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Contemporary Muslim and Christian Responses to Religious Plurality

Religious Plurality and the New Global Climate: Present Problems and Possibilities

Religious plurality is nothing new to Islam or Christianity. Both were forged in the fires of multiply religious cultural settings. As Harold Netland observes of first-century Christianity,

> It is tempting to assume that the perplexing problems of religious pluralism we face today are unprecedented, but nothing could be further from the truth. The world of the New Testament was characterized by social, intellectual and religious ferment. Traditional Jewish religious values and beliefs were being challenged by powerful competing forces within the Hellenistic-Roman world. Even within Palestine itself, Jews were confronted with alien beliefs and practices. . . . Not only did they face the formidable challenge presented by Greek philosophy and literature but also they had to contend with the many popular religious movements of the day—the cults of Asclepius and Artemis-Diana, the "mystery religions" of Osiris and Isis, Mithras, Adonis and Eleusis, the ubiquitous cult of the Roman emperor and the many popularized versions of Stoicism, Cynicism, and Epicureanism.[1]

1. Netland, *Encountering*, 25.

Islam was also born in the cradle of Arabia where pagan polytheism, widespread idol worship, tribal sectarian and cultic religiosity, as well as Jewish and Christian monotheisms were all present and vying for personal and communal adherence.[2] The presence and influence of Christianity upon Islam in its formative years reminds us that Muslims and Christians have been dialogically engaging one another for fourteen centuries.[3] At best, this has been a checkered history with mixed results. One need only reflect upon the Christian Crusades, for example, to recall some of the deplorable decisions made by Christians to try and deal with Islamic successes and Christian losses.[4] So, Christian and Muslim encounters are nothing new. Nevertheless, as Yvonne and Wadi Haddad point out, "The fourteen-century history of the encounter between Christianity and Islam has taken many forms of conflict and cooperation, diatribe and dialogue, hatred and tolerance, community hostility and personal friendships. . . . At this moment . . . , we find ourselves in a distinctively different situation. The reality of mass communication alone has changed circumstances radically. . . . [W]e can have information at the touch of a . . . button. . . . We are, in effect, instantly accountable to one another."[5]

This accountability presses us to live with one another in more tolerant and peaceful ways. This is especially true as we witness the growing moral challenges of our global society, coupled with a creeping secularization that seeks to privatize and marginalize all religion. Admittedly, this secular attitude is especially prominent in the West, but the new world climate has forced other regions and nations to grapple with the "disestablishment" of religious influence in the public

2. For a very brief but excellent summary of the historical milieu during Muhammad's time, see Tennent, *Religious Roundtable*, 142–44.

3. These interactions have been variously divided into eras where much interfaith encounter was followed by long periods characterized predominantly by isolation. For an interesting look at the first two hundred years of interaction between Christians and Muslims, see Goddard, *History*, ch. 3. The degree of Christianity's influence on Islam in the early years is debated. Initially Judaism had a far more direct impact than Christianity, but the Qur'an makes it clear that early on some form of Christianity was known about and responded to by Muhammad and his followers.

4. The history of the Christian Crusades is complex and voluminous and cannot be unpacked here. For a brief examination and evaluative summary of the Crusades, see Cairns, *Christianity*, 212–25.

5. Haddad and Haddad, *Encounters*, 1.

arena. Is there a legitimate place for religion in public discourse? Is this possible without amalgamating religious adherence and political governance? Can a Muslim, for example, live righteously and publicly before others without pressing for an Islamically governed state and nation?[6] Must Christians pursue reconstructionistic legal policy to be true to their religious faith?[7] Or is it possible for people of all faiths to pursue publicly their religious ends in a democratically free and moral society? If so, how, and what resources might Christianity and Islam provide?

These are complicated questions, and the proper relationships between religious faiths as well as other aspects of public society are not perfectly clear. Nor are they likely to be clarified fully by any one person or group of persons in the near future. One thing is clear: historically, Islam and Christianity, to varying degrees, have always been publicly practiced. In addition, most contend this religious publicity cannot be completely compromised. The degree to which their faith can be openly practiced alongside the faiths and ideologies of others is hotly debated. But some level of publicity is inherent in their respective views of God as sovereign Master of all, since "The Lord has made everything for His own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Prov 16:14).

Ultimately, answers to these problems go beyond the scope of this chapter. For now, recognition of the public nature of these two great faiths, along with the claim that they offer tremendous resources for the creation of democratically and religiously free and moral societies, will have to suffice.

We will begin by surveying how Christianity and Islam have recently responded to religious plurality. The responses concerned will be primarily *intra-religious*, noting how these faiths have tried to make sense of themselves among other faiths. We will look first at various Christian rejoinders before examining Muslim reactions. Sometimes such reactions mix political and secular concerns into the category of plurality, making them more fluid and less strictly related to religious plurality. In chapter 2 we will explore in more detail how various

6. Many conservative Muslims simply answer no to this question.

7. Christian reconstructionists, also known as "theonomists" and "dominion theologians," claim Christians should seek to implement Old Testament law worldwide, since this is the only viable and God-honoring way to create a truly moral and just society. For a look at their views, see Rushdoony, *Biblical Law* and *Law and Society*. For a fair but devastating critique of this movement, see House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*.

Muslims and Christians have responded to each other through deliberate interfaith dialogue. Reviewing and categorizing the resulting themes and impasses will open the way to consider how Pannenberg (chapter 3) and Sachedina (chapter 4) might be utilized to help move the conversation forward in new and promising directions.

Taxonomical Problems of Classifying Christian Responses to Religious Plurality

Before turning to some Christian responses to religious plurality, taxonomical questions must be addressed. How can various Christian reactions to religious plurality best be classified? One of the problems here is that it is difficult to find a universal system of taxonomy. Many of the responses are generated by the way religious persons or groups see the world and others in it. Because theology of religions is more developed in Christianity than other world religions, several classification systems have been offered for arranging Christian responses to religious plurality.

The origin of the initial classification system for Christian responses is unclear. However, it is generally agreed that Alan Race was the first to put in print the widely used tripartite system of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[8] Because early work in this area was done by those like John Hick, who tended to be more pluralistically minded, the term "exclusivism" was given to Christians who held more restrictive views of salvation and religious value in other religions. The term, assigned by those who disagreed, can admittedly be understood derogatorily. As Netland observes,

> It seems that the term *exclusivism* was introduced into the discussion not by adherents of [what Netland calls] the traditional perspective but rather by those who rejected this view and wished to cast it in a negative light. It is a rather pejorative term with unflattering connotations: exclusivists are typically branded as dogmatic, narrow-minded, intolerant, ignorant, arrogant, and so on, and those rejecting exclusivism for more

8. See Race, *Religious Pluralism*.

> accommodating perspectives are regarded as exemplifying the virtues believed deficient in exclusivists.[9]

To avoid this connotation, Netland substitutes "*particularism*" for "exclusivism," a more recent term offered by Okholm and Phillips.[10] Yet he chooses to retain the other two more commonly used categories of inclusivism and pluralism.[11] Despite this, the term "exclusivism" (along with the other two) is still customarily used to describe more conservative Christian responses to religious plurality. And since exclusivism has gradually become more widely and fairly explained by its own adherents and better understood by others, the pejorative connotations are not nearly as forceful as they once were. Thus, the use of the term is still acceptable to describe what are considered more traditional points of view concerning this subject. However, with the rise of significant variation among alternative Christian views, more accurately descriptive typologies have now been proposed.

One of these, utilized by Paul Knitter, employs this terminology: "Total Replacement," "Partial Replacement," "Fulfillment," "Mutuality," and "Acceptance."[12] In Total Replacement, Christianity is called to replace completely other world religions since they are largely, if not completely, false and demonically motivated. A second and closely related position is that Christianity should *partially replace* and *complete* those areas of other religions where the truth of God has been corrupted or missed. While salvation is not possible apart from Christianity, it is likely God is currently at work revealing himself in other religions. Dialogue becomes an opportunity for gathering truth and for witness. As Knitter puts it, those who hold to a Partial Replacement model are concerned that "the Total Replacement Model . . . misses the very real presence of God within the world of other religions."[13]

The third option, the Fulfillment model, affirms that "other religions are of value, that God is to be found in them, that Christians need

9. Netland, *Encountering*, 46.

10. Okholm and Phillips, "Introduction," 16.

11. In *Encountering*, 50, Netland goes on to distinguish particularism from the more specialized restrictivism that claims only those who have explicitly heard the gospel of Christ and embraced its truth can be saved.

12. Knitter, *Introducing*.

13. Ibid., 33.

to dialogue with them and not just preach to them."[14] Thus, Christianity is the *fulfillment* of what God wants from religion, but not the exclusive possessor of religious truth. Still, advocates wish to retain the centrality of Jesus, not only to Christianity, but to every person and religion. They do this by claiming (with Karl Rahner and others like him) that while other religions demonstrate and possess God's grace, this grace is still mediated through *Christ alone*. Consequently, salvation is available to those outside Christianity and the institutional church, but it is still based upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, whether or not religious others overtly believe or embrace this fact.[15] Thus, in Jesus, Christianity represents the fulfillment of all the good other religions long for and possess.

Fourth is the Mutuality model. Here, Knitter notes three important bridges that have moved Christians into more pluralistic territory.[16] They are the "philosophical-historical" bridge (Hick), the "religious-mystical" bridge (Panikkar), and the "ethical-practical" bridge (Knitter—although he never names himself here). Each challenges Christianity's uniqueness and particularity in slightly different ways, but they all emphasize the many similarities all great world religions exhibit. Thus, they claim the great world religions stand roughly as equals, pursuing similar goals in different and contextually situated ways. As such, they all need one another for mutual discovery, encouragement, enrichment, and cooperative moral action.

The fifth and final view is the Acceptance model. Nurtured in the context of postmodern relativism, this view suggests religions may well express incompatible notions of God, truth, goodness, and reality, but the best way to live with plurality is to embrace it without smoothing over differences (mutuality), incorporating other views into one's own (fulfillment), or refuting everyone else's truth claims on the basis of one's own (replacement). Not surprisingly, the ways and degrees in which this embrace and acceptance is accomplished varies greatly among its adherents. As Knitter puts it, "the motto of the Acceptance Model might well be, 'Vive la difference!'—let the differences thrive! If that be so, we should expect to find diversity within the model itself.

14. Ibid., 63.

15. While it has now been extensively critiqued, Rahner was the one who first developed the concept of the "anonymous Christian."

16. Knitter, *Introducing*, 112–13.

And we do."[17] What matters most is not to misrepresent other views, but *let them stand as they really are*. Because we all have our own points of view, we are never fully able to see the world of others as they do, but in dialogue we can begin to expand our vision.

I have explained this latter classification system for two reasons. First, it highlights the diversity of responses to other religions within Christianity. Second, the categories are more accurately descriptive, allowing greater room for the genuine diversity present in Christian theologies of religions. Still, I am not fully satisfied with the system since it subtly tips the scale in favor of pluralistic responses to other religions. However, I will not use it primarily because there is a more *distinctively Christian* typology that more clearly describes ways Christians are responding to religious plurality. This is called the "centrist typology."[18]

Survey of Christian Responses to Religious Plurality: A Diversity of "Centrisms"

This system is called the "centrist typology" because each category describes the aspect of Christian theology it centers its understanding of other religions around.[19] Thus, it represents a truly *Christian* theology of religions. Furthermore, it is more descriptive of each view so the categories are not only more accurate but more informative. This does not mean the system is perfect, of course. Every typology suffers from its own attempt to generalize at the expense of being fair to the particulars of any given view. Still, without categories, understanding and analysis diminishes, so we must embrace such a system—cautiously and humbly, but unapologetically nonetheless.

The centrist categories are: 1) ecclesiocentrism,[20] 2) christocentrism, 3) theocentrism, 4) ethicocentrism, and 5) eschatocentrism.[21]

17. Ibid., 202–3.

18. Incidentally, I am not intentionally using terminology that could be attributed to Islam by using the word "centric." Its use here bears no relation to the call in Q. 2:143 for Muslims to be a community of the "middle way."

19. This system comes from Kärkkäinen (*Introduction*, 25) via Dupuis' system in *Theology of Pluralism*. I have modified it by adding two more categories I believe deserve separate treatments.

20. This term is derived from the Greek word *ecclesia*, meaning "church."

21. This term is derived from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning "end."

These will all be explained more fully as each is developed and illustrated. Ethicocentrism, following Paul Knitter and others like him, centers on the ethical aspects of the kingdom of God, especially justice for the poor and living righteously in peace with others.[22] Eschatocentrism arises from S. Mark Heim's creative proposal for a religiously plural world. It concentrates on the various religious ends after which each world religion strives and consequently, he argues, *ontologically creates* for itself.

Outside of a general critique of pluralism and inclusivism in chapter 6, I will not significantly evaluate the following responses since that has been ably done by others and ultimately goes beyond our current concerns.[23] These perspectives are offered to give a better context and understanding for Pannenberg and Sachedina's views. We begin by looking at the ecclesiocentric view of other religions.

Ecclesiocentrism

Ecclesiocentrism is sometimes called "particularism" or even "christocentric exclusivism." According to Kärkkäinen, there are two major forms, an older one associated with Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer, and a newer one identified with evangelicals like Millard Erickson, Harold Netland, and Vinoth Ramachandra.[24] For the sake of focus, only contemporary ecclesiocentrisms will be considered.

In ecclesiocentrism, concern about salvation and the status of other world religions centers around the ministry of the church. Therefore, "salvation in Christ is to be found in the church and in a faith response to the Christian gospel."[25] Typically, ecclesiocentric views fo-

22. Admittedly, Knitter does not use this term for his own view. Rather, in his article "Liberation Theology" (187), he calls his view "soteriocentric," from the Greek word *soteria*, meaning "salvation." I think this automatically skews his viewpoint in a confusing way since many Christians would not entertain the possibility of salvation for those who remain outside of Christianity. Thus, "ethicocentric" is more accurately descriptive of Knitter's views and less confusing.

23. For two good critiques of major pluralisms, see Heim, *Salvations*, esp. chs. 1–4; and Knitter, *Introducing*.

24. Kärkkäinen, covers the earlier forms in *Introduction*, chs. 18–20, and the contemporary forms in chs. 36–38.

25. Ibid., 319.

cus on questions about those outside the church and their relationship to God through Jesus Christ. This is especially the case with Erickson, who seeks to answer questions like "How much does one need to know to be saved?", and "How many will be saved?" In the end, the Bible seems clear that "general revelation is insufficient to bring persons to salvation."[26] As hard as this truth is to hear, Erickson is unequivocal: "without hearing the gospel explicitly, people are eternally lost."[27]

A similar but more open view is that of Harold Netland. In *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, Netland evaluates the inheritance of modernity[28] and then argues against what he sees as Hick's reductionistic claim that all religions are merely phenomenal, contextualized expressions of noumenal reality-in-itself.[29] Instead, Netland argues, "Religious traditions do make distinctive claims about reality, and these claims do at times conflict. . . . Moreover . . . , the problem of conflicting truth claims presents a formidable obstacle to any genuinely pluralistic model of the religions."[30]

At the heart of his view is the affirmation that "where the central claims of Christian faith are incompatible with those of other traditions, the latter are to be rejected as false."[31] He then provides two criteria that enable Christians to evaluate competing religious truth claims: "logical consistency" and "the moral criterion."[32] The biblical testimony provides the source of authority to assess the claims of all religions as they stand, rather than demanding they conform to a preconceived grid of meaning.

Similarly, Vinoth Ramachandra emphasizes the importance of the authoritative texts of Christianity, concluding Jesus is the unique and only Savior. Yet Jesus' particularity is not restrictive but expansive, as it seeks universality in missionary outreach. Thus, "The normativeness and ultimacy of Jesus Christ in God's salvific dealings with his world

26. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved?*, 158.

27. Ibid., 268.

28. Netland, *Encountering*, chs. 1–4.

29. Ibid., 231ff.

30. Ibid., 188.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 293–300. In his earlier book, *Dissonant Voices* (180–95), he gives six, although in *Encountering*, under critical pressure, he appears to have relented down to only two cross-cultural criteria.

. . . , far from being an arbitrary and repressive doctrine, is *intrinsic to Christian praxis and self-understanding*, then and now."[33] Otherwise, our call to share the gospel with the world makes little sense.

Christocentrism

It could be argued that "christocentrism" is something of a misnomer since most Christians claim the centrality of Jesus Christ for faith and life. However, the christological focus of this view, especially with respect to the soteriological status of people from other religions, warrants the title. What, then, is the christocentric view of other religions? Knitter claims this view "embodies the majority opinion of present-day Christianity."[34] Thus, there are numerous possible advocates who could be used to illustrate it.[35] From our survey of Knitter's categories, we saw one of the most influential promoters of this view is Karl Rahner with his concept of the "anonymous Christian." While this view has been extensively criticized, its basic ideas still aptly illustrate the christocentric view. Thus, we will use Rahner's thesis to explain it.

At the core of this view stands the assertion that, through the communicating action of God's Spirit, divine grace extends to every person, regardless of religious affiliation. A universal transcendence draws us into the mystery of God and toward the infinite as we are in relationship with one another. However, this communication of the Spirit never remains abstract but is always manifest in the concrete aspects of real-time history. In Rahner's words, "This Spirit is always, everywhere, and from the outset, . . . the determining principle, of the history of revelation and salvation; and its communication and acceptance, by its very nature, never takes place in a merely abstract transcendental form. It always comes about through the mediation of history."[36]

Because the Spirit is self-communicating to all humanity, other religions, to varying degrees, exhibit manifestations of this same Spirit,

33. Ramachandra, *Recovery of Mission*, 216.

34. Knitter, *Introducing*, 63.

35. This breadth is illustrated by Kärkkäinen in *Introduction*. He explicates the christocentric views of four Catholics, four mainline Protestants, and three evangelicals, for a total of eleven!

36. Rahner, "Jesus Christ," 46.

creating historically conditioned revelation that is real but tainted and dimmed by the depravity of sin. In contrast, nowhere has that communication been clearer and brighter than in the person and work of the incarnate Christ. Again, Rahner claims,

> Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion . . . does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason, a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.[37]

Because these Spirit-mediated communications are genuine revelations from God, tainted as they are, other religions are not merely *prepared* by them to receive the gospel of Christ. They *already possess*, in varying degrees, the actual grace and love of God through Christ. In the final analysis, if a person responds positively to these transcendent workings of God's Spirit, they are, in fact, open to the saving grace of God in Christ and can be described as "anonymous Christians" since this grace is finally and fully mediated through Jesus Christ.

This view is ultimately christocentric because the grace of God is still centered within the Lord Jesus Christ and his saving work on behalf of all humanity. Whether or not that grace is recognized as explicitly grounded in Jesus, it is nevertheless present in all religions and persons to greater or lesser degrees. Thus, Jesus Christ is still the *norm and standard of salvation*, but an overt affirmation and confession of this reality is no longer required for salvific grace to be received and enjoyed by those who are not visible members of the institutional Christian church.

The christocentric idea that God's grace is transcendently given to all through revelatory communications of the Spirit and mediated by Christ is, for many theologians, a relatively short stopover on a journey into pluralism. The move from a christological mediation to a more general *theological* mediation is a fairly small step if saving grace is given to other non-Christian religious peoples. Thus, all grace is God's grace, but its concrete contextual manifestations account for the mani-

37. Rahner, "Christianity," 121.

fold differences apparent in any interreligious survey of practices and beliefs. Thus, *Christ* is no longer the focus and source of grace; *God* is—and so we move into full-blown *theocentrism*.

Theocentrism

Perhaps the most famous and articulate advocate of theocentrism in its early forms is John Hick.[38] As he wrestled with religious plurality and what he saw as the intractable problems of an exclusive and ecclesiocentric theology of religions, Hick decided there must be another way to understand the universe of faiths. Consequently, he developed a Kantian view of religion where all religious claims and experiences are nothing more than phenomenal manifestations of an experience of and response to the revealing presence of the one true noumenal God. Using the Copernican model of astronomy from the Middle Ages as an analogy, Hick claimed the world's many religions are similar to planets revolving around the sun. They are all different, yet they circle around the one and only God of the universe. Therefore, all religions, Christianity included, must be reinterpreted to emphasize their common source and destiny and to deemphasize the many differences that arose in the concrete contexts of space and time. Kärkkäinen summarizes this early Hickan view this way: "[Hick] came to the conclusion that religion is a human interpretation of reality, not absolute fact statements, and that consequently all religions are in contact with and describe the same reality."[39]

To maintain this view, Hick reinterpreted the way Christian language speaks about God and other theological claims, and significantly modified traditional concepts of Christology to reflect more pluralistic notions of both. By claiming religious truth claims were actually attempts to describe the divine mythically, he believed many of the apparent contradictions could ultimately be resolved or attributed to concretions of historicity. In addition, claims about God's nature could be seen as complementary rather than contradictory, especially since they attempt to describe the One who is ultimately indescribable. As

38. Some of Hick's earlier works include: *Universe of Faiths*, *Truth and Dialogue*, *Myth of God Incarnate*, and *Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

39. Kärkkäinen, *Introduction*, 283.

Kärkkäinen puts it, "even though various religions seem to have dramatic differences at the surface level, deep down they share a common foundation."[40]

Christologically, in light of his pluralist thesis, Hick only sees Jesus as a holy man, rather than the *ontologically unique* Son of God. Consequently, Hick speaks of incarnation this way:

> Incarnation, in the sense of the embodiment of ideas, values, insights in human living, is a basic metaphor. . . . Now we want to say of Jesus that he was so vividly conscious of God as the loving heavenly Father, and so startlingly open to God and so fully his servant and instrument, that the divine love was expressed, and in this sense incarnated, in his life. . . . He was wholly human; but whenever self-giving love in response to the love of God is lived out in a human life, to that extent the divine love has become incarnate on earth.[41]

Sometimes called "degree Christology," the idea here is that Jesus was different than most others, but only by *degree*. His openness and passion for God was greater than perhaps every other person who ever lived. But this difference was not *qualitative*. Perhaps if Jesus had been born in another time and another place, "he would have been identified as a Bodhissattva who, like Gotama some four centuries earlier, had attained to Buddhahood or perfect relationship to reality . . ."[42] In short, "Christ's 'divinity' means that he had a specific God-consciousness, but that does not mean that other religious leaders could not share the same consciousness."[43]

In the final analysis, all religions have strikingly similar concepts of what Hick calls the "Ultimate Divine" or "the *Real*."[44] In addition, they all represent legitimate means by which adherents are moved from self-centeredness toward God-centeredness, or perhaps even better, *Reality*-centeredness. Thus, to be more inclusive of Buddhistic ways of looking at religion, Hick has moved toward a "reality-centric" approach to world religions.

40. Ibid., 288.

41. Hick, *Many Names*, 58–59.

42. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 117.

43. Kärkkäinen, *Introduction*, 291. For Hick's mature Christology, see *Metaphor of God*.

44. Hick traces some of these similarities in *Rainbow of Faiths*, 69.