

2008

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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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May 2008

This Study by: Matthew F. Rittgers

Entitled: Religious Pluralism: The Evangelical Christian Response

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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Introduction

The dawn of the twenty-first century has ushered in a new age in humankind. Information travels around the world at the speed of light thanks to the Internet, cell phones and communications satellites; industry and science have created advanced technologies and medicines, and transportation has continued to grant more and more humans the ability to leave their ancestral homeland and travel across the globe in a matter of hours. Due to these things, the world seems to be a smaller place. No longer do enormous mountains or vast oceans isolate nations and cultures from each other. Perhaps one of the most astounding consequences of the emerging twenty-first century is the ever expanding sharing of not only ideas and information but religious beliefs and convictions as well.

Undoubtedly, this has had an unprecedented effect on the lives of Christians living in the United States of America. While Christians have known about the existence of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and other faiths for more than centuries, it had all too often to believe these people were ‘uncivilized’, ‘ignorant’, or ‘wicked’. Countless missionaries were sent across the seas to ‘civilize’, ‘enlighten’, and ‘purify’ these peoples, but for the most part, the average Christian living in the United States must have been ill-informed of the true nature of these religious others. Today, because of the spread of ideas and peoples, it is not uncommon for a Christian to find their classmates, coworkers, friends, and relatives to be faithful, compassionate, and intelligent members of another religious tradition. Age-old caricatures of these religious faiths now have crumbled and many Christians are left wondering what to think regarding not only the faiths of others but their own as well. More and more they find themselves asking

questions such as, “Do I have the correct faith?” “Is faith in Jesus Christ the only means to salvation?” “Will my peer, coworker, friend, or family member be going to hell?” These are complex questions requiring new theological discussion for not only the religious elite but the laypeople as well.

What is at stake today is not only the right knowledge or belief but right action as well. In the past, as well as today, wars have been fought over religious beliefs. Likewise communities have been shunned if not persecuted because they held differing convictions of what is the “Religious Ultimate,” whether that is Yahweh, Allah, Jesus, or some other personal or non-personal divine object. If humanity is going to survive the twenty-first century, it will need to solve the tensions deeply-seated in the relationships between the great religions of the world.

One such solution that has been proposed has come to be known as *religious pluralism*. In one sense of the term, *religious pluralism* simply indicates the obvious; there are a plurality of religions on the planet. However, more and more the term *religious pluralism* is used to stand for an emerging theological viewpoint that claims that there is not one specific religion that holds access to all religious Truth but that many may indeed hold elements of Truth within their traditions. Within this school of thought, I will discuss John Cobb, Paul Knitter, and John Hick in detail. While they all have different understandings of how different religions may hold claim to truth, they all are attempting to establish a theological model that will promote peace and cooperation across the great religious divides.

In contrast to these theologians, I will discuss the work of Harold Netland. Netland attempts to establish that traditional evangelical Christianity is already properly

suited to peacefully relate to the other religions of the world. Thus, instead of trying to establish an entirely new model in which to look at the world's religions, he looks through the eyes of evangelical Christianity in a fresh, but faithful and true light.

I believe that this new age will only continue to bring the great world faiths in contact with other. Likewise, it is absolutely essential that all the world faiths discover ways to meaningfully and creatively interact with each other. In this essay, I will attempt to lay out the different ideas of Cobb, Knitter, Hick, and Netland regarding this new religious climate and weigh how helpful I believe they are in encouraging peace and constructive coexistence among the great religious faiths of the world.

John Cobb

The first work that I will discuss is Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism by John Cobb. Cobb is intimately concerned with the various religions of the world entering into communication with each other. This idea in itself is not revolutionary in nature; others have suggested that the great world faiths need to be in dialogue with each other to promote peace and understanding. Yet Cobb has something more significant in mind: his desire is that the world's great religions would go *beyond* simple dialogue with each other because each has something important and meaningful to share. If this were to happen, the world would be a peaceful and enriched place. "Through dialogue people come to understand one another better and learn to cooperate better. In dialogue they may even learn from one another ideas and insights that will enrich their several Ways" (Cobb, viii).

In order to best understand Cobb's theological framework, we need to understand his picture of the world's religions. Often it has been the habit for theologians who are seeking dialogue and relationship between the great religious traditions to make bold statements claiming that all of the religions really point to the same reality or God. In other words, they try to equate Allah, the Christian God, Yahweh, the Hindu gods, and the Buddhist religious ultimate as all being of the same entity. Some of these theologians may make these claims because they believe that it gives the believers of each tradition the necessary ground to begin discussion. In other words, if all of the world's religions shared a common divine element, then they would be able to use this as a starting point for their relationships. Two theologians, John Hick and Paul Knitter, implement this in their work. I will discuss them later in detail. Cobb, however, rejects the claim that all religions are dealing with the same divine Reality. Cobb writes, "Our reason for dialogue with others is not that we both participate in a common religiosity. Our common humanity, rather, is the necessary and sufficient basis for dialogue" (39). Although the intent of the previously mentioned theologians is to create places for dialogue, Cobb believes that in some cases this causes more harm than good. "Specifically it inhibits the dialogue with Mahayana Buddhism" (Cobb, 42). Or perhaps more clearly,

The Confucian heaven or principle, the Vedantist Brahman, and the Buddhist Nirvana cannot be assumed to be synonymous with Christ. Even the Muslim Allah and the Jewish Master of the Universe should not be conceived in other terms (Cobb, 46).

It is clear that Cobb does not want to begin his push for interfaith dialogue with the idea that all religions are really talking about the same thing.

If the world faiths are not necessarily talking about experience with the same divine Reality, why is it important for dialogue to even occur? For speaking as one in a

predominately Christian culture, we should not forget that Christians believe that they have found something of infinite value. If Jesus brings immense meaning to the life of the Christian, surely he has something to offer to the Jew, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist. “We believe that Buddhists lack something of supreme importance when they do not incorporate Jesus Christ into their Buddhism. We believe they will be better Buddhists when they have done so” (Cobb, 52). Likewise it is fair to say that Buddhism may have some valuable understandings that Christians can learn and incorporate into their tradition. Both partners in the dialogue should look to be transformed. As Cobb puts it, “*Beyond* dialogue, I suggest, lies the aim of mutual transformation” (48). I believe that it is fair for Cobb to expect that each of the world’s religions has found beliefs and practices that are edifying, and they should share these with persons of other faiths.

It is clear that Cobb is not secretly trying to convert Buddhists to Christians or Christians to Buddhists. “We may quite properly say that our concern for Buddhists is that they become better Buddhists” (Cobb, 52). Yet when dialogue continuously takes place, something astounding happens. Traditions that had once been separated by what seemed to be an impenetrable divide are brought closer. In Cobb’s discussion of Christian dialogue with Judaism,

A Christianity that has genuinely encompassed the history of the Jews in its effective memory and a Judaism which has integrated Jesus into its history will not become one, but the present sharp lines of distinction between them will blur (Cobb, 50).

I believe that Cobb is onto something great here. If our goal is to create a more peaceful and constructive coexistence with persons of other faiths, then we must continuously be in dialogue. Yet, to what extent the lines between differing faiths may blur, I am not fully convinced. While it is apparent that dialogue will bring friendships and compassion,

certain beliefs such as the divinity (or lack thereof) of Christ are not often up for discussion. Some lines between religions look as if they will remain for a long time.

Should Christians enter into dialogue with any religion, or are some off-limits? Cobb is clear that we should not take any old belief system to be valuable for our own spiritual growth and transformation. Dialogue “is grounded in respect, in the recognition of wisdom and integrity. There are movements such as Nazism and the Ku Klux Klan in which Christians do not recognize the requisite wisdom and integrity” (Cobb, x). Some belief systems are so corrupt that the great religions of the world should not look to learn their truths. Nevertheless, there are many movements that are full of wisdom and integrity. Yet Cobb does see some dialogue as more helpful than others. “The best dialogue occurs when the partners are deeply convinced of many things” (Cobb, 45). When two individual religions come into contact with each other and neither is satisfied with watered-down beliefs or assumed understandings of reality, true beneficial dialogue can really take place. A dialogue of this nature leads to a refining of both faiths. Yet, many people are concerned that criticism of their deeply-held beliefs will be detrimental to their faith. “When one is really convinced, one does not fear such criticism or expect, in advance, that criticism will greatly alter the conviction” (Cobb, 45). Yet each partner must be careful not to hold to merely dogmatic beliefs. Dogmatic beliefs are beliefs that one holds without a particular knowledge or conviction why he or she holds it. This harms both the successful dialogue that could occur and the subsequent growth within the individual.

The dogmatic attitude rejects in advance the relevance of criticism or evidence to the beliefs held. That attitude on any point whatever blocks dialogue. It reflects precisely a lack of real conviction and the substitution of an authoritarian system (Cobb, 45-46).

Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism offers some example of dialogue in work. As the title indicates, Cobb here is using the Christian tradition and a particular strand of Buddhism known as Mahayana, or Pure Land, Buddhism. In contrast to Zen Buddhism, in which adherents seek release from the world on their own power, Pure Land Buddhism looks to a historical figure, Amida Buddha, to help them on their path. “Pure Land Buddhism, indeed, criticizes Zen for its reliance on the self-power and calls instead for faith in the other-power of the Buddha, Amida” (Cobb, 101). This faith comes out of recognition that they themselves cannot receive salvation through their own merit, but by grace. “...it is not the human accomplishment of the right attitude that saves, but Amida’s grace. Sinful human beings can be confident of salvation precisely because it is effected by Amida and not by human merit” (Cobb, 102). This, remarks Cobb, is a doctrine that is found very much in Luther’s understanding of Christ. Yet it is clear that Mahayana Amida does have some very distinct differences that the Christian notion of Christ. Particularly “In Christianity the dominant imagery is certainly interpersonal, so that trust in a human friend can be used as a strong analogy for faith in Christ” (Cobb, 103). However, in Pure Land Buddhism, “...the accent falls on a state of being or consciousness rather than on interpersonal relation” (Cobb, 103).

Despite these differences, Christians and Pure Land Buddhists have a lot to share with each other and learn. Christians can share about the meaning found in their relationship in Jesus while Pure Land Buddhists can share about the state of being attained through faith in Amida. “In each tradition there remains a need to clarify how these poles can be most fruitfully related, and in this effort of clarification each can aid

the other” (Cobb, 103). When a Mahayana Buddhist and a Christian walks away from this discussion, they may be able to take the good things that they learned from the other tradition and apply them to their own.

Yet, when it comes to dialogue, it has recently been common for Christians to believe that they hold a special position. Often they may pretend to be entering into true dialogue with others of different beliefs, but in fact, are holding onto what they believe to be Absolute Truth and are not seeking to gain from the discussion. This *Truth*, they believe, is God’s given word through revelation and scripture and is not up for criticism. Cobb believes that if Christians will be ever able to go beyond dialogue with believers of other traditions and be transformed, they need to forfeit this stronghold. “There should be no special pleading by Christians for Christianity based on the ideas of revelation or scriptural authority. Christian theology should work with the available evidence and accept public criticism” (Cobb, 40). They can still believe in the preciousness of their beliefs, but they must hold onto them with an open hand instead of a closed fist. These Christians would then be open to a living relationship with Christ instead of a merely dogmatic one. This relationship is one that has transformative power.

Changes in long-held ideas about Christ appear dangerous and threatening. To be Christian is to cling to some relation to that past figure or some belief about him. But if faith is directed instead to the living Christ, the divine saving and revealing presence in our own lives which was truly incarnate in Jesus, then faith in Christ is the free and confident participation in that Change which is appropriate to our own time and situation (Cobb, 46).

Likewise, Cobb does not think that Christians need to be skeptical of dialogue with religious others as if communication with them will somehow cause them to lose their

faith. In fact, Cobb wants to claim that interaction with open criticism and questioning through dialogue is what the Christian faith calls for:

How can one better serve the universal revealing and saving presence of God than by submitting all that one believes to radical questioning and opening oneself critically to alien ideas? Is that not exactly what faith in Christ calls for? ...It is the exemption of beliefs about God or about Christ from real involvement in the dialogue that is an expression of lack in faith in Christ (Cobb, 46).

Christians, Cobb believes, should be compelled to dialogue with religious others if they really desire to expand their faith and relationship with God.

I agree with Cobb that Christians should enter into dialogue with believers of other faiths and allow them to ask questions about the validity of the Bible. If Christians desperately cling to their scriptures and do not allow criticism concerning it, I believe many will be unable to grapple with the truth within its pages. Just as many Christians had many questions and skepticisms about their faith when they first began their faith journey, they must allow persons of other faiths to have questions as well. A Christian must maintain that if the Bible is indeed the living and active word of God, they must maintain that it can withstand any criticism on its own. Likewise, any contact with the pages of such a divine object would necessarily impact the heart of any man, woman, or child.

Ultimately, the more religions come into relationship with each other and go *beyond dialogue*, so to speak, the more they will have a direct impact on the stability of world peace and cooperation. In a quotation that I mentioned earlier, Cobb stated, “Through dialogue people come to understand one another better and learn to cooperate better” (viii). If, as my thesis is exploring, we wish to create a world that fosters the virtues of peace, love, and cooperation, I believe that we need to take Cobb’s advice and

enter into relationship with people of different religious traditions. Isolation too often leads to misunderstanding and suspicion.

In summary of Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism John Cobb describes that going beyond dialogue is important for the great religious traditions for a few simple reasons. The first reason is that the individuals who are convinced of religious convictions have a duty to share their knowledge and understanding with their brothers and sisters around the world. One must then also accept that other religions may equally have something of great importance to share as well. Second, through the sharing of faith through religious dialogue, both parties can hope to be transformed by the new knowledge and wisdom that they learn. This will undoubtedly cause them to return to their perspective religious traditions and work to refine and perfect their faith. Buddhists will become better Buddhists, Jews better Jews, and Christians better Christians. And finally, the continued dialogue between any given religious faiths will bring them together both in understanding and cooperation.

It is somewhat difficult to find much that is troubling with Cobb's theological model. First and foremost, he tries very hard to keep talk about going *beyond dialogue* general. Unlike authors that I will later discuss, he attempts to the best of his ability to stay true to the belief systems of the religions. He does not attack central beliefs inherent in Christianity, Islam, or the other faiths. Nor does he claim that all the religions are really different manifestations of the same faith.

Likewise it is difficult to argue against Cobb that Christians, or adherents of any faith tradition, can and must learn from other traditions. "Accordingly Christianity can and should assimilate the elements of truth in all religious traditions" (Cobb, 41). While it

would be foolish to state that there are not any individuals who deeply believe that they alone have access to any and all truth whatsoever, these people are hard to come by in an active academic and theological discussion. Most people accept that they personally do not have all of the answers. Nor does Cobb dictate what understanding one should come to from a dialogue with religious others. Instead he goes as far as to claim that

My main point here, however, is not to offer a better hypothesis as the basis for dialogue but to argue that we do better to enter dialogue with multiple and flexibly hypotheses. We need to make clear that our interest in dialogue does not depend on the correctness of any of these hypotheses, that we enter dialogue in hopes of developing new and better hypotheses (Cobb, 44).

So then, Cobb does not claim what will be gained from dialogue, but that this is something that will hopefully be found through dialogue.

Perhaps one shortcoming of Cobb is that he may not make a convincing argument for what do to with what a religion takes to be a truth of absolute importance. For example, one particular truth for many Christians is that salvation is entirely dependent upon belief in Christ, his divinity, and his perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Surely this is not simply one belief alongside a host of others for the Christian. It is *the* belief! Dialogue, for these Christians, is next to useless if they do not lead to the religious other coming to faith in Jesus. Likewise, I believe that there may be similar ideas taken to be absolute by many other religious traditions. One such belief may be the Muslim belief that it is blasphemous to equate anything created with God—precisely what Christians are claiming in Jesus. In order to accomplish dialogue even among such conflicting views, Cobb states:

Our critics are correct that for genuine dialogue we must be open to being changed at any point whatever. That means that we must be prepared to change our Christology, but it equally means that we must be prepared to

subject our views of divine transcendence to the test. It does not mean that we downplay in advance our most precious beliefs (Cobb, 45).

Although I agree that one must be open to discussion about the validity of their deepest beliefs, I wonder if anyone who is thoroughly convinced that they have the religious ‘truth’ would ever be able to enter into the kind of dialogue that Cobb is proposing. Undoubtedly, some individuals who have been subject to academic learning and criticism may very well feel comfortable enough to enter into such a vulnerable conversation. However, I am not convinced that the majority of any religious tradition, be it Islam, Judaism, or Christianity, would find themselves comfortable enough to put all of their religious beliefs so openly on the table. And, if Cobb truly wishes to transform the cores of the great religious traditions through dialogue, this presents itself as a nearly insurmountable barrier to be crossed.

All in all I find Cobb’s work to be helpful but still a far cry away from presenting a framework in which evangelical Christians can interact with the religious individuals around them. It is undeniable that dialogue must play an essential role in religious cooperation and understanding; however, it seems that his work does not go far enough to explain how any religious tradition can see the value in dialogue using a framework which they will already accept and cherish. In order for any religious individual to enter into a peaceful relationship with an individual of another religious tradition, he or she can only do so through principles already laid out and acceptable to their tradition. Christians need to find the reason within their tradition to live peacefully with others. An outsider to their tradition arguably cannot convince them to do so on grounds that are foreign to their understanding and framework.

Paul Knitter

The second work that I will discuss is Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility by Paul Knitter. Knitter is interested in discussion of religious pluralism because he is concerned with social justice. This directly impacts the type of Christian faith he has and how specifically he interprets the Christian scriptures,

More explicitly, I admit that when I, with so many other Christians, propose liberation or emancipation as the heart of the gospel, I admit that our contemporary need for liberation and global responsibility plays a key role in how I hear the gospel (Knitter, 88).

Knitter is attempting to establish a theological framework that a Christian will be able to, through their own tradition, share in relationship and dialogue with individuals of other religious traditions.

I will try to show that when Christians engage in such a correlational, globally responsible dialogue... they are not being “unfaithful” to Christian convictions about the uniqueness of Jesus and the mission of the church. Indeed, such a dialogue can lead Christians to a clearer understanding of what makes Jesus unique, to a more committed following of him, and to a more meaningful carrying out of his mission to the world (Knitter, 2).

This is undoubtedly a bold statement to claim; there are many people in the Christian tradition who would maintain that too close of a relationship with others outside of the Christian faith is downright sinful. Thus it is important for Knitter to clarify why a global dialogue is not detrimental to the Christian faith.

First and foremost, Knitter’s case for Christians to enter into interfaith dialogue is the first commandment. “If God’s love *is* unbounded, ours *ought* to be. We are called upon to love each other as God loves us. This is, for Christians, the *first commandment*—which means that this commandment takes priority over all other commandments in all aspects of life” (Knitter, 38-39). It seems that Knitter is alluding to what is also known as

the Greatest Commandment found in the New Testament. When asked which of all the commandments is most important, Jesus replies,

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29-31).

I believe that Knitter would interpret this passage as saying that there should be nothing held in greater importance than loving other human beings on the earth. Even if one must forfeit some deeply held doctrine or belief. “It also means that, in situations where one has to choose, loving one’s neighbor takes a prior place to proclaiming true doctrine or formally worshiping God” (Knitter, 39). It will help to clarify what Knitter precisely means by love.

To love others means to respect them, to honor them, to listen to them with an authentic openness to what they are saying. It means to treat them as we would want them to treat us. It means to listen to them and their witness to truth as we would want them to listen to us and our witness. Yes, this means that I have to confront them when I think that they are wrong, but I also have to be authentically ready to be so confronted by them (Knitter, 39).

For Knitter, then loving one’s neighbor is more than simply being kind or compassionate towards them. Loving one not only means to respect the individual but also to respect their beliefs and religious tradition. To hold to a religious belief that rejects that the beliefs of others might be true, we do not love. That is, when we take our own beliefs to be the sole ‘word of God’, we do not love them.

Whenever we hold up a truth or a revelation and insist according to the will of God it is the only or the absolutely final norm in which all others have to be included, then we cannot treat them as brothers and sisters in God. Such a norm does enable us to confront them, as love sometimes requires, but it does not allow us to be confronted by them, as love also requires. Whenever we are not disposed to learn as much from our neighbors as they can from us, we cannot love them (Knitter, 39).

For Knitter, one cannot claim to hold onto the absolute Truth and still love someone who believes something entirely different. This is precisely where Knitter believes that Christianity has historically been derailed in the past.

Although the *first commandment* has definitely been influential throughout the history of Christianity, nevertheless it has been dwarfed at times by other doctrines. Primarily, Knitter believes that what is recorded as the last commandment of Jesus Christ has been interpreted as more important than the commandment to love one's neighbor.

The last commandment can be found in the Gospel of Matthew.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:18-20).

Knitter believes that the mission of preaching the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth has, at times, led to a radical overlooking of the first commandment. "In the way they have gone about preaching and making disciples, they have all too often not loved their neighbors" (Knitter, 40). This commandment has been interpreted by Christians to mean that the Christian faith must be spread across the world no matter what—even if what may seem as very unloving ways at times. This has been one of the premises that helped lead to inquisitions, pogroms, crusades, and colonialism. Knitter believes that if we are going to someday live in peace with people from different faith practices, we must give up our claims that our idea of faith in salvation through Jesus Christ alone is absolute.

In sharing an office, dinner table, school program, maybe even a marital bed with a person who is a committed follower of another religious path,

and to witness how that following has enriched and transformed that person's life—in view of such existential relationships, we cannot, we simply cannot, continue with the traditional Christian assertions that ours is the only true religion, not even with the modified claims that our religion is the final word for theirs, meant for their fulfillment” (Knitter, 28).

In other words, Knitter is claiming that in order for Christians to appropriately follow the first commandment of loving and respecting ones neighbors, they need come up with a new interpretation of the final commandment. This will leave Christians with a faith that no longer claims Christ to be the only avenue to God but one of a plethora of avenues.

Is this acceptable to the Christian faith? I am not convinced that the final commandment necessarily stands in contrast to the first commandment. If Christians wholeheartedly believe that a relationship with Jesus Christ is the one avenue towards right relationship with God, which many do, then their only loving option is to go about the world making ‘disciples of all nations and baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ I believe, unlike Knitter, that this can be done while continuously valuing the lives and knowledge of persons of different cultures and faiths.

I do agree that the first commandment given by Christ is the most important rule by which any Christian should follow. Yet, Knitter seems confused when discussing the first commandment. It's necessary to quote again the book of Mark:

“‘The most important one (commandment),’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29-31).

Knitter mistakenly calls the *first commandment* what really is labeled as the *second commandment* of Christ. The first commandment is to love the one God with every

essence of being. The second commandment is to love one's neighbor as their self. Note that a Christian is not called to love God as their self, or to love their neighbor with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Now, returning to the last commandment:

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20 **emphasis mine**).*

Although Knitter would have you believe otherwise, this passage does not command the proselytizing of heathens to Christianity without regard to love or compassion. Very clearly Jesus is quoted as saying, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Surely this includes teaching the first and second commandments-love God, love neighbors. And, what good is a teacher who commands a heathen to love their neighbors if they are not being loved themselves? Although undoubtedly Christians have forced conversions in an unloving manner in the past, it seems that simple reading of New Testament scriptures easily clarifies that it would be wrong to obey the final commandment without regard to Christ's first and second commandments. Unfortunately, I am tempted to question whether or not Knitter has strong knowledge of the Biblical scriptures in which he is calling into question.

Another topic that needs to be addressed is that Knitter believes that all religious traditions are limited. “Christians (and all religious persons) have to admit honestly that within our human condition, there can be no final word, no one way of knowing truth that is valid for all times and all peoples” (Knitter, 30). However, although every single tradition is itself limited, we are indeed able to reach past the boundaries of our faith when we enter into dialogue with other traditions.

If we are not talking and listening to others, we are not learning. Dialogue becomes the escape from or solution to the inherent limitations of our own viewpoint. Through conversation with the genuinely other, we can expand or correct the truth that we have (Knitter, 31).

The danger of not entering into dialogue with others is that we may never know how wrong some of our theological beliefs may be. “Just as we need someone else to tell us when our breath is bad, so we need others to tell us when our religious truth has become ideological abuse” (Knitter, 32).

Should both partners come to a dialogue relinquishing all convictions of their faith? Absolutely not!

I am not denying that it is important, even necessary, for each partner to enter the dialogue with firm positions, with universal claims, with the deeply felt conviction that his or her perspective on a given issue is better than others... But there is a difference, a decisive difference, between speaking out of deeply felt and divinely guided convictions, on the one hand, and speaking out of a God-given final revelation, on the other (Knitter, 33).

Thus participants of dialogue necessarily must have deep convictions when it comes to dialogue, but they must not think that they have all of the revelation of God held as if it is in their pocket.

How can Christians believe that other faiths have anything of importance to share—do not Christians believe that the object of their faith, Jesus Christ, is God himself? Although this is a common interpretation to many Christians, Knitter believes that it is problematic. He maintains that above all else, Christianity must cling to the mysteriousness of God. Christians must not come to think that they have God figured out. This understanding “requires us to also recognize that no religion and no revelation can be the only or the final or the exclusive or the inclusive Word of God” (Knitter, 38). In fact, any claims to Jesus to be the final norm for God is idolatrous! Knitter quotes Tom

Driver's "The Case for Pluralism": "Idolatry is the insistence that there is only one way, one norm, one truth. It is the refusal to be corrected or informed by the 'other'" (Knitter, 38). Thus the very idea that Jesus, or Christianity for that matter, could contain the wholeness of truth is completely unfounded.

But does not the Gospel of John maintain that Jesus is the "way the truth and the life" (John 14:6)? Indeed the followers of Jesus, even from the earliest of times, have spoke about him in ways that equate him to be God on earth. Yet, Knitter believes that when the earliest of Christians spoke in this matter, they were not speaking literally.

...the titles and images given to Jesus by the early church are better understood as literary-symbolic rather than literal-definitive attempts to say who Jesus was for them. In other words, images such as Son of God, Word of God, Lord, Messiah, and Savior are to be interpreted as doxological or confessional expressions of personal-community experience of this man and his message and as exhortations to follow him, rather than definitive, propositional statements about his nature or ontological status in the universe (Knitter, 43).

In other words, talk about Jesus in these lofty God-like terms is not saying that Jesus was the only manifestation of God, but perhaps the only manifestation of God to them. This, in Knitter's viewpoint would allow for Christians to more adequately be able to enter into dialogue with others of different religions.

...Christians can enter the interreligious dialogue with clear claims of what God has done in Jesus without having to insist that God has done it only in Jesus. In firmly proclaiming Jesus as incarnate Son or Messiah, they are also open to the possibility of other sons and daughters who have incarnated God's grace and truth for others (Knitter, 43).

Thus Christ may be the Savior to a particular Christian but not necessarily to a believer of another faith.

Yet Knitter believes that the message of Christ is important for all humans to hear. He passionately believes that Jesus Christ had one specific message to share—the

Kingdom of God. Knitter describes the Kingdom of God through a quote by Edward Schillebeeckx in *The Church: The Human Story of God*:

The Kingdom of God is a changed new relationship (metanoia) of men and women to God, the tangible and visible side of which is a new type of liberating relationship among men and women within a reconciling society in a peaceful natural environment (Knitter, 91).

The Kingdom of God is essentially about transformation of the lives of individuals and the world. The Kingdom of God is “anything that promotes the welfare of humanity and removes suffering” (Knitter, 91). However, the mission of the church has not always been to bring forth the Kingdom of God but to make more churches. However, there has been a movement from this in recent times. “In terms of past decades... the *primary* reason why missionaries are sent forth is not to establish and plant the church but to establish and build the Kingdom” (Knitter, 109).

In summary, the Kingdom of God is what Knitter takes to be the most important part of faith. This social transformation of individuals should take precedence before all talk of other doctrines. The goal of Christians should not be to convert Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, or Jews, but to inspire them to be able to partake alongside the work of the Kingdom of God.

And so the missionary will be the Christian vision of the Kingdom known to their neighbors, both across the street or across the seas. True, Christians will never try to force conversions to the church; nor will they measure their success in terms of the number of such conversions (Knitter, 123).

To accurately proclaim the Kingdom of God above all else, Christians will need to recognize that Jesus is not the sole manifestation of the divine, nor that Christianity has all of the answers. Yet, if the world faiths come into mutual dialogue with each other, they may then finally be able to bring forth the Kingdom of God.

Knitter offers an interesting interpretation of Christianity. However, I expect that it will be prone to much criticism and critique. Although love and justice and the Kingdom of God were clearly messages that Jesus preached, it would be a long step to say that this was the only message that the early church interpreted from the life of Jesus to be important. I believe that it seems quite clear that the early followers of Jesus believed deeply that he was the only way to right relationship with God. The evidence of this is not only shown throughout the texts of the New Testament, but also that they willingly marched to their deaths proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It would seem outlandish for there to be such an opposition to the earliest Christians if they solely preached love and justice.

Likewise I do not expect the majority of Christians today to accept that Jesus Christ was not the only definitive and normative messenger to Earth, let alone God himself. These currents lie at the very roots of many Christian's faith to such extent that to deny this would mean for many to no longer consider themselves Christians.

John Hick

The third work that I will discuss is Problems of Religious Pluralism by John Hick. Like the previous two authors, Hick is a supporter of religious pluralism. While Cobb has helpfully argued that religions should be in a transformative dialogue together, Hick focuses on displaying that all of these religions really are concerned with the same thing. In doing so, Hick has crafted one of the most established arguments for religious pluralism today.

In agreement with Cobb and Knitter, Hick accepts that human experience is indeed limited. Hick explains that an individual experiences the world through their senses- sight, hearing, and touch- and interprets their experiences. Hick calls this process 'experiencing-as'. "In our everyday perception of our environment we use several sense-organs at once; and I suggest that we adopt the term 'experiencing-as' to refer to our ordinary multi-dimensional awareness of the world" (Hick, 19). Hick uses a clever example to explain this process. He postulates that if you were able to show an individual from the Stone Age some fancy cutlery, undoubtedly he or she would not immediately understand the concept of the fork, spoon, and knife (Hick, 20). What he or she may come to interpret the objects to be is dependent upon their past experiences and cultural heritage.

What this means for the human experience is this: human beings, when experiencing the world through their senses, do not have a direct and clear understanding of the world around them. Instead, human beings develop interpretations of what they experience. These interpretations are based upon preconceived notions and concepts that have been developed in their life and larger culture. One human being will likely have an entirely different interpretation of an experience than a human being from another culture. Likewise, it is no surprise to Hick that the great religions have such different interpretations of the divine reality. Hick writes, "Thus, if we ask why it is that Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, report such different perceptions of the divine, the answer that suggests itself is that they are operating with different sets of religious concepts" (26). It should be no surprise that a divine presence, which is unclear

and mysterious in any one religion at best, be understood in immensely different ways across religious divides.

How does one know if a religion, or all the religions, has really built its interpretations on the basis of a true experience of the divine? Could not one, or all, be nothing more than fanciful imagination? Hick accepts this problem whole-heartedly.

It could be that the religions are all experiencing erroneously, projecting different illusions upon the universe. And it could on the other hand be that they are each responding to an infinite divine reality which exceeds our human conceptualities and which is capable of being humanly thought and experienced in these fascinatingly divergent ways (Hick, 26).

While it is impossible to know for sure, Hick believes that we must work with each of the great religions as having experienced to some extent the Ultimate Reality, or as Hick likes to call it *the Real*. *The Real* is simply a bucket-term that Hick uses to express the entirety of all that is divine, or religiously ultimate. No religion has had contact with all of the Real but merely unique manifestations of it.

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 Paramatma, and under the many lesser images of deity... (Hick, 41-42).

Because human experience is limited and depends upon interpretation, so is experience with the Real limited. That being said, any religion's experience with its God or other Ultimate Reality is only a limited picture of the Real.

From a pluralist point of view Yahweh and Shiva are not rival gods, or rival claimants to be the one and only God, but rather two different concrete historical personae in terms of which the ultimate divine Reality is present and responded to by different large historical communities within different strands of the human story (Hick, 42).

How can we be sure that all of these gods have been true manifestations of the Real? Or could some gods in certain religions be merely imagined? While this always remains a

possibility, Hick believes that there is evidence supporting his theory that all of the great religions are interpretations of the Real. His evidence for their similar connection with the real is what he considers to be the common soteriological function of these faiths. In other words, each faith has roughly the same goal in mind, or the same salvation/liberation/transformation at work. “There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation” (Hick, 34).

What does Hick mean by *salvation/liberation/transformation*? At first glance, it seems quite absurd for Hick to be making such a bold statement. Surely Nirvana is not the same as the Christian heaven! However, Hick is quite clear that this is not what he is talking about. Salvation, for Hick, is not only about some distant place that one may go to when they die. Salvation is first and foremost about living in the here and now. Hick writes,

Pluralism, then, is the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions (Hick, 34).

In other words, Hick appears to be saying that the key attribute of a true religion is that it takes the eyes of the believer off of him or herself and ushers him or her into an awareness of the Ultimate Reality, or the Real.

However, it may be difficult to conclude which tradition really helps its faithful come into an awareness of the Real. Even in our Western tradition there have been a great deal of men and women who have claimed to be in relationship with the divine. Simply self-professing to be in relationship with the Real does not mean necessarily that they really are. Surely one cannot just take another’s word for it! Luckily, Hick suggests

that there is a way to observe if a faith truly supports the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

The immediate proof of whether a religion really embodies salvation/liberation/transformation is displayed through the lives of the religious adherents. One who has successfully come into awareness of the Real will live a radically different life than one who has not. Each of the world's great religions contains *saints*, or people that have successfully learned to live beyond their selfishness, and thus testify to their legitimacy. Likewise, each religion has also produced its own share of great *sinner*s, people who use the foundation of the religion to do evil in the lives of others. Hick writes,

These traditions have all nurtured not only saints and leaders in righteousness who have given themselves for the welfare of their fellows, but also evil and demonic figures, leaders in aggression and aggrandisement, who have cruelly exploited and oppressed their fellows (84).

Because each tradition has each produced its share of righteousness and evil, it is impossible to rationally conclude that any one religion is morally or spiritually superior. However, this does not stop Hick from determining that we must accept that there are multiple correct religions:

The great world traditions have in fact all proved to be realms within which or routes along which people are enabled to advance in the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. And, since they reveal the Real in such different lights, we must conclude that they are independently valid (Hick, 44).

In other words, the proof is in the pudding. If a religious tradition has the ability to create saints, then it must have, at least to some extent, a path to salvation/liberation/transformation and an awareness of the Real. There will always be

bad eggs so to speak in each religion, but the fact that they all lead to this personal transformation testifies to their validity.

Hick's philosophical argument thus far is summed up in this quote:

Stated philosophically such a pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is manifestly taking place -- and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternate soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment (36-37).

Since human knowledge and experience is limited, and each of the great faith traditions appear to somewhat equally lead to a personal transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, Hick believes that we must conclude that each of these religious faiths must be valid responses to the ultimate divine Real.

However, each religion has much more to say than the simple message of transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. They all have absolute claims to which they passionately cling. Christians, for example, will whole-heartedly claim that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the human manifestation of God through which one attains salvation. Both Muslims and Jews would both passionately declare this as blasphemy! All of this goes to say that every one of the great religions cannot simply be boiled down to being simply about transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Each religion contains a complex set of beliefs and practices in which this transformation, as given by Hick, may be only a part of the end goal.

It may seem that talk of absolute claims within the various religious traditions would be an insurmountable roadblock Hick's theology of religious pluralism. However,

Hick cleverly dodges these tensions. Since he claims that the primary focus of any religion is to achieve salvation, every other doctrine is second to this. In fact, it cannot ever be scientifically proven for sure that Jesus was or was not the only Son of God. Nor can it be scientifically proven what is or is not the authoritative word of God. Since humanity can never know these things for certain, they must not be ultimately important.

*“But in practice the basic question of fact is so difficult to determine that it may well go on being discussed and disagreed about for a very long time or even for the rest of earthly history. In the meantime it is, I would suggest, an issue on which we should **learn to tolerate differences**. One should be able to recognize that a person who accepts reincarnation when one denies it, or who denies it when affirms it, might nevertheless be closer to the divine Reality than one is oneself; and **therefore that if someone is mistaken on this matter the mistake cannot be of ultimate importance**” (Hick, 90 *emphasis mine*).*

But many Christians will claim that due to their own *experience* in the faith they have come to a conviction that Jesus is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ However, if we accept that Christians can come to believe that their religion is valid simply because of their experiences, we must also allow for the Muslim, Hindu, Jew, and Buddhist the same right.

For, if it is rational for the Christian to believe in God on the basis of his or her distinctively Christian experience, it must by the same argument be rational for the Muslim to believe in the reality of Allah on the basis of the distinctively Islamic experience... (Hick, 103).

Finally, Hick has one more goal with his pluralist theology. When different religions meet with each other, “one may become aware of other aspects or dimensions of the Real, and of other possibilities of response to the Real, which had not been made effectively available by one’s own tradition” (Hick, 44). Thus, like Cobb, Hick is calling the world’s religions into dialogue with each other. Most importantly, this dialogue will lead not primarily to conversions but to “mutual enrichment and at co-operation in face of

the urgent problems of human survival in a just and sustainable world society” (Hick, 44). A world that understands that all of the great traditions are concerned with the same divine reality will be a much better place.

If every Christian and Muslim, every Hindu and Buddhist, fully incarnated their respective ideals, they would live in a basic acceptance and love of all their fellow human beings. For they would have turned away from the self-centeredness which is the source of acquisitiveness, dishonesty, injustice, and exploitation. A world which practiced the common ethical ideal of these traditions would have realized human brotherhood on earth. (Hick, 83).

In summary, Hick advances the theology of religious pluralism in multiple ways. First, he skillfully establishes that the Ultimate Reality, whatever it may be, is infinitely beyond human experience, and human experience is limited both individually and culturally. Second, Hick proposes that the Real has been active in all of the world’s great religions. The proof for this lies in a common soteriological function embedded within them. In other words, they have the same salvation/liberation/transformation at work within them—the transformation from self-centeredness to other or reality-centeredness. Finally, the acknowledgement of truth in each of the world’s great religions will lead to mutual growth toward the Real and a common push towards a more sustainable and cooperative world.

I believe that there are two main problems with Hick’s theology of religious pluralism. The first problem has to do with his assumption that the transformation of one’s human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is an indicator of one’s relationship with the Real.

The transformations of human existence which the different major visions produce appear, as we see them described in their scriptures and embodied in the lives of their saints, to be equally radical in their nature and equally impressive in their outcomes. Each involves a voluntary

renunciation of ego-centredness and a self-giving to, or self-losing in, the Real- a self-giving which brings acceptance, compassion, love for all humankind or even for all life (Hick, 81).

Essentially, what Hick is saying is that being a saint in a particular religious tradition shows that he or she has been transformed through the Real to be compassionate and to love all humankind. What is problematic with this is that simply because one is a saintly figure, it is assumed that it is one and the same Real to which they have voluntarily given themselves. Likewise, if one has not given his or her self to the Real, he or she must not be a saint! I would like to point out the many people in the world who have shown undeniable love for their common man and world yet do not attribute any of their transformation to a higher power outside of themselves or immediate world. The atheist can be ethical, for example, and surely they would be greatly offended to be told that they are ethical because they really do have ‘salvation’ in the divine, ultimate Real.

The second problem with Hick’s theology I believe lies on top of the first problem. Hick reduces all true religions to be first and foremost about the salvation/transformation/liberation that is displayed in the change from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Though each religion may have some other doctrines that they had taken to be of great importance, these cannot be of ultimate importance in the saving/transforming/liberating work. One such example of this is whether or not Jesus had an earthly father. There is much debate even among people in the Christian tradition. However, since we cannot be historically certain which case is true, “(it) can never be more than penultimately important” (Hick, 89).

The very fact that Hick could go ahead and claim that beliefs essential to a particular faith are not of primary importance is troubling. In order for his theology to

work, every religion is subject to his reductionist interpretation. What I mean by this is that Hick liberally cuts out of a religious tradition all of the beliefs and doctrines that cause tension with other religions and with his own theology. This is simply unacceptable for many believers of each of the great faiths! Harold Netland, the next author that I will discuss, writes concerning this problem:

...I argued that Hick's model is problematic because, although it purports to be an explanatory model that accounts for the data from the various religious traditions, it does so by reinterpreting the actual beliefs and practices of the religions in ways unacceptable to orthodox practitioners of the religions themselves (Netland, 323).

I believe that a workable theology that can deal with the modern religious climate must be approachable by the majority of the religion's adherents. Hick's model may very well be one that could bring forth cooperation in and relationship between the world's great traditions; however, I do not believe that it will ever be given a chance because it will never be accepted by most Christians, Jews, or Muslims. Only when a model is suggested that is acceptable to the majority of a religious community, will it then really be an avenue to inter-religious communication and cooperation.

Harold Netland

The final work that I will discuss is Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission by Harold Netland. Netland, by any stretch of the imagination, does not support the arguments brought forth by Cobb, Knitter, and Hick. In fact, Netland's work comes as a direct response to John Hick's argument for religious pluralism. In this work, he provides a defense of traditional Christian claims to the exclusivity of salvation through Christ. Yet, Netland also is attempting to solve the

same problem that Cobb, Knitter, and Hick all address: How can Christians both creatively and constructively live in peaceful coexistence with practitioners in other religious traditions? Knitter and Hick have come to the conclusion that a traditional Christianity is not equipped to deal with this difficult problem. Netland, on the other hand, begs to differ. He attempts to propose that evangelical Christianity is properly equipped to live and promote peaceful coexistence with those of other faith traditions.

The first thing that Netland wishes to establish is that the problem of multiple faiths is not new to Christianity. In addition to Christianity being birthed in a predominately Jewish and pagan culture, it did not swiftly enter a theological fortress protected from other great faiths. In particular, Christianity has found itself confronted with Islam for quite some time. Netland quotes Robert Wilken in his book,

Since the seventh century a large part of the Christian world, Christians residing in the Eastern Mediterranean, for example, in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, have lived in the face of the seemingly invincible presence of Islam, and at a later date Christians in the great Orthodox capital of Constantinople, as well as those in Greece, Bulgaria, and neighboring regions, had to adjust life under the rule of Ottoman Turks (Netland, 11).

If Christianity has encountered other religions throughout history, why is religious pluralism such a growing topic in religious debate? I believe that Netland strikes the heart of the issue. He writes,

At its (religious pluralism's) heart is the conviction that sincere and morally respectable people simply cannot be mistaken about basic religious beliefs, especially when such beliefs and practices have beneficial effects for the participants....God will accept sincere and good people of whatever faith (and therefore all religions are legitimate options)... (14).

So then, Netland believes that the modern discussion of religious pluralism has sprung out of compassion and respect for others. What is different about the world scene today

that separates it from centuries ago is that today the West is confronted with a deep desire to promote peace and tolerance. This is in response to the horrors of the crusades, religious wars, and most recently, the Holocaust. The nightmarish past has created a new social climate in the West that demands tolerance. Today talk of religious pluralism addresses the question: “Surely good people don’t go to hell, do they?” This is a troubling question indeed for the Christian who believes in a righteous and loving God. In the face of the modern concern for tolerance and peace, exclusivist claims that Christianity has sole access to truth appears bigoted and hurtful. Thus it has not been a surprise to find such a push towards a transformation of Christianity to religious pluralism in the works of Hick, Cobb, and Knitter. Yet, Netland stands against this current, claiming that traditional evangelical Christianity can effectively answer the concern for peace and salvation in the world. In this following section I will outline Netland’s qualms with Hick’s proposal.

One of the key problems that Netland has with Hick’s model is that it offers a reductionistic picture of religions. In essence, in order for Hick to develop a working model of religious pluralism, he needs to reinterpret deep-seated religious beliefs in troubling ways.

Hick’s treatment of beliefs from different religions is frequently reductionistic, and he freely reinterprets troublesome doctrines so as to accommodate them within his theory... although it purports to be an explanatory model that accounts for the data from the various religious traditions, it does so by reinterpreting the actual beliefs and practices of the religions in ways unacceptable to orthodox practitioners of the religions themselves (Netland, 232).

Most particularly, Netland claims that Hick wants to hold that all religions really are focused on a small fragment of the Religious Ultimate. This is greatly rejected by the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist faiths.

First, Hick's theory fails to account satisfactory for the fact that each tradition ascribes ultimacy to its particular conception of the religious ultimate....Orthodox followers of each of these traditions would vigorously resist the suggestion that their particular conception of the ultimate is in fact merely a penultimate manifestation of what is truly ultimate—the Real (Netland, 235).

Another problem that Netland has with Hick's theological proposal regards the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Netland does commend Hick for recognizing "that all major traditions are all concerned in some sense with the theme of salvation (or liberation or enlightenment)" (Netland, 236). Nevertheless, each religion has a completely different idea what that in fact means.

...each tradition would provide strikingly different meanings to this formula. What does it mean to be transformed from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness? What does "self-centeredness" mean? The mistaken belief in a substantial, enduring ego, as Buddhists argue? Or the sinful tendency of the individual human beings to regard themselves-and not God- as the object of ultimate concern, as Christians maintain? (Netland 236)

Likewise, Hick is not precise on what "Reality-centeredness" means. Is it nirvana or acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Something else? Hick is careful not to describe his view of salvation in any particular detail.

Hick greatly minimizes soteriological differences by speaking as if all religions share a common goal and understanding of the nature of salvation. But surely this is misleading....Hick is adopting a kind of lowest-common-denominator soteriology resulting in a strictly formal formula that ignores central aspects of the soteriology of the various religions (Netland, 237).

Hick's reductionist look at the soteriological work within the world's great religions does seem to oversimplify their deep-seated belief sets.

Next I will discuss Netland's theological picture that he believes can effectively deal with the modern problem of religious pluralism. As I have mentioned before, Netland will attempt to argue that Christianity itself is already capable of dealing with believers of other traditions in a loving and understanding way. In doing so, he highlights six key biblical understandings that will be acceptable to evangelical Christianity. Discussion of these will adequately explain and clarify his position.

1. "*The one eternal God is holy and righteous in all his ways*" (Netland, 315). Christians can have confidence that whatever the fate of any individual on the earth, it will be decided justly. "As morally pure, God is also completely righteous and just (Ps 7:9, 11; 103:6; 145:17...)" (Netland, 315). Christians need not fear that God will unjustly punish the undeserving.

2. "*God has sovereignly created all things, including human beings, who are made in the image of God*" (Netland, 315). Netland refers to a quote by D.A. Carson in *Gagging of God* that states,

The least that "image of God" language suggests, in addition to human personhood, is that human beings are not simply hairless apes with cranial capacities slightly larger than those of other primates, but that we are accorded an astonishing dignity; that human beings are moral creatures with special privileges and responsibilities; that there is implanted within us a profound capacity for knowing God intimately, however much we have distorted that capacity... (Netland, 316).

Human beings, then, have the special advantage of coming to knowledge in God precisely because God made them that way.

3. “*God has graciously taken the initiative in revealing himself to humankind, and although God’s revelation comes in various forms, the definitive revelation for us is the written Scriptures*” (Netland, 316). There exists two kinds of revelation about God, general revelation and special revelation. “Through general revelation humanity can understand that God exists, that he is the eternal Creator, that he is righteous and should be worshiped and that we should do what is right and refrain from doing what is wrong (Rom. 1:19-20; 2:14-15)” (Netland, 317). General revelation is common to the human experience and it claims that some knowledge of God can be found through interaction with the world and universe. Special revelation is something that is given directly from God to a particular person at a particular moment in time. “Special revelation is today usually associated with God’s written revelation, the Bible, so that by “special revelation” we normally mean the written scriptures” (Netland, 317). In other words, special revelation is information that is given to us directly by God. The definitive, most enlightening revelation was placed “in the incarnation of Jesus” (Netland, 317). However, Netland also is careful to note that special revelation has occurred to people directly,

...not only the patriarchs, prophets and apostles but also Abimelech of Gerar (Gen 20:3), the Egyptian pharaoh (Gen 41), Balaam (Num 22), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2, 4) and the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:3-5) (Netland 318).

Although God has shown Himself to occasionally reveal Himself directly to individuals, Christians have come to understand that “...it is the Bible that is ultimately authoritative for believers and must shape our understanding of religious others” (Netland, 318). The bible, then, stands as the first source of knowledge about God and can be used to weigh the validity of other ‘revelations’ one may receive.

4. “*God’s creation, including humankind, has been corrupted by sin*” (Netland, 318). From the evangelical viewpoint, this is the key issue when discussing religious pluralism. According to Christian doctrine sin “includes a condition of alienation from God” (Netland, 318). That is, human beings naturally find themselves distanced from God due to their sin and wrong doings. And unfortunately, there are not even a few people who have overcome this sin for “all people are sinners” (Netland, 318). Thus, there is not even one person who can come to a wholly correct, unadulterated knowledge of God. The theologians Hick and Knitter, who believe that all of the great religious traditions have a relationship with God, often overlook this. Netland agrees with Chris Wright who has said,

I find it a frustrating exercise reading the work of religious pluralists because they tend to be so vague and inadequate on what salvation actually is. And that in turn seems to me largely because they ignore the Hebrew Bible’s insight on the nature and seriousness of sin (Netland, 319).

Humankind is then distinctively alienated from God because of their sin. If Netland’s theology stopped here, mankind would be doomed to eternal separation from God. Yet, he continues:

5. “*In his mercy God has provided a way, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross, for sinful persons to be reconciled to God*” (Netland, 319). This is the crux of the evangelical faith. God himself took the initiative for all humanity to be able to have relationship with him. This is nothing that any human could have done on his or her own. “Salvation—the work of God’s grace and not the result of human effort or good works—must be appropriated through an act of faith in God (Eph 2:8-10)” (Netland, 319). For without Jesus, mankind is hopeless. “Although God detests sin and

evil, he is also a God of love and mercy whose compassion extends to people in all cultures, including followers of other religions” (Netland, 319). It is then because of God’s goodness that humanity may have a renewed relationship with him.

We need to take a moment here to discuss Netland’s understanding of religious others in our world around us. Specifically Netland asks, “What is the fate of those who never hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?” (Netland, 320). All people do indeed stand in judgment for their sin, and evangelicals hold that “although ultimately not everyone will be saved, God is entirely just and fair in his dealings with humankind. No one is condemned by God unfairly” (Netland, 320).

There are a particular group of evangelical Christians who deeply believe that without explicitly expressed faith in Jesus Christ, one cannot receive salvation.

Many evangelicals, including John Piper, Ronald Nash, R. C. Sproul and Carl F. H. Henry, hold that only those who hear the gospel and explicitly respond in faith to Jesus in this life can be saved. Explicit knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ is thus essential for salvation, and there is no hope for those who pass from this life without having come into contact with the gospel (Netland, 320).

In other words, a renewed connection with God through Jesus Christ can only occur if one comes into expressed knowledge of Jesus and his work on earth. While this belief is definitely arguable through the Old and New Testaments, other evangelical Christians find this problematic. It would seem that an infinitely loving and just God is not entirely loving or just to inhabitants of remote villages and landscapes that have, to a large extent, been geographically distanced from the message of Jesus. Would it not imply that these particular individuals are not receiving the same love found in Jesus Christ?

Thus another strand of thought has emerged within evangelical Christendom.

On the other hand, there is a “wider hope” perspective of Clark Pinnock, John Sanders and others that insists that we can expect large numbers of those who never hear the gospel to be saved. Although Jesus Christ is the one Savior for all humankind, and although salvation is possible only because of Christ’s work on the cross, one need not know about Jesus Christ in order to be saved (Netland, 321).

Netland quickly clarifies that many theologians in this category will state that “we simply do not know whether this occurs at all, or if so, how many might be saved in this manner” (Netland, 321). Nor is it attempting to say that “one can be saved by being a sincere follower of another religion or by being sufficiently good” (Netland, 321). In any circumstance, salvation is given by God’s grace and mercy towards man. “Salvation is always a gift of God’s grace on the basis of Christ’s atonement” (322). Netland uses a helpful quote from J. I. Packer:

We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker’s mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (cf Acts 10:34f; Rom. 10:12(f)); (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ. But what we cannot safely say is that God ever does save anyone in this way. We simply do not know” (Netland, 322).

Evangelical Christians must take clear note of the end of this statement. While we must never limit God’s ability to save lost souls, we must recognize that the common clear pattern expressed in the New Testament “is for people first to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and then to respond by God’s grace to the gospel in saving faith” (Netland, 323). Thus we are led to Netland’s sixth and final biblical understanding that evangelical Christians must hold to.

6. *“The community of the redeemed are to share the gospel of Jesus Christ and to make disciples of all peoples, including sincere adherents of other religious traditions, so that God is honored and worshiped throughout the earth” (Netland, 323).* This means

that Christians have not only the duty but also the privilege to share their intimate relationship with God with every person on the planet in a loving and compassionate way. “It should be prompted by compassion for the lost who need to hear the gospel (Jn 3:16, 18, 36; Rom 1:16-17)” (Netland, 324). If a Christian truly believes that they have found life within the message of Jesus, they absolutely must have the utmost desire to share this precious gift with others.

This is not to overlook that Christians have committed atrocities under the guise of sharing the gospel and making disciples, yet this should not keep the Christians of today from sharing their great faiths with others. To do so appropriately, Christians must gain a fair and true understanding of the different religions’ beliefs on earth. “An adequate theology of religions must accurately reflect the beliefs and practices of the religious traditions” (Netland, 325). In doing so “we should recognize both continuities and discontinuities” found in the relationship of other faiths to our own (Netland, 327). Yet when it all comes down to it, there must be a decision made by any man or woman. This profound question is of Jesus Christ—“Who do people say I am?” (Mk 8:27). Evangelical Christians believe that Jesus is the one true saving force within all history, and accordingly, Christians must focus on this above all else.

In summary, Netland offers a unique understanding of Christianity and its relationship to other religions. While he holds that truth may be indeed found in the beliefs of others, “...we should expect that in the religious dimensions of human experience there exists elements of both good and evil...”, evangelical Christians must remain true to their faith in the soteriological power of Jesus Christ alone (Netland, 328). True, while it may not be entirely clear what the relationship of man to Christ may look

like in every circumstance, Christians have the duty to share their faith and convictions with the world in a loving way. Humanity, according to Netland, must realize above all that it is not religious institutions themselves, but relationship with the Divine Creator that leads to meaningful salvation. “It is often our religiosity (even “Christian” religiosity)—our attempts to try to impress God or to earn his favor through following carefully prescribed religious rituals and rules—that keeps us furthest away from him” (Netland, 335). Christians must share their knowledge of Jesus Christ not because they wish to grow their religion or the size of their church, but because they believe that they have a real and personal relationship with the Divine God of the Universe.

Finally, Netland believes that this evangelical theology of religions will help promote peace and understanding in the world. However, the absolute goal of any dialogue or interaction with other faiths is to share what they believe to be the Truth of Jesus Christ as Savior for all humankind.

The church must demonstrate through its actions, not merely its words, that we do accept ethnic and cultural diversity, that we are committed to justice for all and that we will support the rights of other religious communities to live and practice in our midst. But, at the same time we cannot abandon our commitment to Jesus Christ as the one Lord and Savior for all humankind (Netland, 347).

In the end, Christians must accept that every individual has the right to choose to follow Christ or to deny him. They must not attempt to force conversions. They must love justice and these rights of others because that is what their faith commands them to. While there will undoubtedly be disagreements among different faiths, this kind of Christianity will be able to lovingly and constructively live alongside differing beliefs of religious truth.

There will undoubtedly be some critics of Netland's theology. Specifically, there will be Christians who will maintain that only explicit knowledge of Christ can lead to salvation. Likewise, there will also be Christians made uneasy with the Netland's continued claim that not all men and women will be saved from their sin. Nevertheless, I believe that Netland's proposal is one that will find a reasonable amount of supporters in the evangelical tradition and will encourage them to peacefully and lovingly share their faith with religious others across the globe.

Netland's theology is first and foremost an evangelical Christian theology. He starts with the basic assumptions found in most evangelical Christian circles and will undoubtedly be rejected by other faiths. However, I would also argue that none of the other proposals would be received with open arms either. What Netland does provide is a constructive framework in which evangelical Christians can passionately and peacefully live out their lives amongst the many religious others.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to display in this work is a truthful and accurate description of some of the most established suggestions to the problem of plurality of religions in the world today. Each of these men have suggested new theological frameworks that Christians might be able to live in that will promote peace and constructive coexistence. However, through the course of my study, I have come to believe that some of these men have offered better proposals than others. I have already discussed in this essay some of the overriding problems of each of the proposals. Yet, in the end I am left with one final critique.

If Christians are going to enter into a peaceful and constructive coexistence with members of different faith communities, they must do so through a theological framework that they can accept. Unfortunately, I believe that Knitter and Hick fail in this respect. Knitter has proposed a theological framework that would require Christians to radically change their millennia-old understanding of Jesus Christ—namely his divinity and exclusivity. Hick, on the other hand, tries to claim that all of the great religions are really talk about the same salvation/transformation/liberation at work. In doing so, he offers a vague reductionist picture of salvation that I do not believe members of most faiths would feel comfortable accepting.

Cobb indeed offers a helpful new way of looking at other faiths in encouraging dialogue and mutual transformation. Unfortunately, what this mutual transformation is, in fact, is not clear, nor is it helpful for individuals who believe that they have a much more correct understanding of the divine than their neighbor and so are not open to criticism.

This leaves us with Netland's proposal. I believe that Netland has skillfully shown that evangelical Christians can live in good relations with persons of other faiths simply through well thought-out discussion of Christianity's core faith and scriptures. I believe that evangelical Christians will be able to, more than through any of the other authors, come to understand that they can live in friendship and peace with their neighbors across the yard and across the seas. It is a proposal that still places utmost importance on faith in Jesus Christ and his divinity—something that evangelical Christians will not be forfeiting of any time soon.

It is true that Netland's work is not helpful to adherents of religions other than Christianity. Yet, I think that this is preferable. I believe that if a religion is going to

embrace a movement that promotes peace and understanding with other faiths, this movement must come from within the specific religion itself. An outsider dictating that another's religion should believe certain dogmas but not others will undoubtedly be ignored. I believe that Netland, from an insider position, offers a framework for how evangelical Christians can interact positively with followers of other religions. Likewise, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism all need proposals from within their respective traditions that promote peace and understanding between the great faiths. To me, it does not seem arrogant if each religion is convinced that it is the normative way for interacting and coming into relationship with the divine. As Cobb said, "The best dialogue occurs when the partners are deeply convinced of many things" (45). Adherents of each religious tradition should not be expected to check their deepest beliefs at the door when they meet with persons of other faiths. Christians should still be convinced that Jesus is the Son of God and Muslims should still very much agree.

Since Netland has offered a positive framework that is acceptable to the majority of evangelical Christianity, I believe that he has helped open a doorway for Christians to interact peacefully with believers of other religious traditions. Yes, Christians are still permitted to believe that their new friends are mistaken about some of their core beliefs, but they are also reminded that they themselves do not have a comprehensive knowledge of the Divine. Hopefully, once Christians see others as people that they can teach and perhaps learn from, believers of other religious traditions may also seek to build such relationships on their own end. Such relationships between the great faiths will undoubtedly be passionate and argumentative at times, but I believe that these friendships

will indeed both humanize religious others and encourage the individual's religious faith to grow.

Hopefully Netland's work, as well as others, will encourage Christians to think about their faith and their relationship with others with new fervor. I suspect that if Christians take the first step to understanding and befriending their neighbors around the world, they will find that all men and women have more in common than the differences. Friendships build trust. Trust builds peace. Only through this most important work can we hope that the twenty-first century will lead to a better world.

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