or, more specifically, they try to *pluralize* the idea of the one ultimate form of religion. This manipulation of "the one" is very obvious in the case of metaphysical pluralism where we see talk of multiple ultimate religious perspectives, or multiple ultimate religious truths. It is less obvious in the case of humanistic-universalistic pluralism but, I maintain, still present. It is less obvious because humanistic pluralists are unwilling to pluralize ultimate religion by pluralizing Ultimate Reality and, therefore, need to disconnect religion from unitary Ultimate Reality. But, then, humanistic-universalistic pluralists recuperate the idea of the one true religion, or the one ultimate form or religion, by introducing the ideas of a religious universal. This religious universal is only visible in its various authentic expressions, and so this idea of a religious universal supports the idea that there are many universally true religions. But, in this case, the many universally true religions, are not the same as the many relatively true religions of religions inclusivism; they are "the one" reconstituted and pluralized. And,

of course, the many forms of the ultimate form of religion, in metaphysical pluralism, is not the same as the relative many either.

I suggest that if we fail to see this higher or secondary level of abstraction that is taking place in all forms of religious pluralism – i.e., this effort to *pluralize* “the one” or a particular idea of “true religion” – that we will not be able to properly identify theories of religious pluralism. We will be prone to classifying any theory that claims there are many religions as pluralist, and to thinking that pluralism amounts to saying that all religions are true.⁷⁹

2. The Future of the Idea of Religious Pluralism

The aim of this dissertation has been to make clear the meaning of religious pluralism and other theories of religious diversity, and not to make judgements about the relative values of these differing theories. But, now, I will close with some reflections related to value, by asking three questions about the possible future of religious pluralism: 1) does religious pluralism have a future in the Christian West?; 2) does religious pluralism have a future outside of the Christian West?; and, 3) is the idea of religious pluralism conceptually exhausted, or at an end? My reflections on these questions are not meant to

⁷⁹ To be fair, Knitter’s phrase “many true religions” implies that the mutuality model and the acceptance model are based on the pluralisation of the one true religion – and, consequently, that he is not making a conceptual mistake of conflating the relative many with the ultimate or universal many. Nonetheless, by not explicitly distinguishing between the relative many and the ultimate or universal many, Knitter leaves pluralism open to the sorts of misunderstandings I have mentioned here. I also suggested that Schmidt-Leukel does not notice the secondary abstraction wherein pluralist try to pluralize the one, since he sees pluralism as the claim that there is no singular maximus, and so the positive claim of pluralism is identical to the positive claim of inclusivism, i.e., that more than one religion (but not necessarily all religions) mediates salvific knowledge of ultimate reality. In this case, the distinction between the relative many and the ultimate or universal many is completely lost. As for why Knitter does not see Heim’s theology as a version of the fulfillment model I have only one suggestion: He misread Heim, and didn’t see that Heim does conceive Christian salvation as the ultimate (unitary albeit complex) form of religion; see my analysis of Heim in Chapter 5. And, perhaps, he did this because he didn’t have a more full-fledged version of metaphysical pluralism to contrast it with.

provide definitive answers but, rather, to initiate some conversations that now might be more fruitful in light of our present understanding of religious pluralism.

Does Religious Pluralism have a Future in the Christian West?

By asking if the idea of religious pluralism has a future in the Christian West, I am asking if it is likely that pluralism will become a popular, if not dominant, way of conceptualizing religious diversity amongst Christians and Westerners in the future.

I will begin by discussing, generally, two reasons why I think that pluralism may gain in popularity: 1) because it articulates an already perceived reality; and, 2) because it is consonant with the widely accepted value of religious tolerance.

“Pluralism” is Already Widely Recognized. The weight of historical evidence seems to suggest that there are many religions that function in similar ways and, so, in this respect can be regarded as equal. The concept of “world religions” gives voice to this perception, and since the early twentieth century this idea has become imbedded in popular and academic religious discourses.⁸⁰ In some respects, theories of religious pluralism may be thought of as an attempt to make bring the ubiquitous – yet fuzzy – idea of world religions into sharper focus; and, indeed, to convert it into a respectable theological idea. The degree to which pluralistic theologians have succeeded in this task is still historically undetermined; nonetheless, the idea of world religions seems to have created a widespread and enduring perception that there are, in reality, world religions, and I suspect that this will continue to be supportive of pluralistic theories of religious diversity.

⁸⁰ Again, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, especially Chapter 9. Also, consider the dramatic shift in the approach to studying religion in the second half of the twentieth century; see, for example, Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*.

The Intolerability of Religious Intolerance. The Holocaust and 911 stand as enduring testaments to the evil of religious intolerance, and religiously inspired and directed violence.⁸¹ Or, they have helped shape a wide-spread view that religiously inspired and directed violence is ethically wrong and needs to be eradicated from society. This view, as indicated, makes a causal connection between intolerant attitudes towards religious others and religious violence. For some (pluralistic theorists in particular), theories of religious exclusivism (and to a lesser extent theories of religious inclusivism) produce intolerant attitudes towards religious others and, therefore, are a cause of religious violence. And, consequently, a goal of religious pluralists is to construct (non-exclusivist and non-inclusivist) theories of religious diversity, which will foster more tolerant attitudes towards religious others and, thereby, contribute to more peaceful interfaith relations.

Whether or not any extant, or future, theory of religious pluralism will lead to more tolerant religious attitudes and, therefore, less religiously inspired and directed violence cannot yet be determined. What I think we can say, though, is that intolerance of religious tolerance has become something of a societal norm in the West and, therefore, theories of religious diversity that *aim* to produce tolerant attitudes towards religious others will flourish (more than those that don't).

⁸¹ It is seemingly difficult to make direct, historical, causal links between religious exclusivism and violence; for example it seems difficult to argue that Christian exclusivism contributed *directly* to the Holocaust. Nonetheless, it could be argued that Christian exclusivism contributed implicitly to the Holocaust by not supplying Christians with a resource to actively oppose the Holocaust, the way that theories of religious pluralism might have. Although, he does not employ the language of "religious exclusivism" Jacob Katz, shows how anti-Jewish religious (i.e., Christian) ideas gave way to more secular notions of anti-Semitism in the late 18th century, and how these climaxed in the Holocaust; see, Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction*. I find Katz's argument convincing. Of course, for some pluralists, e.g. Hick, Knitter and Griffith, the direct between an exclusivism and violence is clear and obvious.

That said, we will now discuss some of the barriers that extant theories of religious pluralism have faced, or are sure to face, as they try to become “normative” ways of conceptualizing religious diversity. I will begin by discussing two problems common to both humanistic and metaphysical pluralism, and will then discuss some problems specific to each type.

Common Problems for Religious Pluralism I: Religious Authority. One obvious barrier to the success of both types of religious pluralism is religious authority. What I mean here is that theories of religious pluralism are unlikely to succeed, in religious communities, if their claims contradict the claims of religious authorities. Religious communities have people, institutions, and books that are invested with the power to make authoritative statements of truth (within their communities). Thus, there are “authorities” within religious communities that have authoritative things to say about the sorts of things that pluralistic theorists make claims about. To cite some examples, that are important for our discussion, religious authorities make authoritative statements about the nature of God; about the station of their founder; about the nature of religion; and, about the relationship between their own religious community and other religious communities.⁸²

According to the requirement of my own *theology* of religions, the members of the Christian, Daist, and Baha’i communities are obliged to recognize each other’s respective founders. But, if we reflect on this possibility in light of statements made in the authoritative texts of each tradition, it becomes apparent that the views commended in this theology are not authorized in the sacred texts of these traditions.

⁸² Somewhat ironically, a general lack of religious authority might also stall the progress of religious pluralism. Thank you to Paul Allen of Concordia University’s Theology Department for this insight.

I claimed, for example, that Daists could subjectively recognize Adi Da as divine and consequently commit to his religious disciplines in order to become God-realized. And, moreover, that they could – and indeed should – simultaneously, objectively recognise Baha'u'llah and Christ as divine Others and, thereby, obtain objective knowledge about the two other aspects of Ultimate Reality (i.e., Universal Spirit Energy, and Divine Form in Daist terms) that Adi Da is not identified with. Also, as a consequence of these objective recognitions, they should honour and respect not only Baha'u'llah and Jesus Christ but also Baha'is and Christians. They should allow these others to follow their own path to ultimate religious truth, while 1) sharing with these others what they themselves subjectively know about Ultimate Reality and, 2) learning objectively from these others what they subjectively know about Ultimate Reality. I also constructed parallel scenarios wherein Baha'is are obliged to acknowledge the truth of Daists and Christians, and Christians are obliged to learn from Daists and Baha'is.

However, the authoritative texts of Daists, Baha'is, and Christians have different things to say that are not consonant with these requirements.

Adi Da does not say that Baha'u'llah is Universal Spirit Energy or that Christ is Divine Form. He does, however, say that he is Consciousness Itself, and, by extension, because there is only One Reality, that he is also Spirit Energy and Divine Form.⁸³ He has also said that Jesus Christ is a fifth stage God-Realizer, and that Baha'u'llah (and Muhammad) are not true God-Realizers.⁸⁴

⁸³ In the late 1980s, Adi Da began to encourage his devotees to meditate on his “bodily (human) Form,” his Spiritual (and Always Blessing) Presence,” and his “Very (and Inherently Perfect) State.” (Da, *The Love Ananda Gita*). This was a way for Adi Da to say that he is Consciousness itself (his State); Spirit Energy (his Presence), and Divine Form (his bodily Form).

⁸⁴ For Adi Da's representations of Jesus, see Da, *The Basket of Tolerance*. This evaluation of Baha'u'llah was communicated to me by the leadership of the Adidam community, in a private conversation.

Baha'u'llah does not say that Adi Da is the Unknowable Essence of God (obviously) or that Jesus Christ is Universal Matter. He does say that he is the Most Great Spirit of God that generates all matter and is the only means by which one can know the Unknowable Essence of God. He also says that all true religions are founded by a Manifestation of God, and that there will not be a further Manifestation of God for at least one thousand years from the start of his own dispensation (1844).⁸⁵ Thus, by revelatory definition Adi Da is a false prophet. Moreover, Baha'u'llah has said that he is the "Son returned in the glory of the Father" meaning that his own revelation succeeds Christ's revelation.⁸⁶

Christian scriptures, of course, do not address my particular claim but there are two biblical passages (Acts 4:12 and John 14:6) which strongly imply the impossibility of Christians recognizing "divine Others." Here, I could argue that these passages are only meaningful within the context of Christian salvation, but then I would be challenging interpretive authorities within the church; a different form of the same problem.

In any case, my general point is that pluralists are making claims in fields with established authorities and, indeed, they are sometimes making claims that contradict the claims of these authorities. I suggest that this will present an enduring problem for the success of pluralistic theories

Common Problems for Humanistic and Metaphysical Pluralism II: Just Another World View? Another problem common to both humanistic and metaphysical pluralism is the

⁸⁵ Baha'u'llah, *The Most Holy Book*, 32

⁸⁶ Effendi, *God Passes By*, 248

perception that they are merely attempts to replace one world view with another – usually an authentic religious one with a pseudo-religious philosophical one.

I will now discuss this complex issue in the context of my own version of metaphysical pluralism.

This version of metaphysical pluralism is grounded in a tripartite metaphysics. Within this metaphysics, the metaphysics of non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarianism are affirmed as true; or, as the three possible truths of tripartite Ultimate Reality. More specifically, they are the three truths of Ultimate Reality that are obtained through identification with one of the three aspects of Ultimate Reality.

As such, none of these truths, individually, is the truth of Ultimate Reality altogether; each is an ultimate truth, but only from one perspective within tripartite Ultimate Reality. Only the truths of non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarianism, *together*, constitute the whole truth of Ultimate Reality. Am I, then, proposing a “meta-religion” that will integrate multiple religious truths into one?

Not exactly. What I have envisioned is a *pluralistic* vision of ultimate religious truth. Again, here is how I did this:

The ultimate form of religion is realized ontologically and epistemologically by 1) subjectively identifying with one aspect of Reality in order to see or experience the truth of Ultimate Reality from this perspective; 2) objectively recognizing (i.e., recognizing from the outside) those identified with the other two aspects of Ultimate Reality, and objectively recognizing the (different) truths about Ultimate Reality that they reveal. The metaphysical conclusion drawn from this pluralistic experience and cognition of Ultimate

Reality is that Ultimate Reality is tripartite, which in this case would also lead one to the conclusion that religion is also tripartite, i.e., pluralistic.

But this conclusion can *only* be arrived at by virtue of subjectively identifying with one aspect of Ultimate Reality, and objectively recognizing the other two aspects of Ultimate Reality, as revealed in religious others. To be more specific, it is only possible to arrive at the conclusion that Ultimate Reality is tripartite from the subjective religious base of non-dualism, divine unity, or trinitarianism. Thus, the tripartite metaphysics is envisioned as inherent to non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarians, not foreign elements added to these.

There is a critical element in this vision that is directed at the religions of non-dualism, divine unity, and divine relationship. The criticism is that none of these “ultimate religions” have seen the whole truth of Ultimate Reality that is inherent to their own religious perspective and, indeed, is only *possible* from their own religious perspective. More specifically, they are not recognizing what the other two forms of ultimate religion reveal about Ultimate Reality. When they add this objective knowledge of Ultimate Reality to their own subjective knowledge of Ultimate Reality, then they will have attained complete knowledge of Ultimate Reality, or the truly ultimate form of religion. They will have realized what is inherent in their own perspective.

But, again, the ultimate form of religion is inherently pluralistic; there is not one form of the ultimate form of religion but three. And, moreover, to realize any one of these three ultimate religious perspectives would be to realize the tripartite/pluralistic nature of the ultimate form of religion.

So in answer to the question of whether or not this pluralistic theory/theology functions as an ultimate religious perspective I would say that, the way I have envisioned things, the realization of the (inherently) tripartite ultimate form of religion would necessarily result in a pluralistic theology of religions. From any one of the ultimate religious perspectives it would be realized that Ultimate Reality is tripartite, and this combined with the assumed view that religion reveals Ultimate Reality, would lead to the pluralistic conclusion that religion is ultimately tripartite or pluralistic. Thus, this pluralistic theology is not conceived as an ultimate form of religion, in itself, but it is the theology of religions that emerges when the ultimate form of religions, conceived in this particular way, is realized.

But do all theories, philosophies, and theologies of religions function in this way? I think that they do insofar as they are all conclusions about “true religion” or “the ultimate form of religion” based on claims or assumptions about the nature of Ultimate Reality and the nature of religion. These three together might be thought of as a “spiritual universe” or a “religious world-view.”

So, yes, I do see pluralistic theories as alternative religious world-views; and specifically, as religious world views that clash with the world-views of inclusivistic theories on the specific issue of whether the ultimate form of religion is singular or plural. At present, it seems to me, that inclusivism is the predominant world view within Christianity. Is this likely to change in favour of pluralism?

To answer this latter question, I suggest that it is necessary to look at *all* of the components of (the two types of) religious pluralism – and not just the conclusion of pluralism that what is ultimately religious is pluriform.

For example, for Christians to accept John Hick's religious pluralism they would have to accept the following components or claims: a unitary metaphysics; a humanistic concept of religion; that the universal form of religion is turning from self-centredness to Reality-centredness; that their religion is one particular, unique and authentic, instance of this universal form of religion; that some other religions are, equally authentic forms of the universal form of religion; that the universal form of religion is inherently multiform, or true religion is inherently pluralistic. If a Christian could accept all of this they would be a Christian pluralist. Moreover, if a Muslim or a Buddhist could accept all of this, they would respectively be Muslim and Buddhist pluralists.

The situation is the same with my metaphysical pluralism. In this case, it is necessary to accept the following claims: that Ultimate Reality is tripartite; that it is possible to identify with different aspects of Ultimate Reality; that identification with Ultimate Reality produces three different, but equally and ultimately valid, truths of Ultimate Reality – specifically, the truths of non-dualism, divine unity, and trinitarianism. Thus, if a Christian and a Baha'i were willing to make all of these claims a part of their theology they would respectively be a Christian metaphysical pluralist and a Baha'i metaphysical religious pluralist.

Therefore, even if there is acknowledgement, across the board, that all theories of religious diversity are visions of a conceptual spiritual universe – such that pluralists would stop claiming conceptual high-ground and inclusivist would stop saying that pluralist theories are inauthentic – the foundational problem persists: whose world view?

In light of this, I will now discuss some type-specific problems that humanistic-universalistic pluralists and metaphysical pluralists may face in trying to get Christian

theologians, Western philosophers, and Christians to adopt their pluralistic theories *in total*.

Problems for Humanistic Pluralism I: Religion as a Human Construct? Humanistic pluralism is based on a radical departure from traditional religion; specifically, from the notion that there is strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion, and identity which bestows deep divinity on religion. Yes, humanistic pluralism affirms that there is Transcendent Reality, and the religious universal that it posits is certainly related to this; but, there is a significant difference between fashioning a human conception of Ultimate Reality and participating in the life of Ultimate Reality which, in Christianity, usually takes the form of communion within the Triune God.

Humanistic pluralism demands that religions renounce any literal understanding of religious concepts or doctrines that express strong identity between religious reality and Ultimate Reality; for example, the Incarnation and the Trinity. The backlash of neo-inclusivism suggests that this might not be an easy, or agreeable, thing for Christian theologians to accept. And what of the generality of Christians; are they likely to renounce the idea that Christ is God in a real and tangible way for them? If Christian theologians won't renounce literal understandings of doctrines that express identity between Christ and God, and if the generality of Christians won't let go of the idea that Christ is God, then humanistic pluralism is unlikely to succeed as a theology of religions.

Problems for Humanistic Pluralist II: Religious Universals? While less literalist Christian theologians and Western philosophers may applaud humanistic religious

pluralism for its move away from the idea that religion is divine revelation, I suspect that those from this camp will not approve of the universalistic element in humanistic-universalistic pluralism.⁸⁷ Indeed, neo-inclusivists are also highly critical of this element within humanistic pluralism, and claim that these universals are identical to the “universals” or religious essences that real Christian theologians propose – except for the fact that they aren’t, Christian, truly pluralistic, and so forth. I have made my position clear: the universals of humanistic pluralists are pluralistic; and the essences of inclusivists are not.

But even if these universals are (rightly) understood as pluralistic at least two important questions remain. One: are any of the universals proposed by humanistic pluralists actually right? – have they rightly identified the universal form of all authentic religions. Two: are there religious universals at all?

These questions flag potential problems for the likelihood of success for theories of humanistic pluralism, because if there is not acceptance of their proposed universals then these can’t do their work of validating the existence of multiple forms of true religion.

Problems for Metaphysical Pluralism I: Ultimate Reality as Plural? In the same way that a concept of religion as humanly constructed is a radical departure from traditional religion, so is the concept of Ultimate Reality as plural. Some Christians, of course, have a similar idea with the Trinity and some have even used the Trinity to authenticate the

⁸⁷ See D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, for articles critical of the universalistic element of humanistic-universalistic pluralism.

truth of other religions.⁸⁸ But, I suspect that most Christians, like Gavin D'Costa, would object to the way that metaphysical pluralists “chop up” “the Trinity” for the purpose of claiming that there are multiple ultimate religious truths. Christians assert that Ultimate Reality is trinitarian; not tripartite. Conversely, as a metaphysical pluralist, I claim that Ultimate Reality is not trinitarian but tripartite. Nonetheless, the relevant point is that the idea of Ultimate Reality as tripartite is unacceptable to most Christian theologians; in fact, it is not even acceptable to humanistic-universalistic pluralists, who are also trying to conceptualize the idea of true religion as multiform.

The idea that Ultimate Reality is multiform is foundation to metaphysical pluralism; therefore, if this idea is not likely to get off the ground in the Christian West then neither is the idea of metaphysical pluralism.

Problems for Metaphysical Pluralism II: Ultimate Reality? I suspect that, even though most traditional Christian theologians would object to the idea of a pluralistic Ultimate Reality, they would be comfortable with its idea of revelatory religion, and even its metaphysical speculations. Or, at least, they would be comfortable with the efforts of metaphysical pluralists to produce a concept of Ultimate Reality, if not their results. But I also suspect that the theologians and philosophers who object to the very idea of religious universals would also object to the very idea of constructing realistic concepts of Ultimate Reality, i.e., the very idea of metaphysics. And, obviously, metaphysical pluralism will not become very successful if it is widely accepted that metaphysical constructs are meaningless.

⁸⁸ For a review of such efforts, see Karkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*.

I will now move on to discuss the likelihood of religious pluralism succeeding outside of the Christian West.

Does Religious Pluralism have a Future Outside of the Christian West?

As discussed earlier, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, (the vanguard publication of humanistic religious pluralism) and *Deep Religious Pluralism* (the vanguard publication of metaphysical religious pluralism) both seek to be multi-faith. Thus, in *The Myth of Religious Superiority* we see religious pluralism from Hindu and Sikh perspectives, Buddhist perspectives, Jewish perspectives, Christian perspectives, and Muslim perspectives. And, in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, we see examples of Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish versions of deep religious pluralism.

Some see this move as a Western imposition. In response to this accusation, I would say that the notion of imposition is meaningless unless there is a social structure that allows religious pluralists to impose their views on others. I don't see any such a social structure, especially *outside* of academic institutions; as far as I can tell, religions are free to accept or reject theories of religious pluralism at will. Moreover, I think it is reasonable and appropriate for pluralists to hope and expect that the religions they authenticate, as true religions, will adopt their theories of religious pluralism; indeed, unless the many true religions adopt a pluralistic view, theories of religious pluralism are of little practical consequence.

With that said, I see no reason for not inquiring into the possibility that the genius of religious pluralism belongs to the Christian West, and that this might make it even more difficult for theories of religious pluralism to succeed outside of the Christian West.

Consequently, I will now reflect on the possibility that the very idea of religious pluralism – the idea that there are true religions, or multiple forms of true religion – is relatively unique to the Christian West.

More specifically, I want to explore the notion that the idea of religions as unique and separate entities is largely Western.⁸⁹ If this is the case, then, the related idea of, unique and separate, true religions – i.e., the idea of religious pluralism – might not even make sense outside of the Christian West.

This is not to suggest that there are no religious cultures, outside of the Christian West, interested in the idea of religious pluralism; or, that different religious cultures don't have ideas about religious diversity that parallel the idea of religious pluralism in significant ways. Instead, it is to suggest that other religious cultures may not gravitate towards the Western Christian idea of religious pluralism because they employ significantly different understandings of religion.⁹⁰

As a means of probing this question, we will briefly examine the theologies of religions of the two non-Christian “types” of religion that I tried to authenticate as equally true within Christianity in my theory of metaphysical religious pluralism; namely, the non-dualistic theology of religions of Adidam, and the divine-unity theology of religions of the Baha'i Faith.

⁸⁹ This idea is prominent in the different forms of inclusivism and of pluralism examined in this dissertation. (Wilfred Smith may be an exception to this generalization.) Humanistic and metaphysical pluralism claims that there are different types of religion and that these are equal. Christian neo-inclusivism claims that there are different types of religion that have inherent value for realising the ultimate end or absolute essence of religion. For these inclusivists the different types of religion are not just passed on the way to fulfilment they are necessary for fulfilment.

⁹⁰ There are even non-Christian theories of religious diversity that I would classify as pluralist; for example, I would classify Dan Cohn-Sherbok's theory of religious diversity as a Jewish version of humanistic religious pluralism; see, Cohn-Sherbok, “Judaism and other Faiths.” Nonetheless, I am not willing to make any general claims about Jewish views of religious diversity based on this; cf., Oppenheim, *Speaking-Writing of God*.

Non-dualistic theology of religions is grounded in the affirmation that God is non-dualistic, or the idea that there is only God. Because there is only God, it is impossible to be outside of or unrelated to God; thus, everyone and indeed everything is in a religious state. This completely blurs the Western idea that religion is something set apart from other phenomena that are non-religious. Here, in the same way that there is only God, there is only religion. The goal of religion from this perspective is to realise this truth perfectly, or to realise the non-duality of God. Religions – or really ways of life – that do not result in the perfect realisation of the non-duality of God, are not building blocks of ultimate truth; rather, they are simply errors that must be transcended. Nonetheless, they are not fatal errors deserving of condemnation or punishment; indeed, these “errors” are to be respected, honoured, and tolerated because they are serving some individual on their path to the ultimate non-dualistic realization of God. The idea that there are equally true different types of religion is foreign to this way of thinking; as is the idea that “different types of religions” have their own inherent value as components of truth or as co-means to an ultimate end. But this way of thinking is conducive to a broadly tolerant view of all other sentient beings who are likewise on the path to God. In this respect it is almost infinitely more tolerant than Christian theories of religious diversity that are limited to extending tolerance to the “great world religions.”

Divine unity theology of religions is grounded in the idea that God is an unequivocal unity – no trinity and no tripartite structure is allowed here. The one and the unknowable essence of God is completely transcendent, and God is only knowable through the manifest aspect of God, known as the Manifestation of God. In this theology, religion is identified completely with the reality of the Manifestation of God. The

Manifestation of God reveals to humanity, at different points in its history, the laws and ordinances of God – which, when followed, allow human beings to draw nearer to God in likeness. In other words, the Manifestation of God, who is the manifestation of all of the “names and attributes” of God, shows human beings how to, likewise, attain these names and attributes, to the degree that they are capable; specifically, the Manifestation of God reveals the laws and ordinances that, when followed, allow human beings to manifest the names and attributes of God in themselves. Each time a Manifestation of God appears in human history, He or She reveals different laws and ordinances, on account of the differing spiritual and social needs of the age. Moreover, the spiritual and social life of humanity is progressive and, so, the laws of a “new” Manifestation of God “fulfill and abrogate” the laws of the previous Manifestation. But the reality of each Manifestation of God is the same divine Reality; different Manifestations have different names and different missions but they are in reality *identical*. Thus, there is only one religion - the religion of the Manifestations of God or the religion of God. In this theology, all past Manifestations of God must be recognised and honoured as such; to belittle a past religious dispensation on account of its outdated laws, is to belittle the reality of the current religious dispensation because both have come from the same great Being. Moreover, it is believed that the current religious dispensation will eventually be abrogated by God’s new Manifestation in the future. Thus, there are not different types of religion, but only the same religion that is continually renewed by God. In this theology, all of the Manifestations of God (more or less, the founders of the “great world religions”) must be accepted; to reject one is to reject all. This requires a reverent and

non-critical response to the followers of all other divinely revealed religions and, thus, engenders real tolerance on a practical level.

I suspect that, on first glance, most humanistic and metaphysical religious pluralists would identify and dismiss both of these theologies as forms of inclusive. Moreover, I suspect that most neo-inclusivists would identify these theologies as inaccurate forms of inclusivism that don't capture the rich diversity of religions in the same way that they do. But I suggest that the differences run deeper than this. Neither the non-dualistic theology of religions nor the divine unity theology of religions, accept the idea that there are different equally true types of religion, or different true types of religion that contribute to the attainment of true religion.

In the non-dualistic theology, everything, literally everything, is a religious path that leads to the same ultimate end. This non-dualistic theology certainly shares the idea of an ultimate religious end with Christian inclusivism; and it does seem that it should not matter what the particular religious end is, so long as it is ultimate. But the religious ends are different, and this contributes to a different understanding of the religious experiences that lead up to the ultimate end. In the non-dualistic theology, the non-dualistic realization of God leads to the dissolution of all reality into the Reality of God; in trinitarian forms of Christian inclusivism, the end is communion with the Triune God, or some philosophically constructed version of this. The non-dualistic theology leads to the ideas, on one hand, that all religions are dissolved into God, and, on the other, that because nothing is really different from God, that all phenomenal reality is religious: There is only religion. The trinitarian theology leads to the ideas, on one hand, that

different aspects of God are recognisable in the ultimate fulfilment, and, on the other, that *religions* contribute to understanding these different aspects of God.

In some sense, it is possible to collapse both of these ideas into the idea of religious inclusivism. Still it should be recognised that the “trinitarian inclusivism” leads to the possibility of recognising different types of true religion (even if in the end these become components of true religion), while “non-dualistic inclusivism” does not. But non-dualistic inclusivism allows for a very broad and tolerant view of *all* other religious traditions, while trinitarian inclusivism does not.

In the theology of divine unity, there are no distinct, religious paths; all different religions are recognised as previous forms of the exact same religion. From this perspective, it is possible to think in terms of the “great world religions” in a way that pluralists and neo-inclusivists have become accustomed to. Moreover, there is not the diffuse sense of religiousness everywhere that there is in the non-dualistic theology; here, religion has definite borders. But in this theology, the borders *between* religions are simply not present in the same sense. Here the claim is that if all religions are direct revelations from the same one God then there must be only one religion. Metaphysical religious pluralists, of course, have problems with this idea because they suggest that religion is grounded in the different aspects of the same pluralistic Ultimate Reality. Christian inclusivists preserve this same idea in the notion that the ultimate religious end or absolute religious essence combines or unifies different aspects of God or elements of religious truth. There is a sharp logical distinction in play here. The theology of divine unity identifies religion with the manifest aspect of God, but not with other “aspects of God,” even though it recognises something like these in its conceptions of “the Essence

of God” and “Universal Matter.” In contrast, the trinitarian theology identifies ultimate religious fulfilment with the unification of the different aspects of God. As stated above, the trinitarian theology leads to the ideas, on one hand, that different aspects of God are recognisable in the ultimate fulfilment, and, on the other, that religions contribute to understanding these different aspects of God. In contrast, the theology of divine unity leads, on one hand, to the idea that all religions are grounded in the same Ultimate Reality, and, on the other, that there are no deep religious differences or even different religions: There is only one religion.

Here, too, it is possible to collapse both of these ideas into the common idea of religious inclusivism. But it should be kept in mind that the grounding of religion in different dimensions of the one Ultimate Reality is different from grounding religion in the one and only means for accessing Ultimate Reality, and this potentially leads to very different ways of thinking about religious diversity.

“Trinitarian inclusivism” allows for an acknowledgement of the value of religious differences at a very deep level, while “divine unity inclusivism” does not seem to. But divine unity inclusivism circumvents the whole problem of acknowledging the validity of the “individual religions” by never giving this idea a foothold in reality, while trinitarian inclusivism first flames the fire of religious diversity and then to douse it with the water of Christian unity.⁹¹

As far as I can tell, the idea that there are different types of religions, that are equal, is simply not present in this non-dualistic theology of religions, or in this divine unity theology of religions. The predominant idea about religious diversity in the non-dualistic theology, is that everything is religion or that there is quite literally only

⁹¹ I have Mark Heim’s theology of religions in mind for these reflections on trinitarian inclusivism.

religion. The predominant idea about religious diversity in the divine unity theology is that all religions are manifestations of the same religious reality, or that there is quite literally only one religion. The idea that everything is religion and therefore all paths should be respected, and the idea that there is only one religion and therefore all divine religions should be revered are ideas of religion that don't seem to come into play in the West. In the Christian and Western discussion of religious diversity it is generally assumed that there is a strong boundary line between what is religious and what is not religious, and that there is an equally strong boundary between those entities that are taken to be religions. Non-dualists do not think in terms of the former assumption, and divine unitarians do not think in terms of the latter assumption. Thus, neither is so interested in affirming the unique truth of other religions, on one hand, because all religions (meaning all reality) will ultimately dissolve into God and, on the other, because there is really only one religion. In other words, why bother reconciling differences that are not permanent, and bother reconciling differences that are not real?

Is the Idea of Religious Pluralism at an End?

A title that I considered for this dissertation was *The Meaning and End of Religious Pluralism*. I considered this title because my original plan was to show what religious pluralism means and, then, argue that religious pluralism is at its conceptual end.

Obviously, I decided to forgo the argument that religious pluralism is at its end, but will now close this work by discussing this possibility.

Humanistic pluralism, as I have conceived it, denies the possibility that religion can be identified with the divine, and so employs a humanistic concept of religion.

Religion is a human response to Transcendence but is not Transcendence itself.

Humanistic pluralism does this because it also employs a unitary metaphysics or the idea that God or Ultimate Reality is one – and the combination of the idea that religion is identical to God (in some strong sense) and the idea that God is one necessarily leads to the logical conclusion that religion is also one.

Metaphysical pluralism also tries to avoid the conclusion that religion is one – but instead of employing a humanistic concept of religion, it does so by using a pluralistic metaphysics. It says that religion may be “divine” or “revelatory” in the sense of strong identity between Ultimate Reality and religion but that this doesn’t lead to the conclusion religion is one, because Ultimate Reality is itself pluralistic and therefore religion reflects this pluralistic reality.

But are these the *only* possibilities such that we can say religious pluralism is a claim that the ultimate form of religion is multiform, *necessarily* grounded in either a humanistic concept of religion or a pluralistic metaphysics (or, redundantly, both)? In other words, do these two (non-redundant) possibilities bring to an end pluralistic theorizing?

If the concepts of humanistic religion and divine/revelatory religion are fully disjunctive; if the concepts of a unitary metaphysics and a pluralistic metaphysics are fully disjunction; and if it is *necessary* for a religious person to hold either one position, or the other, for both of these disjunctive sets – then, yes, they do bring pluralistic theorizing to an end. In other words, if one must hold either a humanistic or a divine/revelatory concept of religion and one must hold either a unitary metaphysics or a pluralistic metaphysics, then one can only come to religious pluralism in the following

ways: 1) by holding a unitary metaphysics and a humanistic concept of God; 2) by holding a pluralistic metaphysics and a divine/revelatory concept of religion; or, 3) (redundantly) by holding a humanistic concept of religion and a pluralistic metaphysics. There are no other logical possibilities.

It seems to me that all of the theorists discussed in this dissertation presuppose that a religious person must hold either a humanistic or divine/revelatory concept of religion, and either a unitary or pluralistic metaphysics – and if this is the case then the solutions proffered by these theorists are *predictable* and, for them, there are no other possible solutions short of dropping these claims, or presuppositions, about the nature of Ultimate Reality and religion.

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