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Religious Pluralism and John Hick

THE PLURALISTIC SITUATION

More than any other time in the history of Western civilization, we are living today in a period of increasing religious plurality. It is becoming more common for persons living in many of the urban and suburban cities in the United States and around the world to have neighbors and acquaintances that are Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. In addition to familiar church buildings, it is now commonplace to find synagogues, mosques, and temples in many cities and even rural areas. The estimated Muslim population in the United States is now five million and growing.[1] Already by September of 2000, there were over twelve hundred Islamic centers of worship throughout the United States serving Muslims from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, as well as other parts of Africa and Asia.[2] With the help of some highly publicized films and numerous celebrity endorsements, Buddhism has also been in the midst of an awakening in American culture.[3] The yellow pages of any telephone book in the United States now list enough alternatives under *churches* to counter anyone who feels uneasy referring to pluralism as merely the plurality of churches. In any given bookstore throughout United States, one can now find as many books on non-Christian religions as on Christian ones in its religion section.

1. *The World Almanac*, 682.

2. Bagby, Perl, and Froele, *The Mosque in America*, 1.

3. There were over 2.8 million Americans practicing one of several streams of Buddhist faith by 2007 according to *The World Almanac 2009*, 681.

Diversities of religions are, of course, nothing new in the history of humankind. In the East, especially, the world has always been characterized by religious pluralism. In China, Korea, and Japan, for example, many of the world's major religious traditions, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, have coexisted side by side in relative harmony with indigenous folk religions.[4] In these Far Eastern countries, the great religious traditions have been so interrelated and integrated that they are often treated as a unified system. In India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Jain, Sikh, and Islamic traditions, have coexisted for hundreds—in some cases many hundreds—of years. Hinduism is, in particular, perhaps the most variegated phenomenon in the world of religions. In fact, Hinduism may legitimately be viewed as a collection of religious traditions, not only in the sense of embracing its own diverse religious roots, which have gone through many drastic changes, but also in its willingness to accept members of the other faiths of especially Indian origin, namely, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs.[5] In this sense, Hinduism may be viewed not so much as a single religious system as a plurality of systems, not all of which are always consistent with one another.

From its inception, Christianity was set within a richly pluralistic context of rival religions and competing intellectual convictions.[6] The emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, the expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, and the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome meant that the early church had to find its own place among the plurality of existing religions. Not only was Christianity forced to interact with the various schools of philosophical thought, including Platonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Skepticism, and Gnosticism; it had to contend with Greek and Roman polytheism

4. Folk religions in these Far Eastern countries include the worship of various deities of native origin, reverence of ancestors, propitiation of ghosts and demons, astrology, geomancy, and spirit mediums, all of which are eclectically mixed together with the so-called "Three Teachings." Chinese folk religion includes an understanding of the spiritual dimensions operated by beings resembling earthly rulers and officials. In Korea, Shamanism (and in Japan, Shintoism) is the most popular expression of folk religion. See Jochim, *Chinese Religions*, 12–16, and Lewis and Travis, *Traditions,* 328–36.

5. Sharma, "Hinduism," 4.

6. W. C. Smith, who insists that the early church had to deal with only two spiritual movements, namely, Greek philosophy and the Roman Empire, rejects this point. See Smith, "Mission," 361.

and myths, as well as Roman state religion and emperor worship. In addition, the various mystery religions of Greek, Egyptian, and Oriental origins,[7] as well as syncretistic cults and local superstitious practices, all contributed to the early Christian environment of multifaceted and vigorous religious pluralism.

After Constantine and Licinius made Christianity a legally sanctioned religion in 313 CE, however, Christianity emerged from being a minor movement fighting for its place in society to becoming a dominant and exclusive religion of the empire. Elements of other religions were either absorbed into Christianity or marginalized to the point of gradually disappearing altogether. During the Middle Ages, the Christian church became increasingly exclusive as it became ever more isolated from other religious traditions. Barring a few deviations in the unfortunate and regrettable skirmishes with Muslims, and the outlandish tales of the East told by adventurous travelers and missionaries, the West paced along much of its history in insulated obliviousness to other major world traditions. Even in the age of the Roman Catholic missions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the age of Protestant missions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the absoluteness of Christianity was essentially undisputed in the Western world. The substantial majority of the people in the West lived much of their lives with little, if any, direct exposure to other religions until well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[8]

In contrast to much of Western history, the twentieth century has been a period of greatly increased awareness of other cultures and religious traditions in the West, both in Europe and in the United States. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the United States had already become, in Will Herberg's words, a "Protestant-Catholic-Jewish" country. Since the 1960s, the growth of Eastern and other non-Christian religions in the West has been both unprecedented and unparalleled. Especially following World War II, a large percentage of the West's population has had

7. These include the mystery cults of Eleusis originating from Greece, the cult of Mithra from Persia, that of Isis and Osiris or Serapis from Egypt, Cybele from Asia, and many local cults.

8. In America, the Constitution of 1789 legally disestablishing religion on a national level allowed for "Protestant pluralism," that is, a type of pluralism among the different Protestant groups. Early Catholics and Jews experienced prejudice despite the law's protection. Although religious diversity was on the increase during the nineteenth century, such pluralism had little impact on American culture until the twentieth century.

direct and personal contact with persons from other religious faiths due to increased international travel and massive immigrations from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.[9] Indirectly, developments in new and modern methods of electronic communication, especially television and computers, have exposed various religious traditions to the West, making it impossible today to live in religious isolation. The twentieth century has also been a period of rapidly accelerated sharing of theological and religious scholarship. In the last hundred years or so, the study of world religions in the West has made possible a relatively accurate appreciation of the different faiths and religious claims. Religious literature is now widely available to everyone at local bookstores. As one commentator has astutely observed concerning these developments, the twentieth century which began in the United States as a much heralded "Christian Century" appears at its conclusion to have been the "Century of Religious Pluralism."[10]

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

Having entered into a new century, indeed a new millennium, we have every reason to expect an increased and accelerated process of globalization and pluralization of the world communities. Without doubt, such developments will only serve to further heighten the various and exasperating problems connected with religious pluralism. In particular, Christianity will have to fundamentally reconsider its theology and its practical relationships to other religious traditions. Why does such contemporary awareness of religious plurality pose serious questions for Christianity? And what exactly are the theological problems associated with pluralism? If Paul Tillich was at all correct in describing religion as a matter of *ultimate concern*, it is not at all difficult to imagine why today's unprecedented situation of plurality is posing such serious theo-

9. To be sure, the growth in religious pluralism was more characteristic of the last third of the century than the first two-thirds, due largely to the influx of non-Western immigrants resulting from changes in the immigration law in 1965 eliminating rigid quotas against non-European immigrants. Many of today's twenty to thirty-year-old Muslims, for example, are the children of parents who immigrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Approximately 24 percent of the Muslim population in the United States is of South Asian descent; Arabs make up another 12 percent; 42 percent are African-American converts; 21 percent come from other backgrounds. Power, "The New Islam," *Time,* 34–37.

10. Lindner, "Trends."

logical problems for Christianity, given its increasing awareness of other ultimate claims in conflict with its own. For Christian communities, the problem of religious pluralism involves nothing less than a foundational and sometimes very painful reexamination of the core doctrines of Christology and soteriology.

A great number of factors could be mentioned as to why the heightened consciousness of plurality is causing Christians to reexamine their christological and soteriological doctrines. Here I shall restrict myself, however, to three main reasons.[11] To begin with, there is a growing awareness, produced by the increased contact with non-Christian cultures, that the Christian faith is held today by a minority of the human race.[12] As we approach the beginning of the twenty-first century, Christians still constitute only about one-third of the world's population. Complicating this picture is the renewed awareness of fact that the vast majority of the human race has died without ever hearing about Jesus Christ. It is estimated that in 100 CE there were 181 million people, of whom one million were Christians.[13] By the year 1000 there were 270 million people, 50 million of whom were Christians. In 1989 there were 5.2 billion people, with 1.7 billion Christians. By the year 2000, there were 2.2 billion people who identify themselves as members of the Christian church, but one billion people in the world who still have not come into contact with Christianity, let alone become its converts.[14]

Another problem concerns the fact that the majority of the world's population is not simply non-Christian; they are followers of the other major religious faiths. In the year 2007, for example, it was estimated that there were 1.4 billion followers of Islam in the world, Muslims being the fastest growing major religious group due largely to a high birth rate.[15] There were also 876 million Hindus, largely in India, and 386 million people who were Buddhists.[16] In the great majority of these cases, as Hick points out, the religion to which a person adheres depend upon

11. I am indebted to John Hick for citing a number of factors that may cause contemporary Christians to be troubled by the current situation of religious plurality.

12. John Hick makes this point in his book, *Many Names,* 60–61.

13. These figures are taken from *World Christian Encyclopedia,* cited in Sanders, *What About Those*, 9.

14. Barrett and Johnson, *A.D. 2000 Monitor*.

15. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2009*, 682.

16. Ibid.

the time, location, and accident of birth.[17] When someone is born to Buddhist parents in a Buddhist culture, for example, that person is very likely to be a Buddhist, as someone born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan would very likely be a Muslim. Furthermore, there seems to be an additional complication to this picture in the fact that conversions from one great religious tradition to another seem to be marginal. The most successful missionary efforts of the great faiths continue to be "downwards" into relative primitive religions rather than "sideways" into territories dominated by another world faith.[18]

A third problem emerges from the fact that we can readily observe many striking similarities among the various great religions of the world. Although there may be great differences, the many religions are all agreed in affirming an existence of a higher reality, however diversely conceived. Among the monotheistic religions, there is a common belief in a supreme God who, as the personal creator of the universe, makes moral demands upon the lives of men and women. There is furthermore a certain recognizable familiarity in the various forms of worship, prayers, and hymns.[19] The various traditions all teach the principles of moral goodness, including kindness, generosity, forgiveness, love, and compassion. The Golden Rule, in its positive and negative forms, is likewise taught in many of the major religions. And finally, all the major religious traditions have evidence of saints, prophets, martyrs, and mystics whose lives demonstrate a deep sense of the divine as expressed in spiritual and moral fruits.[20]

What theological questions are raised by such problems posed by our heightened awareness of plurality? First and foremost, the central theological issue of religious pluralism is the christological one—"Who do you say that I am?" Christianity has traditionally affirmed that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the only savior and the sole mediator between God and human beings. As personal contact with adherents of other religions increases, however, this belief is increasingly being questioned. Paul Knitter has described the underlying question of Jesus' uniqueness as the "gadfly-question."[21] Is Jesus unique among the religious

17. Hick, *Many Names,* 61.
18. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 138.
19. Hick, *Many Names,* 62–66.
20. Hick, *Interpretation*, 309–15.
21. Knitter, *No Other Name*, 171.

figures of history? If so how? In other words, is Jesus Christ as the absolute and final revelation of God, uniquely different from Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Abraham, Moses, or Muhammad? Should Christians continue to believe in Jesus Christ as the *only* savior, and not just one among many saviors? And, perhaps most importantly, in what sense are we to understand Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God who is fully human and fully divine, if any? These are extremely important christological issues raised by religious pluralism because the basic creedal affirmation that "the Lord Jesus Christ is God and Savior" has always been, and continues to be, foundational to the Christian self identity.[22] Religious pluralism, however, questions this foundational essence, the inner core and, indeed, the very self-identity of the Christian faith.

Closely related to the problems of Christology, religious pluralism also raises important series of soteriological questions about the eternal destiny of those who adhere to other religious traditions. How can Christian theology reconcile the notion of there being one, and only one, savior with a belief in God's universal saving activity? If only one-third of the world's population professes faith in Christ, what is Christ's relationship to the other two-thirds? What is the fate of those who have not, through no fault of their own, ever heard the gospel? Will God allow the majority of the human race to be excluded from salvation? Is Christianity simply one religion among others, the one that we happened to be born into? Is there hope of salvation for the followers of other religions? If there isn't, why not? If there is, are members of other religious traditions saved *through* their religions or *in spite of* them? Is there only "one way" to salvation, as traditional Christian theology has always affirmed, or are there many divergent paths? Are different religions different paths to a common salvific goal? Are the concepts of salvation the same for different religions? Are these paths convergent, complementary, or divergent?

Given the fact that the vast majority of the human race has died without ever hearing the gospel of Christ and that a large proportion of today's world population adheres to other religious traditions, are not

22. For example, the World Council of Churches understands its identity as "a fellowship of churches which confess the *Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior* according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (emphasis added), in Lihat, "Ecumenical Foundations," 11.

Christians bound to ask whether there is only "one way" to salvation, as Christian theology has traditionally affirmed, or whether there are many divergent paths? And given the fact that what religion one holds is largely a consequence of where one was born, and the fact that the quality of moral and spiritual life among adherents of other religions is often exemplary, must we not believe that God will provide saviors in other cultures? Should Christian theology continue to maintain that there is no salvation outside of Christianity? In the past, Christians have firmly maintained that those who reject Christ are eternally lost and that other religions do not offer salvation in Christ. As personal contact and relationships with adherents of other religions increases, however, this belief is increasingly becoming a painful subject. It is no longer simply a theoretical issue requiring a theoretical answer; it has today become a deeply personal issue concerning the eternal destiny of people with whom we now have personal relationships.

The seriousness of the growing awareness of religious plurality is hard to overestimate. The world's other religions present a challenge to Christianity not only because their worldviews and ultimate commitments conflict with our own, but also because their visible influence is growing in the United States and throughout the world. Canon Max Warren, the former general secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London, was absolutely right when he prophetically argued in 1958 that "the impact of agnostic science will turn out to have been as child's play compared to the challenge to Christian theology of the faith of other men."[23] As we have now entered into the twenty-first century, very few theological issues have become as important as religious pluralism. Carl E. Braaten is surely correct when he observes: "The question whether there is the promise of salvation in the name of Jesus, and in no other name, is fast becoming a life-and-death issue facing contemporary Christianity. In the churches this issue will become the test of fidelity to the gospel, a matter of status *confessionis* more urgent than any other."[24]

TYPES OF THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

In response to the problems and questions posed by religious diversity, Christians have tended to respond in one of several ways. Ever since

23. As quoted in Smith, "The Christian," 91.

24. Braaten, *No Other Gospel,* 89.

theologian Alan Race adopted the terms *exclusivism, inclusivism,* and *pluralism*, it has become commonplace to situate the current theologies of religion within one of these three broad types.[25] As with any simple typology, however, these terms are not without problems due to the many variations of use within each of the categories. A certain degree of ambiguity is bound to exist as different philosophers and theologians use each of these terms with different shades of meaning in mind. Some have used these typologies primarily in relation to truth claims these religions make, while others have used them in reference to the closely related claims about revelation, salvation, and praxis. Despite the various problems associated with the broad typologies, these three paradigms have become so fundamental to the current Christian discussion of religious pluralism that it would be fruitless to try to avoid or replace them. In the following, I will attempt to offer a brief description and comparison of each of the three positions.

Religious Exclusivism

Traditionally, the most common Christian response to the problem of religious plurality has been exclusivism. In terms of the question of truth, this position maintains that the central claims of Christianity are true, and that the truth claims of non-Christian religions must be rejected as false when in conflict with the claims of Christianity.[26] This is simply based on the law of non-contradiction: if two religions make logically contradictory claims, these claims cannot both be true. In reference to the category of revelation, exclusivism counts Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions, including Christianity, can and must be understood.[27] God has been revealed in a full and definitive way in Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God. As such, the revelation in Jesus is absolute and unsurpassable. As to salvation, Christ is the only savior of the world, and therefore Christianity offers the only valid means of salvation; or even more narrowly, in the traditional Catholic dogma, that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation"). Other religions are largely zones of darkness. In some theological

25. Race, *Christians*.

26. According to Harold Netland, Christian exclusivism does not entail that all of the claims of other religions must be false or that they are completely without value. See Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 9, 35.

27. Race, *Christians,* 11.

circles, the terms *restrictivism* and *particularism* are sometimes used almost interchangeably with exclusivism. Though related, these terms are not synonymous, however. *Restrictivism* emphasizes that salvation is limited to those who hear about and come to faith in Christ before they die.[28] *Particularists* argue, on the other hand, that salvation is available only though faith in God's special acts in history culminating in Jesus Christ?[29]

Historically, the roots of Christian exclusivism can be traced all the way back to the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Pentateuch, the foundational narratives of the Hebrews, Yahweh's self-revelation to Israel critiques all other gods and religion because truth and salvation are understood to come from Yahweh alone. When Yahweh delivered Israel out of Egypt and lead the people to Canaan, Yahweh was recognized not only as radically different from other gods but as the only true God (Deut 4:35, 39). The salvation of Israel was seen as belonging to Yahweh alone, and gods or idols of the surrounding nations incapable of saving them. Indeed, the Ten Commandments, the first two in particular, were premised on and pertained to Yahweh's exclusive claims against other gods and religions:

> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. (Exod 20:2–5)

Whatever pluralism may have existed in their past, it was no longer to be tolerated in light of Yahweh's acts of redemption, and the Israelites were called to put away the gods of Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia and constantly renew their covenant relationship with God as unique among the nations (Job 24:14–28). Throughout her history, pagan idolatrous beliefs and practices were explicitly and repeatedly denounced (Ps 115, Isa 40:18–20, Jer 10:1–16).

The New Testament also perpetuates this strict monotheism in the belief that one eternal God was decisively revealed to humankind through Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel of John testifies to Jesus' claim that "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father

28. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 37.

29. Okholm and Phillips, *More Than One Way,* 17.

except through me" (John 14:6). The Apostle Peter's proclamation is also that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

As with the earliest Jewish Christians who inherited the attitude of Second Temple Judaism toward pagan religions, Christians in the second and third centuries largely shared similar negative dispositions toward non-Christian religions as having demonic origins, causing evil to humanity, and bringing about God's judgment.[30] Concerning the eternal destiny of the unevangelized, the exclusivist stance of the early church was best expressed in the famous dictum of Origen and Cyprian (c. 200–58), repeated down through the centuries: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation"). This exclusivist idea found further affirmation in Augustine, the Athanasian Creed, Innocent III, and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), but perhaps its clearest Roman Catholic statement comes from the Council of Florence (1438–45):

> It firmly believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart "into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels" [Matt 25:41] unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock; and that the unity of the ecclesiastical body is so strong that only to those remaining in it are the sacraments of the Church of benefit for salvation, and do fastings, almsgiving, and other functions of piety and exercises of Christian service produce eternal reward, and that no one, whatever almsgiving he practiced, even if he has shed blood for the name of Christ, can be saved, unless he has remained in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.[31]

The Council of Trent (1545–63), Gregory XVI (1831–46), and Pius IX (1846–48) represent further developments of the dogma.[32]

In contrast to Roman Catholics, Protestants have tended to downplay the exclusive role of the church while emphasizing that there is no salvation outside of the Christian faith and belief in Jesus Christ. Thus, it has tended to be more christocentric in form. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Philip Melanchthon among the Reformers; and Karl

30. Sigountos, "Did Early Christians Believe," 231–35.

31. Denzinger, *The Sources,* 39, 40.

32. See Erickson, *How*, 34–41.

Barth, Emil Brunner, Hendrik Kraemer, Lesslie Newbigin, and Carl F. H. Henry—more recent Protestant theologians—have defended the various christocentric forms of the exclusivist doctrine.[33]

In the last several decades, the exclusivist position has come under severe criticisms. John Hick has criticized exclusivism for radically casting doubt on the Christian conception of God as gracious and holy love, and on Christ as the divine love incarnate. Hick has insisted, furthermore, on a correlation between the exclusivist's entirely negative attitude of other faiths to the average Christian's ignorance and distorted conceptions of them.[34] Alan Race has charged exclusivism with depending on purely Christian theological principles, such as a Christian understanding of revelation, and not on empirical facts based on broader religious history. Exclusivists have relied on the Bible, according to Race, in an over-simplistic and naive fashion, ignoring not only the higher-critical views of Scripture but also the theological and conditioned character of biblical knowledge.[35] Paul Knitter has accused exclusivists of confusing the language of *medium* as used in the New Testament with its *essential message.* According to Knitter, the New Testament language about Jesus is confessional in nature, and to be understood within its historical-cultural context reflecting a classicist culture, Jewish eschatological-apocalyptic mentality, and a minority status.[36] Finally, S. J. Samartha has reproached exclusivism with breeding divisiveness and isolation, making cooperation among different religious communities difficult if not impossible, creating tension and conflict in society, and raising irresolvable theological questions.[37]

33. There are some questions as to whether Karl Barth and Lesslie Newbigin rightly belong in this category. Despite Alan Race's assessment that Barth represents the most extreme form of the exclusivist theory due to his unusually negative evaluation of religions, Barth may be viewed as a Universalist—the logical consequence of his doctrine that all human beings have been elected in Christ. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 145–48. Likewise, though Newbigin explicitly accepts the term exclusivism to describe his thought, he hesitates to condemn to hell those who have never known about Christ or are outside the church. Like Barth, who refused to pronounce on the final salvation of the non-Christian, Newbigin believes that God alone has the right to this judgment. See Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 176–80. Thus, if Barth and Newbigin are to be considered exclusivists, they are certainly not so in the restrictivist sense of the term.

34. Hick, *Many Names,* 30–31.

35. Race, *Christians,* 24–37.

36. Knitter, *No Other Name*, 92–93, 182–86.

37. Samartha, *One Christ*, 102.

Religious Inclusivism

Inclusivism is a mediating position between exclusivism and pluralism. According to the Roman Catholic theologian Gavin D. Costa, inclusivism is that position which "affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God."[38] Like exclusivism, inclusivism views the central claims of Christianity to be supremely true and maintains that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is unique, definite, and normative. In contrast to the exclusivists, however, inclusivists tend to be much more generous in their affirmation of God's revelational presence in non-Christian religions. As such, inclusivists tend to be much more opened to dialogue and learning from other traditions.

Inclusivists believe, furthermore, that the appropriation of salvific grace can be mediated through general revelation as God makes salvation universally accessible within each of the great world faiths and also outside them. Although salvation is always the work of Christ when and wherever it occurs, inclusivists deny that an explicit knowledge of the person and the work of Christ is necessary for salvation. That is, the work of Jesus is *ontologically* but not *epistemologically* necessary, for Christ's atonement is seen as applying even to those who have not consciously placed their trust in him. In short, inclusivism is an attempt to hold together two central axioms—the particularity axiom that Jesus is the only mediator of salvation, and the universality axiom that God intends salvation to be available to all.[39]

Historically, inclusivism can be traced to the early church Fathers who espoused Logos-theology (including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria) and to Abelard during the Middle Ages. Saint

38. D'Costa, *Theology and Pluralism*, 80.

39. An interesting variation of inclusivism is a position called "eschatological evangelization" held by a growing number of conservative theologians. This theory, that those who die unevangelized are given an opportunity for redemption after or at the point of death, departs from the mainstream inclusivism in its view that one must personally accept Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior. That is, the work of Christ is both ontologically and epistemologically necessary. However, it shares with the mainstream inclusivism the belief that God's salvific grace is universally accessible. And since it upholds both the particularity axiom that Jesus Christ is the only mediator of salvation and the universality axiom that God intends his salvation to be available to all, it is my opinion that this position properly belongs closest to the inclusivist category. Proponents of this view include George Lindbeck, Gabriel Fackre, Donald Bloesch, Richard Swinburne, and Father J. A. DiNoia.

Justin (ca. 100–65) was particularly important for developing the doctrine of *logos spermatikos* according to which every human being possesses a seed of the Logos. According to Justin, the revelation of God through the Logos is not limited to Christians but is manifested to everyone and everywhere:

> Those who have lived in accordance with the Logos are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them; among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, Misael, and Elijah, and many others, whose deeds and names I forbear to list, knowing that this would be lengthy. So also those who lived contrary to the Logos were ungracious and enemies to Christ, and murderers of those who lived by the Logos. But those who live by the Logos, and those who live so now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed. (1 Apology 46:1–4)[40]

Like the Greek Fathers, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition in the eighteenth century, allowed for the universal possibility of salvation through the supernatural gift of God's prevenient grace. Wesley maintained that the unevangelized can be reached through what "light" they have through God's general revelation: "God never, in any age or nation, 'left himself' quite 'without a witness' in the heart of men; but while he 'gave them rain and fruitful seasons,' imparted some imperfect knowledge of the Giver. 'He is the true Light that' still, in some degree, 'enlightens every man that cometh into the world.'"[41]

In the Roman Catholic Church, the movement toward inclusivism was one of the major legacies of Vatican II (1962–65). The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* declared: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation."[42]

40. This quotation is from Danielou's *Gospel Message*, 40. Contrary to Paul Knitter and other pluralistically oriented interpretations, this passage should not be taken out of its context as an argument that pagans can be saved through their own religions. Justin saw a great gulf fixed between Christianity and non-Christian religions. See Sigountos, "Did Early Christians Believe."

41. Wesley, "Walking by Sight," 258.

42. Flannery, *Documents*, 367–68.

Although inclusivism is not exclusively a Roman Catholic phenomenon, its best-known spokesman was undoubtedly the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. If the Second Vatican Council was a watershed for Christian attitudes towards other religions, Karl Rahner was its chief engineer, distinguishing himself as one of the most influential Catholic theologians in the years before and after Vatican II. Rahner's starting point is his emphasis on the absolute universal validity and superiority of Christianity over other religions, given God's absolute self-revelation and manifestation in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[43] At the same time, Rahner fully acknowledges the legitimacy of non-Christian religions, at least up to the point when Christianity can have a historical claim on their members, since even non-Christian religions contain both natural and supernatural elements of knowledge arising out of God's grace available to all humanity. Accordingly, "Christianity does not simply confront the members 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."[44]

For Rahner, missionary activity is nevertheless legitimate because the Christian gospel makes explicit what was already implicitly present in other religions bringing about thereby a greater possibility of salvation. Since Rahner, other prominent Catholic inclusivists have included the likes of Hans Küng, Jaques Dupuis, and Gavin D'Costa. Among Protestants, Wolfhart Pannenberg and the early John Cobb among the ecumenical theologians, and Sir Norman Anderson, Clark Pinnock, and John Sanders, among evangelicals have been its notable advocates.[45]

Although somewhat fading in favor, inclusivism probably represents the majority view of both Catholic and Protestant theologians. John Hick and others have criticized this doctrine for it's a *priori* assumption that Christ and his teachings are normative. Hick has, in particular, dismissed inclusivist theories as supplementary epicycles that were added to the Christian Ptolemaic theology whose exclusive fixed point is the principle that outside the church, or outside of Christianity,

43. Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," 131.

44. Ibid., 133.

45. In general, evangelical Protestant versions of inclusivism tend to differ from other Catholic and mainline inclusivists in the more cautious attitude they display toward non-Christian religions and in the possibility that these traditions may serve as positive vehicles in human salvation. See, for example, Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 81–113.

there is no salvation. Such epicycles only obscure its incompatibility with the observed set of facts that do not easily fit into the inclusivist theory, namely salvific transformation of human existence within other religious traditions. Thus, says Hick of Rahner's *anonymous Christian* doctrine, "When salvation is acknowledged to be taking place without any connection with the Christian church or Gospel, in people who are living on the basis of quite other faiths, is it not a somewhat empty gesture to insist upon affixing a Christian label to them?"[46] Hick therefore dismisses inclusivism as an inherently vague, burdensome, and transitional theory that, when pressed for clarity, moves toward pluralism. Other theologians have variously criticized inclusivism on grounds that it is paternalistic, presumptuous, imperialistic, and damaging to the dialogue process.[47]

Religious Pluralism

As an alternative to both exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism has been rapidly growing in acceptance among Catholic and Protestant theologians alike in recent decades. There are now numerous varieties of competing positions making it difficult if not impossible to arrive at a single and unified definition of pluralism. In the most general terms, pluralists hold that Christianity is not the one true religion or even superior in any significant way to other religions. According to Paul Knitter, a leading advocate, pluralism represents "a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward recognition of the independent validity of other ways."[48]

Pluralists insist that modern historical consciousness requires us to abandon the claim to Christ's uniqueness, and to recognize that the biblical view of things, like all other human views, is culturally conditioned. Thus, all religious knowledge is historically and culturally limited, making it impossible to evaluate the truth claims of another religion on the basis of any one religion. Pluralism diminishes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ by repudiating the view that God has been revealed fully, definitively, and unsurpassably in Jesus Christ. Rather, the Divine is revealed in all major religions. Jesus was simply one of the many great religious

46. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (hereafter cited as *Problems*), 33–34.
47. See, for example, Knitter's evaluation of inclusivism in *No Other Name,* 141–44.
48. Knitter, "Preface," in *No Other Name*, viii.

leaders who were used by God to teach divine truths and provide salvation for humankind. All major traditions contain truths and are, therefore, valid ways to salvation. Some recent pluralists have insisted that the uniqueness of Christ no longer means "one and only," but "the only one of its kind."[49] In this sense, all religious traditions may be considered unique.

Compared to exclusive and even inclusive viewpoints, the Christian version of religious pluralism seems to be a relatively recent twentieth-century phenomenon.[50] The beginnings of Christian pluralism may be related to the rise of so-called *historical consciousness* and the crisis in theology associated with it. Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) was among the first theologians to come to a clear realization that Christianity's claim to absolute validity stood in sharp conflict with the historically relative and culturally conditioned nature of all religious claims. The earlier Troeltsch had argued for the absolute validity of Christianity in the history of religions.[51] Toward the end of his life, Troeltsch was led to modify his earlier inclusive views in favor of a pluralistic understanding that acknowledged the genuine validity of major non-Christian traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.[52] Troeltsch came to realize, on the one hand, the extent to which claims of Christianity were historically and culturally conditioned and, on the other, how other great religious claims to absolute validity are just as genuine under different historical conditions and for different racial groups. Thus, Troeltsch came to the conclusion that, just as the claims of Christianity are final and unconditional in the context of European and Western groups, so are other major world religions final and unconditional relative to their followers.

English historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) also demonstrated similar historical and pluralistic consciousness. After studying seven major religions, he became extremely critical of the intolerant, oppres-

49. This is true of such pluralists as, for example, John Cobb Jr., Gabriel Moran, and more recently, Paul Knitter.

50. In many parts of the East, however, many cultures have long been characterized not only by the plurality of religions as an objective phenomenon, but also by religious pluralism as an ideology. Many Hindus believe, for example, that all paths lead to God in the end. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna proclaims, "Whatever path men travel is my path; No matter where they walk it leads to Me" (4.11).

51. In his *Absoluteness*, Troeltsch dealt with the means by which Christianity may possibly defend itself against the difficulties of historical methodology.

52. Troeltsch, "The Place," This essay was written as a lecture to be delivered before the University of Oxford in 1923, but Troeltsch died before it could be given.

sive, and monolithic religions that demand exclusive allegiance and penalize those who adhere to other religions.[53] For Toynbee, "Absolute Reality is a mystery to which there is more than one approach [and] pilgrims exploring different approaches are fellow seekers of the same goal."[54] Besides Troeltsch and Toynbee, other significant contributors to the twentieth century's development of religious pluralism include William Hocking (1873–1966), Paul Tillich (1886–1965), and the contributors of the landmark volume, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1988).[55]

Today there are many different types of religious pluralism. Anselm Min has helpfully proposed a tentative typology of the many fascinating varieties of competing positions currently in vogue.[56] These include the *phenomenalist pluralism* of John Hick and Paul Knitter; the *universalist pluralism* of Leonard Swindler, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ninian Smart, Keith Ward, and David Krieger; the *ethical* or *soteriological pluralism* of Rosemary Ruether, Marjorie Suchocki, Tom Driver, and Paul Knitter; the *ontological pluralism* advocated by Raimundo Panikkar; and the *confessionalist pluralism* held by Hans Küng, John Cobb, Jürgen Moltmann, J. A. DiNoia, John Milbank, Kenneth Surin, and Mark Heim. Min himself subscribes to a type of pluralism that he calls *dialectical pluralism*, which he characterizes as confessionalist, pluralist, dialectical, and a pluralism of solidarity.[57]

Out of these many prominent pluralists, John Hick, formerly Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate

53. According to Paul Knitter, Toynbee's brand of historical consciousness may be said to be different from Troeltsch's in that the latter represents the position that "all are relative," whereas the former emphasizes that "all are essentially the same." Says Knitter concerning Toynbee: "he argues for the unity behind all religions and . . . that all religions must join ranks in order to improve the world." *No Other Name,* 38. The latter part of this analysis seems easily supported by Toynbee's work, but the former part is somewhat questionable. However, Toynbee's tendency to seek common elements within the "higher" religions is undeniable.

54. Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach,* xiii.

55. John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds. Some of the prominent theologians contributing to this significant volume include William Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Gordon Kaufman, Landon Gilkey, Raimundo Panikkar, Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris, Rosemary Ruether, Marjorie Suchocki, and Paul Knitter. This volume was based on papers presented at a conference at Claremont Graduate University, March 7–8, 1986.

56. Min, "Dialectical Pluralism," 587–88.

57. Ibid., 588–90.

University, towers as the most comprehensive and persuasive advocate. Considered one of the most important thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century, Hick has made many significant contributions in areas of religious epistemology,[58] theistic proofs,[59] theodicy,[60] death and eternal life,[61] and religious pluralism.[62] Undoubtedly, it is in the area of religious pluralism that Hick has made his most significant and lasting contribution. In recent decades, his theory of religious pluralism has exerted a considerable amount of influence over philosophers, theologians and students of religion alike.

HICK'S PERSONAL BACKGROUND

John Hick was born in 1922 and raised in the Church of England but found Christianity "utterly lifeless and uninteresting" and Sunday services "a matter of infinite boredom."[63] However, as a law student at University College, Hull, at the age of eighteen, Hick underwent a powerful spiritual conversion after a period of several days of intense mental and emotional turmoil, becoming "a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind."[64] Strongly influenced by fellow students of the InterVarsity Fellowship, Hick came to accept a very conservative theology including "the verbal inspiration of the Bible; creation and fall; Jesus as God the Son incarnate, born of a virgin, conscious of his divine nature, and performing miracles of divine power; redemption by his blood from sin and guilt; his bodily resurrection and ascension and future return in glory; heaven and hell."[65]

Intending to enter the Christian ministry, he joined the Presbyterian Church of England and went to the University of Edinburgh eventually to take an M.A. with honors in philosophy. There he became very actively involved with the Christian Union, attending virtually all its

58. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge.*

59. Hick, *The Existence of God*. See also Hick, *Argument*s.

60. Hick, *Evil*.

61. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*.

62. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*; Hick, *Many Names*; Hick, *Problem*; Hick, *Interpretation*; Hick, *Metaphor*; Hick, *A Christian Theology*.

63. Hick gives a personal account of his spiritual pilgrimage in Hick, *Many Names,* 13–19, and also Hick, "A Pluralist View."

64. Hick, *Many Names,* 14.

65. Ibid., 15.

Bible studies and prayer meetings and engaging in evangelistic activities. Hick then attended Oxford University as the first Campbell Fraser scholar, and after completing his D.Phil. in 1950, he went to study for three years at Presbyterian Seminary, Westminster College, Cambridge. At the end of the seminary courses he was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of England, serving the next three years as a pastor of a rural congregation just south of the Scottish border where the congregation flourished.

As a result of an unexpected invitation to become an assistant professor of philosophy at Cornell University, Hick arrived at Cornell in 1957 and remained there for the next three years. It was at this time that he published his first book, *Faith and Knowledge*, based on his original doctoral thesis at Oxford. During this time, he was still theologically conservative, holding on to the Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Indeed one of the first articles that he published, in 1958, was a criticism of the Christology of D. M. Baillie's *paradox of grace* Christology for failing to express the full orthodox faith.

The first noticeable departure from conservative theology occurred in 1961 while teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary (1959–64), when he questioned whether belief in the incarnation required one to believe in the literal historicity of the Virgin Birth. Hick did not deny the doctrine but was agnostic about its historical truth, maintaining that it was secondary to the essential Christian faith in the incarnation. Such a view brought Hick into sharp controversy with the local presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church when attempting to transfer his ministerial membership from the Presbytery of Berwick in England to the Presbytery of New Brunswick. In 1962, the Judicial Commission of the Synod of New Jersey upheld the complaint of eighteen ministers and elders against Hick's reception into the Presbytery, and Hick was no longer a Presbyterian minister or eligible to hold the office of Stuart Professor of Christian Philosophy at the seminary. Several months later, however, the Synod's decision was overturned by the General Assembly and Hick was reinstated to the Presbytery.[66]

Having taught for almost ten years in the United States, Hick returned to England in 1964 to a lectureship in philosophy of religion at Cambridge University. In 1966, Hick published his second book, *Evil and*

66. Hick's own account of this controversy is recounted to us in his essay "Three Controversies," in Hick, *Problems,* 1–4.

the God of Love, which has since become one of the classic texts dealing with the theodicy issue. From Cambridge, he moved to the University of Birmingham in 1967 as Professor of Philosophy. It was there, during his fifteen years at Birmingham, that Hick began to develop his philosophy and theology of religious pluralism.

In the years since World War II, Birmingham had become a multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious city. About one tenth of its one million inhabitants were immigrants or the children of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean islands. There were Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities, as well as a long-established Jewish community, and a small number of Buddhists. Hick became deeply involved in a variety of racial and community-relations organizations and befriended many in these non-Christian communities. He was one of the founders and the first chairman of a voluntary group called All Faiths for One Race (AFFOR) that, over the years, has done an enormous amount of social work for minority groups. As he occasionally attended worship in mosques, synagogues, and temples, he began to philosophize that although language, concepts, liturgical actions, and cultural ethos differ widely from one another, from a religious point of view basically same thing is going on in all of them, "namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man."[67]

Hick's early thoughts on religious pluralism were developed in a series of essays published in his book, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973). Here he argued for the idea of a "Copernican revolution" consisting in a paradigm shift from a Christian-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths.[68] The great world religions were seen as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions that formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.[69] In 1976, he published *Death and Eternal Life,* intended as a project of a global theology of death exploring both the differences and the similarities of insight between Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

In 1977, stirred by the problem of religious pluralism to consider the logical character of incarnational language, Hick edited the contro-

67. Ibid., 5.

68. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 120–33.

69. Ibid., 133–47.

versial *The Myth of God Incarnate*.[70] The contributing authors argued that the historical Jesus did not teach that he was God incarnate or have any conception of himself as the Second Person of the Trinity, that it is possible to trace a development of Christology from that of an eschatological prophet decades after Jesus' death to the incarnational doctrine at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), and that the metaphorical or mythic language of divine incarnation allows for a genuine acceptance of religious pluralism. This book struck a very sensitive nerve in the British church and resulted in considerable reactions, discussions, and heated debates.[71]

In the spring of 1979, Hick accepted his appointment as the Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Claremont Graduate School. While at Claremont, he published *God Has Many Names* (1980) and *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985). In 1987, Hick co-edited with Paul Knitter *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* based on papers presented by distinguished participants at a conference at Claremont Graduate School during March of 1986. The contributors of this landmark volume called for a new paradigm shift, a crossing of the theological Rubicon from exclusivism and inclusivism to the pluralist position.

It was also during this time that he wrote his magnum opus, *An Interpretation of Religion,* based upon his 1986–87 Gifford Lectures, where he presented a bold and sophisticated theory of religious pluralism by appealing to a comprehensive understanding of the nature of religious experience. This book received the 1991 Grawemeyer Award for the most significant new thinking in religion. This highly acclaimed masterpiece is undoubtedly one of the most important and comprehensive books advocating religious pluralism. Having retired from Claremont Graduate University in 1992, he was a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in the Humanities at the University of Birmingham until his death in 2012. His more recent books include *The Fifth Dimension* (1999), *John Hick: An Autobiography* (2003), and *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* (2010).

70. Hick, *Myth of God Incarnate*. Besides Hick, some of the other contributors to the volume included Maurice Wiles, Dennis Nineham, Don Cupitt, and Leslie Houlden.

71. In reaction to the book, for example, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, edited by Michael Green, was rapidly produced by evangelical scholars. Also, *Incarnation and Myth*, edited by Michael Goulder, was published two years later, based on a conference between the *Myth of God Incarnate* authors and their critics.

The purpose of the present chapter has been to locate Hick's importance within the increasingly pluralistic context we find ourselves today, the thorny theological problems this imposes on the Christian church, and the various competing responses that have been offered by the Christian community, including the various forms of pluralistic theologies. In the following chapter, I will explore the different aspects of Hick's philosophy of pluralism in order to identity and sketch the broader philosophical framework from which he approaches his pluralistic theology of religions.