

Faith without Borders?

An inquiry into the limits
of theological pluralism



By Derek Suchard

Masters thesis, Department of Theology and
Religion Studies, University of Amsterdam
Supervised by Prof. Dr. Theo Witvliet and Dr.
Alle Hoekema
July, 2000
Amsterdam

Doctoraalscriptie Onderwijsinstituut Theologie
en Religiestudies Universiteit van Amsterdam
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Foreword

At one level, of course, a thesis is the unavoidable culmination of however many years one has spent in the pursuit of one's degree and evidence of one's familiarity with and dexterity in the chosen field.

At another level, however, and this is especially so in the cases of philosophy, theology and related disciplines, a thesis is more than — one hopes — a simple advancement of the field and becomes an opportunity to systematically explore subjects that, in the case of mature students, may have been the subject of long reflection for years.

So it is with the subject of this thesis for which conscious reflection began on a train siding in Sudbury, Canada at 2:30 a.m. during a three-day cross-Canada train journey nearly 15 years ago, and which ultimately provided the incentive to begin my formal study of theology.

That spiritual and intellectual journey is not yet finished and this thesis marks but a way station albeit at, for me at any rate, a very important junction.

I want to first express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Theo Witvliet for his guidance and assistance in the preparation of this thesis. I claim, however, all its insufficiencies for myself.

My second reader, Dr. Alle Hoekema, also deserves mention for his thorough reading of the nearly finished product and his constructive comments, which helped to further develop it.

I also want to thank fellow student, Janny van der Molen. Many of the issues raised in this thesis arose out of discussions and other related activities with her and without those discussions, the questions, and probably the answers, would have been different.

And last, but far from least, more than thanks are due to my wife, Liesbeth, and my son, Benjamin, whose insightful comments and unstinting support during the years of part-time study have actually made it possible.

Derek Suchard

18 June, 2000

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Introduction

The discussion concerning the absoluteness and exclusivity of Christianity assumed greater proportions in the 20th century than it had had for most of the past two millennia and for what appeared to be the first time in many centuries, positive answers were being heard from inside the established churches, schools of theology and seminaries. There is salvation outside the church, according to those answers, and all belief essentially leads to, at least potentially, the same destination. All religions are, therefore, equal.

This has been an important question for me, as well, both during my theology studies and before, giving this thesis more urgency than dealing with an abstract issue which I was not personally involved with would have. I have no doubt that there is much more to be said on this subject, and I await its appearance with great interest.

In this thesis, I want to examine that answer to determine whether in fact it is reasonable to claim that all religions are equal. I further want to discuss an important corollary: if they are not, by what criteria would one be able to apply to identify those which were not.

I begin by looking at one of the most important works in the development of pluralistic theology, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* by German theologian Ernst Troeltsch. That book essentially kicked off the debate at the beginning of the 20th century and is still referred to by those writing in the field today.

In Chapter Two, I jump forward to the almost-present time to examine two modern supporters of a pluralistic view, John Hick and Paul Knitter, and review their positions especially in comparison with the views of Troeltsch.

Chapter Three consists of a review of the pluralistic views of six theologians spanning a considerable part of the the range of Christian belief and contemporary society and geography to try to determine whether pluralism can be said to have any broad base of support beyond the narrow range of those for whom it is their main project.

In Chapter Four, I apply the results of the inquiry so far to answer both of the questions driving this thesis, however incompletely, providing, I hope a framework for myself and others to carry on the discussion at a practical level.

The Vanishing Point

Ernst Troeltsch and the Absoluteness of Christianity

Introduction

The saturation of contemporary industrialised society with views that are to one degree or another pluralistic as concerns religious matters is now so complete that one may be forgiven for not realising that such views have not yet celebrated their centenary as a major underpinning of Western philosophy. The paradigm-shifting work, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion*, by German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) was only published in 1901.

In this chapter, I shall be close-reading Troeltsch's work with an eye to extracting its most salient elements in order to establish what it can contribute to determining whether the acceptance of a pluralistic view necessarily implies accepting all of the individual religions that make up today's religious constellation or whether some religions may reasonably be excluded.

Before I begin, however, I should like to make a slight detour to examine Troeltsch's use of the word "absolute," a detour that is crucial if we are to avoid hair-splitting later.

According to the New Webster Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English Language¹, "absolute" has a multitude of meanings: "freed from limitation or condition; unconditional; unlimited by extraneous power or control; complete in itself; finished; perfect; free from mixture;

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) — Germany.

Evangelical theologian and a member of the Religious History School (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule) consisting of a group of theologians, largely from Göttingen, who, under the influence of 19th-century German theologian Albrecht Ritschl, attempted to place the study of the Bible and of religion in the wider social, historical and cultural context in which they had developed, rather than relying exclusively on dogmatic truth.

Troeltsch studied theology at the universities of Erlangen, Göttingen, and Berlin. He taught theology at Göttingen and the universities of Bonn and Heidelberg before becoming professor of the history of philosophy and civilization at the University of Berlin in 1915.

Influenced by the historical emphasis of Ritschl, Troeltsch denied that theology can attain an absolute dogmatic truth that transcends historical and cultural circumstances. In his work he tried to reconcile this historical relativism with his belief in permanent and universal ethical values. Troeltsch was actively concerned with political and social issues, and after World War I he criticized the German tendency to idolize the state. One of his most important works is *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1912; trans. 1931), a historical and cultural analysis of Christian social ethics.

¹ *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Avenel Books.) 1980

positive; decided; peremptory. (metaphorically) not relative; considered without reference to other things; existing independent of other cause; self-existing; unconditioned." Similar definitions apply in the German of the original text and readers will carry all these layers of meaning, consciously or otherwise, with them when they approach the book. After little more than 120 pages, all of these definitions will have been dispensed with. Not one will remain. Which is not to say that Troeltsch dispenses with a view of Christianity as an absolute of sorts. Determining where that leaves us is the purpose of this initial inquiry.

Background of the problem of the absoluteness of Christianity

For Troeltsch, a major proponent of the History of Religions movement at the beginning of the present century, the *problem* of Christianity's absolute status was a creation of shifting perceptions of history as an science in service to no master other than its own methodological limitations. For its first eighteen centuries, history had been in service first to the glory of the ancient states whose history was being recorded, with other peoples assigned only bit parts, and, although the rise of pan-European Catholic culture meant that history claimed to be the history of mankind, it served more to justify the then-current state of affairs and to demonstrate that all the important issues were subordinate to and subsumed under the "dogmatic postulates" then current.

No independent science, then, but a good and faithful servant to the ruling ethos that succeeded in isolating Christianity from any relationships.

The understanding of history that grew out of the Enlightenment, out of the Reformation and the renewal of Christian and classical philology, and German idealism,² however, put paid to that splendid isolation, subjecting Christianity, along with everything else, to "critical source analysis [and] conclusions derived from psychological analogy."³

In fact, history was turned on its head. Rather than—consciously or otherwise—serving a top-down agenda that constructed its history to confirm the inevitability of the present and self-evident result in the society before it, history became a bottom-up affair where investigation of underlying facts demonstrated how the present situation was arrived at as one of several possible outcomes.

² Troeltsch, Ernst, *The absoluteness of Christianity and the history of religions*, David Reid (trans.), third edition, (1971: Richmond, VA., John Knox Press), 45

³ Troeltsch, 46

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"It dissolves all dogmas in the flow of events and tries sympathetically to do justice to all phenomena, first measuring them by their own criteria and then combining them into an overall picture of the continuous and *mutually conditioning* factors in all individual phenomena that shape the unfolding development of mankind."⁴ (italics mine. DS)

This historical paradigm has, in fact, permeated all "thinking concerning values and norms [and is] the medium for the self-reflection of the species on its nature, origins and hopes,"⁵ up to and including Christianity, stripping it of both the naïve certainty of its early years and of the apologetic, philosophical and theological fortress that had built up since to reinforce the church's self-image as a "divinely ordained institution, recognisable as such on the basis of external and internal miracle."⁶

In short, Christianity became "one individual phenomenon [in] the current of the other great individual phenomena that history has brought forth (...) as "the wall of external and internal miracle has slowly been broken down (...)." ⁷

Not that the miracles had been disproved or otherwise disposed of: they had been rather ignored as not subject to the historical method, and therefore outside the scope of the inquiry. Perhaps worse from a Christian perspective was the feeling that "it is impossible for historical thought to believe the Christian miracles but deny the non-Christian."⁸ Christianity had lost any ground on which to isolate it from the rest of the human adventure.

Its apologetic defences having been breached, Christianity, in the persons of Schleiermacher and Hegel, and with the able assistance of some notable philosophical artillery—especially Lessing, Kant and Herder—moved onto the offensive,⁹ devising a historico-critical position that could still demonstrate that Christianity was, if not the only truth, then certainly the culmination of all that had gone before in a cumulative build-up that, as a geological rock formation lays

⁴ Troeltsch, 47

⁵ idem.

⁶ Troeltsch, 47

⁷ Troeltsch, 48

⁸ idem.

⁹ The strategy of co-opting the tools of the opposition was not something new, however. The great apologetics of the early church Fathers provided the model here, regardless of whether the post-Enlightenment Church fathers were aware of it. the apostle Paul stated it most succinctly when he said that he would be "Jew to the Jew and Greek to the Greek." Other early apologetics mirrored that, using sophistry against the sophists and philosophy against philosophers. Justin Martyr's *Dialog with Trypho* being one such.

down different layers through the æons, placed Christianity on top of all the other religions in what Troeltsch refers to as an evolutionary development.¹⁰

The historico-critical method cannot, however, conceal that its motives were—just as the apologetic approach's motives were—designed to isolate Christianity from the main, to set it apart (as is only fitting for a sacred institution), and make it "normative (...) by placing Christianity, as a matter of principle, in a unique position."¹¹

In Troeltsch's view, this evolutionary principle is "the source of attempts (...) to show that critical historical research proves the person of Jesus to be the bearer of, and point of breakthrough for, the absolute religion,¹²" and is the presumption against which the term "absoluteness" itself acquires its precise meaning.

These two perspectives, the supernatural, orthodox and the evolutionary, are closely related, especially as regards objectives: specifically, to bestow on Christianity a position of sole truth in relation to all other belief systems, which stand, every one, in opposition. The supernatural position seeks to arrive at this position by focusing on form—which it shares with other beliefs—inculcated with direct divine communication, which it does not share with anyone. The evolutionary position, however, puts its trust on content and essence: Christianity as the ultimate expression of a spiritual content also present in other faiths, though nowhere so completely. In Troeltsch's words: "All religion is, therefore, truth from God, each religion corresponding to some stage in a universal process of spiritual development" in which Christianity is the "highest, ultimate stage."¹³

For Troeltsch, in the first of several culling exercises, these two theories are the only two worth considering in the context of the present inquiry. No other theory is clear-cut and "worthy" and so completely worked out.

He does then consider them, first the supernatural, then the evolutionary. The supernatural view he summarily dismisses in a single paragraph, noting that the reliance of the supernatural position's supporters on external realities to prove internal miracles—and then failing to make a

¹⁰ Troeltsch, 50-51. Troeltsch attributes such success as this approach had to Hegel's "sure foundation in the concept of evolution." The modern reader must be aware that evolution anno 2000 means something different than it did at the time Troeltsch was writing. Then it did indeed mean a progressive upward rise of steadily improving structures, whether biological or otherwise. Today, it is more likely, and more accurately, in my view, to imply the adaptation of structures to environments, and one being's creative adaptation is another's fatal mutation. This distinction in meaning will provide Troeltsch with difficulties later.

¹¹ Troeltsch, 51

¹² Troeltsch, 50

¹³ Troeltsch, 54

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convincing distinction between the sacred and the profane and "gasp[ing] for breath the more it breathes the air of the modern understanding of history."¹⁴ The evolutionary apologetic, however, will not so easily be disposed of and Troeltsch expends some considerable energy in its re-examination.

Re-examination of the Evolutionary Apologetic

The short version of Troeltsch's handling of the evolutionary apologetic is encapsulated in the first two sentences.

"It is impossible to construct a theory of Christianity as the absolute religion on the basis of a historical way of thinking or by the use of historical means. Much that looks weak, shadowy, and unstable in the theology of our day is rooted in the impossibility of putting such a construction on Christianity."¹⁵

What is important, however, is why. And his reasons are clear: the chief concern of historical thinking may well be the unique and individual, but it is not the isolated. Unique and individual historical phenomena "cannot be reduced to a prior cause, and they (...) have their source in the correlative interconnection of all historical events."¹⁶ It is this correlatedness that provides the clue: the convergence of such a multitude of factors, regardless of whether the result of the convergence has an overarching significance, can only occur in a single place and at a single historical time. The development of the idea of universality itself, in fact, is the result of a process of just that kind of temporo-physical convergence.

For history to actually be able to construct an evolutionary theory that would succeed in placing Christianity at its peak, all phenomena would have to be able to be "grasped immanently by means of an all-inclusive principle that would constitute, first, a law the emergence and evolution of everything individual; second, (...) the essence and fulfilment of all genuine value; and third, the norm of all historical phenomena."¹⁷

The principle thus arrived at would have to be able to be analysed with the goal of extracting the invariable—the core—from changing individual phenomena. This principle has not yet been discovered, if it even exists.

¹⁴ Troeltsch, 60

¹⁵ Troeltsch, 62

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Troeltsch, 64

Not for want of trying, in Troeltsch's estimation. Especially in the area of religion, attempts have been made to distil in histories of religion the "universal essence" of religion "that provides above all the idea of a norm."¹⁸ It is this norm which should then bring "forth all the individual religions according to an immanent law."¹⁹ Not in their temporo-historical manifestations, but in their essence. The Christian essence, in most of the treatments, is, then, seen, as the ultimate expression of this essential development.

Four pillars support this essential interpretation:

history is subordinated to a self-instantiating universal principle representing a

- uniform
- homogeneous
- law-structured
- self-actuating power

it elevates the universal principle to a norm and ideal of all-encompassing permanent value

the two concepts above are united in an evolutionary theory

the perfect congruity between the universal principle and the resulting creation of value is implied

The sand on which these pillars rest begins to shift, however, when one realises that the all-important universal principle is a stranger to the modern idea of history. This is so whether one considers it causally—in which case the sum total of all past, present and future religions constitute the universal principle exemplified, leading to no single absolute—or teleologically, which places the exemplification at some unknown point in the future—in which case no present belief system, including Christianity, can be its absolute expression—or when one tries to consider Christianity as the absolute expression of this universal principle, taking no account of its own development in time and place, recognising that it has always been an open system subject to change.

This lack of universal principle means that no values or norms can be traced back to it. And no clear evolutionary path can be traced between so-called lower and higher forms of religion.

¹⁸ Troeltsch, 65

¹⁹ Ibid.

Historical relativity and norms of value: the search for the criterion

If no religion is, therefore, absolute, the only conclusion that remains is that all must stand in some relation to one another. The relativity that so many fear raises its head. The fear is not necessary, Troeltsch assures us, if one only understands what relativity actually means.

What it does not mean is "a roaring ocean of trivialities" arising from the breaking down of independent phenomena into smaller parts. This is only an aid to study and is not the objective of history as such. The results of such efforts are important in the synthesis required to create great history.²⁰

Nor does relativity mean that historical phenomena must be treated solely as the result of their antecedents and environment. That would make history nothing more than another form of natural science where same input always results in same output. In history, the antecedents and environment combine to create the new and individual, arising out of transcendent depths and "coming into actualisation in relation to the given."²¹ Any claims they might have are not "mere products of antecedents or environments, (...) their claims to validity are based (...) upon their truth."

Lastly—and in the modern discussion most damaging—relativity does not mean unrestrained hypothetical empathy for heterogeneous forms, judging each solely on its own merits as a closed system, leaving history "not so much [guilty] of letting its light shine on the righteous and unrighteous alike, but of no longer recognising the difference at all."²² In fact, historical impartiality and hypothetical empathy serve to combat this view of relativity. Each individual is indeed seen as a microcosm, but one that is able to understand the nature and function of apparently alien situations because of different points of similarity between them. The different value orientations of mankind have, therefore, something in common.

Having established what it is not, Troeltsch then proceeds to define relativity:

"Relativity simply means that all historical phenomena are unique, individual configurations acted on by influences from a universal context that comes to bear on them in varying degrees of immediacy. It means, therefore, that every independent structure leads on to a perspective that embraces broader and still broader horizons [until] finally it opens out onto the whole. It means that a comprehensive perspective of this kind allows one to form universal judgement and evaluations."²³

²⁰ Troeltsch, 87

²¹ Troeltsch, 88

²² Troeltsch, 87

What has become of absolutism, then? Anticipating the deconstructionists, Troeltsch asserts that the absolute has been postponed. In Troeltsch's words, "Absolute, unchanging value, conditioned by nothing temporal, exists not within, but beyond history and can be perceived only in presentiment and faith."²⁴

Troeltsch then proceeds to define the theme that will dominate the rest of the book and provide him with the answer to his original question: The problem is not of choosing between relativism and absolutism, but rather of identifying the tendencies towards the absolute goal in the relative.

There is an irony in this process of identification in that while the identification of values transcends history as a descriptive science, it is only by strict adherence to what history can tell us that we can approach an understanding of the transcendental absolute. At least if one disregards "speculative, metaphysical norms smuggled in from other contexts."²⁵

Troeltsch would have us conduct this search in a consideration of the "outstanding forms of religious development," and to compare them with a view to discerning "not a universal principle of law like that at work in (...) the natural sciences, but a principle suggestive of tendencies towards a common goal."²⁶

And here we come to the second of Troeltsch's culling: only the "most outstanding results of man's spiritual development that are known and accessible to us, basing this procedure on the supposition that their being known to us is not a mere accident but is due to the fact that they are the only significant developments which sprang from an elemental matrix." Included in his selection are Christianity, Judaism and Islam plus the Western rationalist philosophies for the West, and Hinduism and Buddhism for the East.²⁷

The surface differences of these belief systems aside, Troeltsch asserts that they all have characterised the ultimate problems of life in similar ways and have developed similar solutions

²³ Troeltsch, 89

²⁴ Troeltsch, 90

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Troeltsch, 91

²⁷ This self-imposed restriction on the field of inquiry is quite problematical. It assigns value only to those belief systems that have succeeded, attributing that success to intrinsic qualities. Troeltsch does not discuss, so we can only hazard a guess as to his feelings regarding the serious competitors that have arisen, the near misses, and the sometimes brutal methods of suppression that have resulted in the success of what remain as "the outstanding." One must think here of Mithraism, the Cathars, the Gnostics, in terms of Christianity; the West Asian and Maghreb churches of early Christianity and the Zoroastrian faith in terms of Islam, as but two examples. Furthermore, when thinking in terms of longevity, he grants to Islam a right of inclusion, with its 1400 years of history, but disregards the several thousand years of classical Egyptian religion, simply because they haven't been around lately. Furthermore, "[p]olytheism and the numerous religions of *uncivilised* (italics mine. DS) peoples are irrelevant to the problem of highest religious values." p. 92.

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for them. What Troeltsch is searching for is a criterion by which to rank them: a criterion that is "a matter of personal conviction and in the last analysis admittedly subjective," but one that "will emerge from the religion that is strongest and most profound."²⁸

The search for the criterion must not be sought in the self-evident truth of the dominant idea of one's own culture: that smacks too much of the Middle Ages. Nor must it be looked for in a Kantian divine reason that everyone shares and need only ponder: too much of the Enlightenment is evident here. The criterion can only be characterised as the "determining of a direction, the setting of a course among the great, dominant tendencies of history."²⁹

And Troeltsch would have us seek for it only in the great, outstanding manifestations of religion that we have available to us.³⁰

The Philosopher's Stone: Christianity's proper place

Having set out his course clearly, that only a calm and comparative study of the outstanding religions will enable one to discern the criterion by which one may appropriately rank the religions in search of the absolute, Troeltsch now embarks on a course to demonstrate that such a consideration leads to the conclusion that Christianity is indeed the absolute religion. He does so, though, in the full awareness that such a conviction remains a confession that is vulnerable to attack from "the children of this world."³¹

That realisation is no hindrance, however, and Troeltsch begins with his final culling, separating the religions one from another, leaving ultimately only one remaining faith occupying the vanishing point of theological convergence.

As stated earlier, the polytheisms and polydemonisms of the "lower stages of religion" are *a priori* excluded from consideration, having scientific value only as regards religion's origins and psychological questions. Only the great worldly religions with their "clearly suprasensual world of absolutely transcendent religious values"³² concern Troeltsch.

²⁸ Troeltsch, 96

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Troeltsch's use of the word 'outstanding' is also problematical. In common usage, it means excellent. It is also used here, however, to mean 'extant,' 'still among us.' Both readings are possible and both should be kept in mind in reading Troeltsch.

³¹ Troeltsch, 108

³² Troeltsch, 109

Next to fall are the religions of law: Judaism and Islam. They are "inferior in their ability to plumb the depths of the distinction between the world of the senses and the world of higher, transcendent values."³³

Only the religions of redemption can properly unite the natural and the spiritual worlds that the religions of law can only juxtapose. Religions of redemption, in fact, transcend the spiritual, "severing men inwardly from the whole of existent reality (...) in order to confront reality with divinely empowered men."³⁴

Among the religions of law, Judaism and Islam *do* border on the redemptive, as does the religious self-consciousness of some of the higher forms of polytheism, but they do not go far enough in "tear[ing] men away from the world and return[ing] them transformed, to confront the world again."³⁵

Next, Troeltsch turns to the competing religions of redemption, which include Christianity and the Indian religions of redemption, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Hinduism and Buddhism, for all their virtues, are still not what is needed as they exert influence by ethical ideas of mastery over the self and the world and by acute religious perceptions of the antithesis between the true and the illusory worlds. But "the higher world" is not able to "uproot[] and transform[] men but has to be sought out by the enlightened through appeal to self-exertion and the natural power of the soul."³⁶

Christianity, on the other hand, is "the strongest and most concentrated revelation of personalistic religious apprehension. (...) [I]t alone has worked out in a radical way the distinction between the higher and lower worlds (...) [I]t alone takes empirical reality (...), builds upon it, transforms it and (...) raises it to a new level."³⁷

Furthermore, Christianity is the only religion that has successfully made a complete break with the limits and conditions of natural religion.

Equally important for Troeltsch is the role of the personal relationship with the deity, which, although he admits that it does raise problems as regards the empirical consideration of historical data, places Christianity on a higher level than all other religions looked at.

³³ Ibid. One wonders how the Sufi and the Hasid would respond to this, to name but two, but we shall not hear it from Troeltsch.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Troeltsch, 110

³⁶ Troeltsch, 111

³⁷ Troeltsch, 111-12

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Christianity is, then, the highest form of religion extant. But is it absolute? It is not absolute in being unique and untouched by others in history nor in some of the solutions it has posed for many of the problems that flesh is heir to. It is not absolute in terms of having the final answer: Christianity's answers have changed through history, its positions have changed, and it will continue to change. Nor is it absolute in being the end of religion as we know it. It *is*, Troeltsch says, the highest form of religion so far, but who is to say that another, more well-defined religion meeting all the conditions of Christianity today, and then some, will never come along. Nor is it absolute in having the absolute truth: that must wait for the eschaton and the cessation of human history.³⁸

It is, though, in Troeltsch's view, absolute as the "culmination and convergence"³⁹ "of all the developmental tendencies that can be discerned in religion. (...) [T]he focal synthesis of all religious tendencies and the disclosure of what is in principle a new way of life."⁴⁰

The sophisticated absoluteness in no way detracts from the naïve absoluteness with which we started at the beginning, Troeltsch contends, and to which it bears only a passing resemblance. This is the thinking man's absoluteness and contains within it the naïve absoluteness, making it a fuller, more complete faith than the simple accepting belief of our spiritual childhood. As such, it more than satisfies as a basis for a continuation of a strong spiritual life.

Here Troeltsch concludes. Christianity has been removed from the naïve absolute pedestal that it occupied—for believers—throughout its first nineteen centuries and placed upon a more secure pedestal of sophisticated absoluteness to which all other religions—or in any case, those religions worth considering—point. Other religions, then, have their value and their virtues, but Christianity's freedom from nature and law and its unification of the transcendent and immanent, coupled with its strong bias for the personal, make it *prima inter (paena) pares*. And so it will remain.

Observations

For all his protestations against the apologetics of Christianity's early years, Troeltsch has, in my estimation, merely created a more modern version of just such an apologetic. He has couched it, however, in a scientific vocabulary that nonetheless serves to demonstrate Christianity's

³⁸ Troeltsch, 114-15

³⁹ Troeltsch, 114

⁴⁰ Ibid.

superiority,⁴¹ though he has left some room open for other beliefs to take what solace they might in the thought that they are not completely without value.

He has, however (and this problem has not entirely been resolved in other considerations of the issue in more recent years, as we shall see), left unanswered the question of what his position means for “salvation” and related issues. These are surely not unimportant in matters of religion and inter-religious dialog, when, in Christianity’s terms, eternal life hangs in the balance, and the Christian mission is seen by many to save those souls.

Equally important and only lightly touched upon is the important question of the religions not found worthy of consideration in Troeltsch’s discussion. Does the position of the believers of those faiths leave them open to unbridled missionary attention? Granted this was a minor problem for Troeltsch when culture and religion were more often linked than they are now and new and New Age religions were but minor factors on the fringes of early 20th-century Europe. For modern Europeans and other Christians generally, however, these questions are very much alive and must be dealt with.

Troeltsch’s legacy then, as recorded in *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, may not have been to resolve the issue completely, but, true to his historical, relative consciousness, to advance and change it, setting the stage for the discussions still going on now and likely to continue into the future.

⁴¹ For a similar modern treatment of the same theme, using a similar methodology and arriving at a very similar result, see Herwig Arts, *Wereldgodsdiensten, allemaal gelijkwaardig?* (Leuven: Davidsfonds), 1993.

“I’m okay, you’re okay”

A pluralistic theology of religions

Between Troeltsch’s death¹ and the turn of the millennium, Christianity in particular and the relationships among different religions in general were affected by several seismic shifts, not all of which were based in theology.

Among other things, the Second World War cast a shadow that still darkens the religious landscape, both for what it showed about a people who could murder in their millions while wearing “Gott mit uns” on their belts, and for its legacy in ushering in the nuclear age. The decline of the great European colonial empires (especially the English, but also the French, Belgian, Portuguese and Dutch) and the self-assertion of the former colonial subject lands, led by India and Pakistan, now both also nuclear powers, but also the Arab countries made rich by the judicious exploitation of their oil reserves, made it necessary to treat those former colonies with more respect, more as equals, than had previously been the case. As their peoples came in their thousands to the home countries of their former colonisers, and Europeans and North Americans continued to spread out around the world, dealing with multi-cultural and multi-faith issues became more than an abstract drawing-room exercise: it became a practical necessity for the maintenance of public order.

These many and various factors, and other related influences as well, have given rise to a theology that simultaneously supports and critiques Troeltsch and extends him to embrace the diversity of faiths as one, to create a unified faith theory, as it were,² a pluralistic theology of religions.³

¹ Troeltsch died in 1923 just before he was to present a lecture at Oxford University, England, in which his own absolute position had been further relativised into a multiplicity of absolutisms, each absolute for its own adherents. See further, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books) 1987.

² These modern efforts are not the first to attempt such a syncretism. Candidate precursors range from the philosophical Deists to the Unitarian Universalists and the Ba’hai through to the lesser-known Japanese writer Ryuho Okawa. Even Hinduism might be considered a candidate with its insistence that “There is but one God, but he has many names.” Within Christianity, however, the modern efforts may turn out to be the most successful converging as they do with a multitude of extra-religious factors that add weight to their arguments and their urgency.

³ The term is from Hick and Knitter.

The basis

The basic premise on which the pluralistic theology of religions is based is outlined at some length in an article by John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity."⁴

Hick begins by noting the state of the argument by Troeltsch: how Troeltsch took the central issue of Christianity in its relationships with other faiths, its absoluteness, and put it under question.

Until well into the nineteenth century, the dominant Christian position in the West had essentially been a medieval one: for the Catholics, salvation came only from the Church, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. So, too, for the Protestants. Non-Christians, therefore, must be saved, even if from themselves.

Hick notes that a "many-sided" answer is necessary to explain the gradual abandonment of this exclusivist position, but "perhaps the most important factor has been the modern explosion of knowledge among Christians in the West concerning the other great religious traditions of the world. (...) The immense spiritual riches of Judaism and Islam, of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, of Confucianism and Taoism and African primal religion, have become better known in the West and have tended to erode the plausibility of the old Christian exclusivism."⁵

Hick goes on to note a second important factor: "the realisation that Christian absolutism, in collaboration with acquisitive and violent human nature, has done much to poison the relationships between the Christian minority and the non-Christian majority of the world's population by sanctifying exploitation and oppression on a gigantic scale."⁶

What hath Christianity wrought?

For Hick, Christianity's assumption of superiority have been felt most destructively in the relationships between European and North American Christians on the one hand and both the black and brown peoples of the world and the Jews on the other.

Fifteen centuries of Christianity's self-proclaimed absoluteness led clearly to the treatment of the Judaism Christianity "superseded," up to the present century.⁷

⁴ Hick, John, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, (eds.) *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 1987 pp. 16-36.

⁵ Hick, p. 17. Hick's inclusion of Confucianism, Taoism and African primal religion already distances him from Troeltsch, who, as we have seen, dismissed them out of hand as being without value.

⁶ Idem. At the same time came the realisation that absolutist claims by other religions have contributed to similar abuses, with Christianity and Islam probably providing the greatest number of examples and Buddhism perhaps the least. P. 17-18.

⁷ Hick, p. 18.

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European colonisation, riding equally on the coattails of commerce and salvation, was, to a large degree, philosophically and psychologically supportable due to the self-evident superiority of its proponents, as evidenced by their possession of the one true faith, and their assumption of the White Man’s Burden to elevate and save the less fortunate races.

The realisation of these errors has led some of the Church to moderate its position somewhat, as evidenced by the developments of Vatican II, which *de facto* if not *de jure* “repealed the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* doctrine by declaring that there is salvation outside the visible church,”⁸ but not through the value of other faiths as such, rather through the all-embracing salvation offered by Christ.⁹ Mankind will be saved despite itself and perhaps even without its active participation. Christianity remains superior, though less triumphantly so.

Within the Protestant world, too, similar sounds have been heard, though with a strong counter-argument holding back from a wholesale acceptance of non-exclusivism.

This salvation is, however, extended only to those who “through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ.”¹⁰ Those who are aware of the gospel and consciously reject it, however, are still to be considered lost.

This revised position is generally referred to as inclusivism. For Hick, it marks the boundary, the Rubicon, the crossing of which changes the whole terrain of Christian truth. Christianity then becomes “*one* of the great world faiths, *one* of the streams of religious life,” rather than the best or the only one.

In Hick’s view, crossing this Rubicon “seems an almost inevitable next step”¹¹ If salvation is also taking place outside Christianity, then “it seems arbitrary and unrealistic to go on insisting that the Christ-event is the sole and exclusive source of human salvation.”¹²

Continued claims for Christianity of such a favoured position uniqueness must then be demonstrated with the historical evidence, “as an empirical issue, to be settled (...) by examination of the facts.”¹³

⁸ Hick, p. 20

⁹ Hick, p. 21

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Hick, p. 22

¹² Idem.

¹³ Hick, p. 23

The facts

It is clear to Hick that an absolute, even a superior religion, must result in observable consequences at either the individual or the social level.

Individually, Hick would see the clearest evidence in the achievement of 'sainthood,' however that may be understood within various traditions and beliefs, but broadly taken to mean "a person who is much further advanced than most of us in the transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness,"¹⁴ A superior religion ought, then, to produce a higher proportional output of 'saints,' or a better quality of saintliness than other religions. On this basis, Christianity's claim to superiority is at best questionable. Hick cites Mahatma (The Great Soul) Gandhi as one who is seen by others as 'saintly' but who is clearly not Christian.¹⁵

But Hick admits to a general human inability to use the individual measure as a guide. There is no adequate frame of reference.

Does Christianity lead then to superiority in the social sphere? Hick claims persuasively that it does not. Christian societies, taken as a whole, are not inherently more just—cf. South America—more prosperous—cf. the non-Christian successes of Japan, Korea, Singapore, etc., against the Christian failures of Central America and Africa—more technologically advanced, more democratic—cf. Hindu India, etc.—freer of torture or human rights abuses—compare the Christian nations named as torturers by Amnesty International¹⁶—South Africa, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay and Peru—with their non-Christian torturing colleagues—Jewish Israel, Moslem Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Hindu India, Buddhist Sri Lanka, etc.

The Christian-influenced West, however, the birthplace of both modern political liberalism and economic prosperity based on scientific developments, seems to lend credence to the argument made by some that the superiority of Christianity is directly responsible for both those things.

On the scientific front, Hick notes that Eastern cosmologies have more affinity to modern scientific theories than the traditional Christian cosmology does. He also notes that neither Hinduism, Christianity nor Buddhism gave rise to modern science as we know it during

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Gandhi's oft-quoted criticism of Christianity, that its proponents were not sufficiently like its book, is an inherent acknowledgement from another tradition that Christianity had not lived up to its own billing.

¹⁶ *Torture in the Eighties*, cited in Hick, p. 25.

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Christianity’s first 1500 years of existence. What did in fact lead to the rise of science was, according to Hick, the “rebirth in the European Renaissance and then in the Enlightenment, of the Greek spirit of free inquiry, gradually liberating minds from the thrall of unquestioned dogmas and enabling them to turn to observation, experimentation and reason to understand the universe in which we find ourselves.”¹⁷

Nor can the Eastern religion’s oft-cited world renouncing elements account for their failure to adopt science and all its ways, thus preventing the development of the prosperity the West is heir to. Christianity, too, has its world-renouncing elements, yet Hick says that Christendom managed to subordinate it to the “development of Western capitalism and the general desire that it feeds for more and more possessions, including ever more sophisticated luxuries.”¹⁸

Can Christianity claim superiority then in the adoption of modern liberal political ideals?

Hick says no: liberalism arose out of the “deconstruction of the medieval dogmatic-hierarchical world of thought (...) the product of a creative interaction of cultural influences.”¹⁹

This critique of Christian superiority should not lead one to conclude that another faith is being promoted as superior. Each has its positive and its negative side. The balance seems to be that the major faiths, including Christianity, have contributed as much good as ill in the world.

The significance for Christian theology

What does this mean for Christian theology? Or, more precisely, for Hick, is Christian theology open enough to permit such a position?

By Hick’s reading, it is, but it requires a reconsideration of the available evidence (read: the texts) with pre-Chalcedonian and pre-Nicene eyes.

¹⁷ This assertion is not without problems, however. The question then remains why the Europeans’ discovery of this spirit of inquiry should have led to the development of science when it did not have a similar effect in the Moslem world—or indeed the Byzantine—which were, in fact, the keepers of the flame as far as having guarded the manuscripts of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers is concerned, as well as being the earlier recipient of other scientific knowledge developed in the East, such as the discovery or invention of the mathematical concept of zero in India. China most of all makes the assertion problematic. The Chinese had already made many significant scientific advances before their first major encounter with the Europeans. The answer to this quandary is undoubtedly complicated and has, I feel, a religious element, but only insofar as religion is an influential cultural vector.

¹⁸ According to Webber’s analysis of the rise of the industrialised West, this world-renouncing element, which encouraged businessmen to reinvest rather than convert profits into displays of wealth, was put into the service of prosperity. This, of course, is a Protestant perspective, which fails to include Roman Catholic, Orthodox or other Christian bodies in the analysis.

¹⁹ Hick, p. 28

Everything hinges on Hick's Christology: who, and equally importantly, what was Jesus? Was he the divine Son of God? He H/himself never claimed it, according to Hick.²⁰

"He probably thought of himself as the final prophet, the one whose mission was to herald the end of the age. He may have applied to himself either of the two main titles that Jewish tradition offered for the fulfiller of this role—that of the son of man who was to come in glory on the clouds of heaven, and that of the messiah who was to rule the world from its new centre, Jerusalem. Neither of these roles, it should be noted, amounted to being God (...)"²¹

If one accepts that position, then, if one is to speak of Jesus' divine mission at all, one must logically otherwise account for God in his relationship with/to Jesus. Hick does it by positing an *inspired* Jesus, in whom God became incarnate "that [he became an] instrument[] of the divine purpose on earth."²²

That requires, then, a rethinking of the trinity, which can no longer be seen as three centres of consciousness, but must be three "major aspects of the divine nature," as creator, redeemer, and inspirer.²³

Nor does the doctrine of the atonement escape unscathed. It, too, requires a complete rethinking. Here, Hick is somewhat weaker, for he is required to fall back on what one may suppose that Jesus thought the value of his impending death would be: "Jesus may well have thought of his own approaching death as a source of blessing to many."²⁴

In his treatment of the subject in this article, Hick has been almost exclusively negative: Christianity is not... should not have... is no longer.... Any positive *theological* consequences that might be drawn from the results of following his position through to its logical conclusion are only peripherally touched on, if at all.

This is a recurring theme in most of the other articles in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, as well: that a pluralistic theology will have many and varied benefits for relations among and between peoples, with very little discussion of the impact such a theology has on the transcendent or eschatological positions that lie at the heart of the various religions. Two of the three sections in the collection deal with these practical issues, with the third devoted to the theological.

²⁰ Hick, p. 31

²¹ Idem.

²² Hick, p. 32

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Hick, p. 33. This is a far-reaching weakening of a central Christian doctrine, however, and, if widely accepted, must result in a complete rethinking of Christianity's core meaning and message.

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Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, writing from a feminist-liberationist perspective, notes that a search for justice in the world must imply not favouring one religion above another, for “[s]uch normativeness, combined with power, allows and invites exploitation of all those falling outside the norm,” which “...falls short of the norm that liberationists consider ultimate—the normative justice that creates well-being in the world community.”²⁵

Gordon Kaufman notes that “...the threat of nuclear war has irrevocably bound us all together in one common fate, whether we like it or not. It is no longer possible, therefore, or desirable, for us to continue living simply and uncritically out of the parochial religious and cultural traditions we have inherited.”²⁶

On a more positive note, Paul Knitter, the co-editor of the collection and a contributor, notes, among other things that pluralism can add something to another theological paradigm, that of liberation theology. In his view, pluralism frees liberation theology from “the dangerous limitation of inbreeding, of drawing on only one vision of the kingdom.”²⁷ Liberation theology cannot only benefit from such a pluralistic view, but “the liberation movement needs not just religion but *religions*! Economic, political, and especially nuclear liberation is too big a job for any one nation, or culture, *or* religion.”²⁸

Knitter joins, though not wholeheartedly, with critics who warn against the dangers of relativism, unifism, common source of religions, or even one God, and seeks an escape through the possibility of shared humanity.

‘If all this makes some sense, then I think we can go a step further; instead of searching for “one God” or “one Ultimate” or a “common essence” or a “mystical centre” within all religions, we can recognize a *shared locus of religious experience* now available to all the religions of the world.’²⁹

Knitter then proposes that “a Christian liberation theology of religions...will propose as the ‘common’...ground or starting point for religious encounter not *Theos*, the ineffable mystery of the divine, but rather, *Soteria*, the “ineffable mystery of salvation.”³⁰

²⁵ Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt, In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective, in Hick and Knitter (eds.), p. 149

²⁶ Kaufman, Gordon D., Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology, in Hick and Knitter (eds.), pg. 15.

²⁷ Knitter, Paul F., Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions, in Hick and Knitter (eds.), pg. 180.

²⁸ Knitter, pg. 179. Emphasis his.

²⁹ Knitter, pg. 186, Emphasis his.

³⁰ Knitter, pg. 187

Such a starting point would not impose its views of God or the Ultimate on other traditions and “seems to be more faithful to the data of comparative religions, for although the religions of the world contain a diverget variety of models for the Ultimate—theistic, metatheistic, polytheistic, and atheistic—the common thrust (...) remains *soteriological*, the concern of most religions being *liberation* (*vimukti*, *moksa*, *nirvana*) rather than speculation about a hypothetical [divine] liberator’.”³¹

Knitter feels his position strengthened by the Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, another contributor to the collection, who observes that “the religions of the world share many more common starting points in their soteriologies than in their theologies.”³²

Knitter asks the question of whether such a soteriological approach might not provide a suitable set of criteria by which to grade religions, as against other models proposed by Hick (soteriological effectiveness—whatever promotes ‘that limitlessly better quality of human existence which comes about in the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness’³³), Stanley Samartha (a ‘consensus of conscience’ that would not be ‘a religious fruit salad’³⁴) Hans Küng (“those fundamental values and fundamental demands’ essential to being human”³⁵).

Knitter says he could support such a Küngian *humanum*, but with the proviso that more specific information is required...whose humanum. From Knitter’s liberationist perspective, everything should be focussed on the “oppressed, the marginated, the powerless (...) otherwise such criteria run the risk of sinking into ineffectual theory or First World ideology.”³⁶

Only in praxis, in action based on concern for the oppressed, can one identify how belief, ritual or practice promotes liberation.

Knitter’s position also has consequences for his Christology. The pre-eminence of praxis as the defining criterion means that understanding the nature of Christ may not be ultimately possible, it is, in fact, no longer necessary: right practice takes pride of place above right belief.³⁷

This criterion would also make it possible, Knitter posits, for discern whether and how much other religious beliefs and religious figures may be genuine ways of salvation and liberators respectively: “Simply stated, from their ethical, soteriological fruits, we shall know them—we

³¹ Idem.

³² Knitter, pg. 188.

³³ Knitter, pg. 189

³⁴ Idem.

³⁵ Idem.

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Knitter, pg. 192.

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shall be able to judge whether and how much other religious paths *and* their mediators are salvific.”³⁸

The final criterion proposed by Knitter is whether “the faithful” would accept such an approach, which would imply the acceptance of a pluralistic view. Others have struggled with presenting a pluralistic view to the faithful and then taken a step back out of fear that in rejecting the pluralism, as they are expected to do, the faithful might also reject other important positions as well.³⁹ Knitter would facilitate the acceptance by the faithful of such a pluralistic view by “help[ing] to see that in ‘receiving’ these new views of Jesus, they are not only remaining faithful to the witness of the New Testament and tradition, but are also being challenged to an even deeper commitment to Christ and his gospel.”⁴⁰

Observations

The discussion within Christianity surrounding pluralism and relativism has certainly not stood still in the hundred years between Troeltsch and Hick. Broadly speaking a couple of observations can be made. In the first place, the proponents of a more pluralistic view are becoming bolder. While Troeltsch dared not venture into the transcendental realm where his evidence and reason would not be able to follow, Hick, Knitter and, as we shall see in the next chapter, others around the world have not shrunk from pulling the transcendental down into their own realm and subjecting it to a rigorous examination. Troeltsch was content to leave Jesus Christ divine, unreachable and absolute, if unprovable. Knitter finds Jesus divinity equally unprovable, but unnecessary in any event. Hick is content to not insist on the divinity.

As regards their pluralistic view, Troeltsch, speaking from a pre-Auschwitz, pre-nuclear perspective, looks for fellow (though not necessarily equal) travellers on his way to ultimate salvation, perhaps, though not necessarily, beyond Christianity. The more recent pluralists are looking for fellow travellers along the road now travelled as a bulwark against the injustices of man against man, against nuclear suicide, against environmental catastrophe.

³⁸ Knitter, pg. 193.

³⁹ Knitter names especially Hans Küng in this regard.

⁴⁰ Knitter, pg. 195.

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To greater or lesser degrees, no serious Christian theologian has been able to avoid the discussion regarding relativism and pluralism in the century since Troeltsch formulated the problem so sharply. Whether one has been for a relativistic/pluralistic view or against it, the question has had to be faced.

In short, the Christian theological world has been divided into two broad camps, though within each a significant amount of variation can be found. The two camps are: the exclusivist camp — still holding to the view that only through the Church and/or Christ can salvation be obtained — and the relativistic/pluralist camp which holds that — and here the opinions diverge widely — salvation can be found in other religions/faiths.

In this chapter, I want to look at a number of authors representing the second of those two camps to illustrate a number of key points.

The five authors are:

Hans Küng, Switzerland/Germany¹, Male, Roman Catholic

Dorothee Sölle, Germany/United States, Female, Lutheran

Ninian Smart, United States, Male, (liberal) Anglican

Steven Konstantine, United States, Male, Greek Orthodox,

Kwok Pui-lan, China/United States, Female, Anglican

R.S. Sugirtharajah, Sri Lanka/United Kingdom, Male, Affiliation unknown

While the authors do not necessarily represent a statistically valid proportion of working theologians today, they have been selected for a several reasons.

First, they cover multiple faith traditions within Christianity, ranging from Roman Catholic to Anglican to Eastern Orthodox.

Second, they cross or ignore gender barriers as if those were not important. Men and women are both represented in this selection.

Thirdly, they transcend — not without consequences — geography. Europe, the Americas and Asia are all represented.

And finally, in various ways, the writers selected have achieved varying degrees of authority, either professionally or with the public or a combination of both. Hans Küng, for example, has a

¹ For each author, where appropriate, I have also indicated the country in which much of their work has been done, which would unavoidably have some impact on their developed thought.

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public far beyond the seat of academe he holds as a professor and is regularly cited in the popular media. The same can be said of Dorothee Sölle. At the time of writing, Ninian Smart is the president of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). The writings of both Kwok Pui-Lan and R.S. Sugirtharajah are regularly included in the curricula of academic courses in theology, and are therefore influential in the formation of future cadres of professional theologians and clergy.

Hans Küng

Hans Küng (Sursee, Switzerland, 1928), professor of dogmatics and ecumenical theology at Germany's Tübingen University, can best be situated in the inclusionist wing of this discussion. To sum it up very briefly, before embarking on a more extensive review: other religions *do* constitute paths to salvation, but that in no way means that they contain the full truth that Christianity does.

In his 1975 book, *On Being a Christian*,² Küng outlined his views concisely.

The first thing that strikes one in his treatment of the subject is the title chosen for the chapter: "The Challenge of the World Religions." Judging by Küng's selection of the religions that have been given greater attention, one can reasonably say that he has chosen a path similar to that mapped by Troeltsch, Hick, and others: the Indian religions — Hinduism and Buddhism — the Chinese religions — Tao and Confucianism — and the Abrahamic religions — Judaism and Islam in addition to Christianity — are world religions, and therefore worthy of further investigation, while others, including traditional African, South American religions, are mentioned only in passing as primitive religions, if at all.

Following Barth³, Küng begins by noting that Christianity "doesn't want to be just a 'religion.'⁴ Having said that, though, he goes on to note that phenomenologically at any rate, there is a "religion" called Christianity, which has much in common with other religions.⁵ The question then becomes whether the other religions can also be considered paths to salvation.

In his lead-in to a consideration of this question, Küng first notes that the missionary efforts in Asia have 'failed,'⁶ and largely because the Roman Catholic hierarchy didn't follow the advice

² Küng, Hans, *Christen Zijn*, P. Heldens, s.j., (trans.) (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht) 1975.

³ Küng's connection to the Protestant Barth dates back to his doctoral thesis on Barth's doctrine of justification.

⁴ Küng, 76.

⁵ Idem

⁶ Idem

of the Jesuits who had recommended an approach more closely resembling the hellenizing efforts of Paul and others in Christianity's formative years.⁷

This situation is different now, Küng notes, with a sea change in how the 'world religions' are approached, though not, it seems, in the ultimate goal:

*(...) from Rome and Paris, to Bangalore, Calcutta, Colombo, Tokyo and Canberra, individuals and whole work groups are making efforts to really begin to discover the great hope, the richness of Islam, of Buddhism, of Hinduism, of Confucianism and Taoism, to understand their value, to make them ready for the Christian message and theology.*⁸

This change in focus has had a serious theological result, Küng notes, with more emphasis being put on the second of four covenants that Christians recognize between Man and YHWH, the Noachite, between YHWH and *all people*, regardless of any other factor.⁹ That is a *de facto* recognition, Küng says, that there is "salvation outside the church," in apparent contradiction to the long-standing dictum *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.¹⁰

Salvation, yes. But not "levelling,"¹¹ is Küng's statement. Though there are similarities — sacrifices, monks, saints, etc. — there are qualitative differences between those concepts among the various religions, and they cannot be ignored.

This does not mean that Christianity "has to make other religions small so it can appear big,"¹² Küng says. On the contrary, the Church should enter into full and participatory dialogue with the world religions, with the idea of enriching them with contributions from Christianity while taking from them important lessons that Christianity could benefit from and "in which the deepest intentions of the religions could be fulfilled."¹³

Küng explicitly does not want arrogant dominance by a Christianity that claims exclusive possession of the truth, which Küng sees as a danger of Karl Barth's position and dialectical theology. Nor does he want a syncretistic blending of all the mutually contradictory religions

⁷ Küng, 77.

⁸ Küng, 77-8

⁹ Küng, 78. The other covenants are with Adam to all humanity, with Moses for the Jews, and with/through Jesus for — potentially — all humanity.

¹⁰ Jacques Dupuis, in his 1997 study *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books) presents a persuasive case for the position that *extra ecclesiam...* in its strictest form was only held for a short period of 50 years following the Council of Florence (1442). Both before that council and after the 'discovery' of the Americas, *extra ecclesiam* was much more flexible than is commonly held, according to Dupuis.

¹¹ Küng, 86.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Küng, 97-98. Among the lessons Christianity could learn, Küng suggests: a strict simplicity from Islam as a counterweight to overcomplicated dogmas; a transpersonal god-perception from the Hindus and Buddhists against

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which reduces the truth through harmonisation (a danger K  ng sees in liberal theology as expressed by Toynbee and others). K  ng would rather see “a self-aware, selfless Christian service to the people in the religions. And from the openness that is more than condescending accommodation; which doesn’t deny one’s own convictions of faith, but which also doesn’t demand a certain answer.”¹⁴

K  ng wants Christianity to enter into constructive criticism of other religions: not destroying what is valuable in them, but not adopting valueless elements uncritically, either. At the same time, K  ng feels that Christianity must accept the same conditions as regards criticism from other religions.¹⁵

What specifically the framework against which one could base acceptance or criticism of other religions is not explored in depth in *On Being a Christian*, and, indeed, the subject matter is too broad to be handled in such a work. Some clue may perhaps be found in the practical expression of this theoretical consideration.

K  ng’s influence in this discussion has also been felt in the practical arena, too. A key element has been the Declaration of a Global Ethic formulated in connection with the convening of the second Parliament of World Religions (1993). The Declaration, which is largely the creation of K  ng’s pen, attempts to formulate ‘a minimum point of agreement’ among the religions.¹⁶ Representatives of or, in the case of religions where no organisational representation is possible due to the nature of the religion, adherents of more than (get number) religions signed the Declaration.

The fact that believers from so many religions find such a range of common ground and sign a document emphasising what unites them is a very practical expression of what K  ng in his 1975 book tried to achieve.

Still, for K  ng in *On Being a Christian*, despite the fact that “there is salvation outside the church,” the ultimate goal seems to be that the dialogue should lead to the dialogue partners “being prepared to accept the message of the gospel.”

the ‘all too often anthropomorphic images of father-god’; the importance of ‘here and now’ from Confucianism against an emphasis on the hereafter.

¹⁴ K  ng, 97.

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ In the context of the present discussion, it is interesting to note that K  ng in the Declaration shares an important turn of phrase with Hick. According to the Declaration, “religions” believe, strive, and hope for certain things, which are explicitly named in the Declaration. The use of the word ‘religions’ without a qualifying article, grammatically implies all religions. This question will become critical in the fourth chapter.

Dorothee Sölle

Dorothee Sölle (Germany, 1929-) has carved out prominent positions in several different though interconnected theological bastions: feminist, socialist and environmentalist, to name but three. In her most recent book, *Mysticism and Resistance*,¹⁷ Sölle combines these various perspectives, uniting them in a vision of praxis born of a hermeneutics of hunger with, as one result, a pluralistic view of religion that doesn't dispense with or suspend the differences between the religions, but transcends them.

Sölle places the hermeneutics of hunger in opposition to the hermeneutics of suspicion formulated by Paul Ricoeur. Suspicion does offer a way to examine a religion's place in a power structure, Sölle says, but it doesn't answer the First World need to live a life where spiritual needs are better met than tradition provides for.¹⁸

As does physical hunger, spiritual hunger leads its hungry to places where they may find their needs met, even if that means drawing from other faith traditions and religions, according to Sölle. In that regard, comparative religious studies are key, unavoidable, in fact.¹⁹ She sees in the many similar symbols and concepts to be found in the world religions a path to discover the multiplicity in the collective without losing sight of the differences.²⁰

This is, for Sölle, especially important in the world of mysticism²¹, which she says is not represented in modern-day Christianity as are the other two characteristics of religion identified by Friederich von Hügel († 1925), institution — the petrine element represented by the Roman Catholic Church — and intellect — the pauline side represented by the Protestant denominations.²²

And it is precisely in this mystical world that Sölle wants to meet and stand side by side with the other world religions.

¹⁷ Sölle, Dorothee, *Mystiek en verzet*, Harmina van der Vinne (trans.), (Baarn, Nederland: Uitgeverij Ten Have), 1998.

¹⁸ Sölle, 79-80

¹⁹ Sölle, 80

²⁰ Idem

²¹ I note here the distinction Sölle makes between the words "mystiek" and "mysticisme" which can only be translated by the single English word "mysticism." Unless otherwise noted in the text, I am using the word in the sense of "mystiek," that is, a sincere and positive attempt at an 'immediate' God experience, rather than the somewhat negatively charged mysticism, which has come to include many elements which have few "mystiek" aspirations.

²² Sölle, 81

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Appropriately for one who seeks a mystical unity, Sölle visualises the “world religions” in a circle, all facing and progressing inwards towards the “the secret of the world, [...] the Godhead.”²³

This “X in the heart of the world,”²⁴ whether known as “Allah, the First Mother, the Eternal, Nirvana, [or] the Unknowable”²⁵ is the ultimate common denominator among the “world religions,” regardless of how it is named, Sölle says.

Three other elements are much more important than the names given to the “X.” The first is how close we all are to the centre. “How close is this unnameable X for us?” she asks, adding, “that is the real question.”²⁶

Secondly, and faithful to her circle motif, Sölle calculates that the closer we all approach the centre, the smaller the distance between us becomes.

Thirdly, the closer we approach the centre, the less important the different perspectives we all have become, until, at “the heart of God,” they disappear entirely.²⁷

This mystic vision is the complete opposite of fundamentalism, Sölle asserts, with fundamentalism being defined as “extreme fixation on certain images, rituals and codes of behaviour” which is in its turn a “massive, often violent rejection of the mystical core.”²⁸ Fundamentalism, therefore, belongs to the periphery.

Aware of the danger such a position has of degenerating into “vague pluralism” Sölle provides as well a security against such a development: contextuality growing out of the hermeneutics of hunger. Contextuality provides a touchstone in the “real presence of the *people*” [emphasis hers] and creates a relationship “between, on the one hand, the mystical experience of others as well as one’s-self and, on the other hand, between the praxis of the other and one’s own praxis.”²⁹

She leaves the question — and in the context of this discussion, the crucial question — open of the discernment of mystical spirits. How does one distinguish between true and false mysticism, between the mysticism of life and of death?

Sölle cites the annexation by the German National-Socialists of many aspects of mysticism as they tried to recreate the Aryan past. On a surface level, Sölle notes, they succeeded to such an

²³ Sölle, 83

²⁴ Idem

²⁵ Idem

²⁶ Idem

²⁷ Idem

²⁸ Sölle, 83-84

²⁹ Sölle, 84

extent that, phenomenologically, no meaningful distinction could be made between the false, Nazi mysticism and true mysticism.

To rescue mysticism from this quandary, Sölle has a ready answer, and one, which immediately recalls Kung's Declaration.

"The criteria of true mysticism," Sölle writes, "are those of ethics. (...) They are generalizable. Universality is not just a dream."³⁰

God, being "common to all creatures (...) any violation of that ground experience, as takes place in racist, class-bound or patriarchal thinking or in mystical egomania, suspends this 'commonality' of God and so ruins precisely the unity of ontology and ethics that true mysticism pursues and experiences."³¹

Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine

At one level, Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine go farther than many Christians, even those who hold a pluralistic view, are prepared to go. The irony will, however, that many critics of liberal theology accuse all those with even a slight pluralistic inclination of the approach Smart and Konstantine so non-apologetically take.

In their 1991 book, *Christian Systematic Theology in a world context*,³² Smart and Konstantine not only positively accept many of the stances of other world religions...they absorb them.

The Christian, Jewish and Muslim God, YHWH or Allah, for example, is explained in terms of the Brahman, the primal force behind the manifestations of the Hindu gods Krishna, Vishnu, etc. Christian devotion is understood as *bhakti*, Hindu-like devotion. Christian *agapé* has characteristics of Confucian *li*.

Whether this is necessary in the presentation of their Trinity-based vision (*darsana*) or is merely window-dressing, is open to question, but it does serve to concretely present their point of view, which is an accepting, open, and unabashedly pluralistic one.

That does not mean that they accept all faiths as containing truth in equal measure or interchangeably. They have criticisms of Buddhist and other doctrines on many points throughout the book³³, but they do accept that "the transforming and saving power of divine

³⁰ Sölle, 87

³¹ Idem

³² Smart, Ninian and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a world context*, (London: Marshall Pickering), 1991

³³ One example is the Hindu and Buddhist notion of reincarnation, by which they are "not convinced." (Smart & Konstantine, 295). But they equally have difficulties with the doctrines of some Christian churches, such as Calvinist predestination. (Smart & Konstantine, 390).

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grace is operative widely in other faiths. (...) [S]uch religions can be seen to produce fruits which are signals of the transcendental contact which (...) is contact with the Trinity itself.”³⁴

Even stronger, Smart and Konstantine “unequivocally state our conviction that there will be universal salvation ultimately.”³⁵

Still, Smart and Konstantine insist that there are some benefits to Christianity that other religions do not enjoy: even though “many non-Christians are much closer to the Divine (...) than many Christians [are]: (...) the Christian has a greater opportunity of plucking the fruits from the Tree of Life.”³⁶

The only possible reason offered for this is that Christians already have a correct view of Reality and Smart and Konstantine “do not wish to put all accounts of Reality, compatible or otherwise, on a par.”³⁷

As does Sölle, Smart and Konstantine find a common centre for all religion. Unlike Sölle, it is unique to Christianity. The common centre is a Social Trinity reflecting the Christian view of the nature of the Divine. Smart and Konstantine do not have any proof for their position, but it is their driving vision.³⁸

What does this mean for relations with other faiths? First is the assertion that Smart and Konstantine feel they must be loyal to their own tradition. “[I]t is naive to suppose that all traditions and subtraditions have an equally valid (or invalid) version of the nature of the one Reality. It is our confessional obligation if we do hold to the Christian view of Reality to testify to it, and to depict its shining glories for others. If they do not see this Reality, then so be it.”³⁹

This has not, they assert, descended into an exclusivist position. In a faint echo of the anonymous Christian position of Rahner in which other believers who were sincere seekers of truth were considered Christians even if they didn’t know it themselves, Smart and Konstantine believe that “each faith must see hidden messages of its own Focus in all other faiths: the Buddha is hidden in the Christian life, as Christ is there, mostly unseen, in the path of the Buddha.”⁴⁰

Christians should “rejoice”⁴¹ in the fact that “the Holy Spirit in history has created other avenues of grace and other avenues of salvation,”⁴² Smart and Konstantine say. So many things

³⁴ Smart & Konstantine, 291

³⁵ Smart & Konstantine, 294

³⁶ Smart & Konstantine, 296

³⁷ Idem

³⁸ Smart & Konstantine, 297

³⁹ Idem

⁴⁰ Idem

⁴¹ Idem

have happened, after all — fanaticism, confusion, racism, anti-Semitism, etc. — which “ha[ve] blackened Christianity as a historical phenomenon”⁴³ and alienated people.

Christianity, in fact, needs the other religions, according to Smart and Konstantine. To help see itself better and better understand its own traditions. Smart and Konstantine feel that religious plurality, in fact, “is part of the divine plan (...) to help [religions] criticize and correct [one an]other: to keep [one an]other honest.

R.S. Sugirtharajah

In several respects, the contribution of R.S. Sugirtharajah illustrates a number of interesting elements in the pluralistic discussion. In the first place, there is the phenomenon of a two-thirds world theologian whose most effective podium is in a one-thirds world institution. Sugirtharajah was born and raised in Sri Lanka, but now (2000) lectures in missiology at the University of Birminham, England.

Secondly, while Sugirtharjah’s work does contain some elements that could be classified as negative, especially as regards rejection of the influence of European colonialism and the theologies that accompanied, supported and justified that colonialism, its view towards pluralism can be extrapolated from positive evaluations of non-Christian cultural and other elements in local religious traditions.

In *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*,⁴⁴ for example, Sugirtharjah devotes not inconsiderable space to an investigation of potential Hindu and Buddhist influences on Jesus, his life and times, an investigation that he asserts has been forgotten by European theologians since the Muslim conquest placed a barrier between Europe and Central Asia.

He notes that “early Christian writers refer to the presence (...) of a group of naked yogies of brahmanical tradition,”⁴⁵ that there were Buddhist missionaries in west Asia in 256 B.C.E.,⁴⁶ that Clement of Alexandria wrote “appreciatively (...) of Buddhist philosophy [and] of the presence of Buddhist *sramanas* (wanderers).”⁴⁷

⁴² Idem

⁴³ Idem

⁴⁴ Sugirtharajah, R.S. *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books)

⁴⁵ Sugirtharajah, p. 114

⁴⁶ Idem

⁴⁷ Idem

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A rebirth in interest in positive appreciations of questions of this nature was destined for an early demise, partly, Sugirtharjah says, because of “pressure exerted by the Vatican [which] silenced and reprimanded [Henri de Lubac, a major proponent of such inquiries.]”⁴⁸

A positive view of the possibility of seminal influences from Buddhist sources on the development of Christianity, up to and including the possibility of the Buddha’s having served as role model for Jesus’ view of his role and his choice of method for carrying it out and the possible influences of Buddhist scriptures having influenced the Gospel writers,⁴⁹ implies a pluralistic approach to comparative religious studies and to a pluralistic view of theology. If one is willing to accept and to value rather than reject ideas and inspiration from a non-Christian source, the logical conclusion must be that there may be more that unites the two beliefs under consideration than has been heretofore accepted.

Sugirtharjah states this quite clearly:

*“Although religious movements seek to establish an exclusive syntax [that] is uniquely theirs, religious identities are nevertheless inevitably coalitional. It was Swami Vivekananda who said, “I pity the Hindu who does not see the beauty in Christ’s character. I pity the Christian who does not reverence the Hindu Christ.” Such acknowledgement of cross-fertilization will help point to the creative possibilities of universally held elements in the teaching of Jesus. These common elements should provide a starting point to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths, rather than starting from a traditional missionary view that Christians have superior knowledge of the truth.”*⁵⁰

This acknowledgment, however, should not be limited to simply noting similarities and differences, but should serve as a basis for “ideological and cultural critique of both Christian and other religious traditions and expose their virulent sides.”⁵¹

The tension is raised to a higher degree when Sugirtharjah makes the following challenge:

“In a multireligious context [such as] ours, the real contest is not between Jesus and other savior figures [such as] Buddha or Krishna, or religious leaders like Mohammed, as advocates of the “Decade of Evangelism” want us to believe, it is between mammon and Satan on the one side, and Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Mohammed on the other. Mammon stands for personal

⁴⁸ Idem

⁴⁹ Sugirtharjah, p. 116

⁵⁰ Sugirtharjah, p. 117

⁵¹ Idem

greed, avariciousness, accumulation, and selfishness, and Satan stands for structural and institutional violence.”⁵²

Kwok Pui-lan

As is the case with Sugirtharajah, Kwok Pui-lan, too, is a two-thirds world theologian who has chosen to practise her theological craft in a one-third world setting. Chinese born, Kwok now teaches at Episcopal Divinity School in the United States, using that platform as a base from which to criticize the EurAmerican Christian theological centre in its approaches to the two-thirds world faith community.

Again, as with Sugirtharajah, Kwok uses the tools of Enlightenment-based theology while rejecting many of its suppositions, and carves out a pluralistic place for herself based on positive appreciations of non-Christian, non-universalist regional faith expressions.

A third element is added to Kwok’s analysis with the inclusion of elements of feminist discourse into the discussion.⁵³

*Discovering the Bible in the non-Biblical World*⁵⁴ examines a number of assumptions regarding truth, canonicity and authority that directly bear on the question of theological pluralism, and challenges the reader to reconsider those issues.

To the question of whether the Bible alone contains all the truth necessary for salvation, a conclusion which must have consequences in any discussion of the relative merits of non-Christian faiths, Kwok notes with favour that “[f]or a long time, Chinese Christians have been

⁵² Sugirtharajah, p. 119. It is interesting to note that while Sugirtharajah clearly outlines the meaning of mammon and Satan—both uniquely Christian concepts, as it happens—he makes no effort to determine the meaning of the savior figures and religious leaders he has enumerated. It is also interesting, by way of an aside, to note that discussion of Sugirtharajah’s book by a class of Masters degree candidates at the University of Amsterdam in 1999 elicited a strong and emotional defensive reaction from the predominantly Dutch and German students who felt that their culturally defined preconceptions were being attacked by Sugirtharajah’s position—not, perhaps, without reason.

⁵³ Kwok is not the first and will certainly not be the last to make the equation between coloniser-colonized and male-female. For other treatments of feminist contributions to the pluralistic discussion, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, “In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective,” both in Hick and Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books) 1987.

⁵⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the non-Biblical World*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books). The title refers to the non-EurAmerican cultures of the two-thirds world for whom the Bible is an imported theological product, rather than being native to those cultures. I note in passing that the assumption in the title that EurAmerica is the “Biblical world” effectively denies Christianity’s west Asian origins, and ignores Judaism entirely. The so-called First World is also a “non-Biblical” world, having willingly or unwillingly accepted the Bible from its west Asian origins. Failure to recognize this fact, and to accept its consequences have led to centuries of misunderstandings and problems on both sides of the International Date Line.

Fellow travellers

saying that western people do not own the truth simply because they bring the Bible to us, *for truth is to be found in other cultures and religions as well.*"⁵⁵(emphasis mine).

This might mean that, agreeing with other 20th century Chinese theologians, that Chinese Christians might rightfully compose a canon including "parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, Confucian classics, and even Daoist and Buddhist texts!"⁵⁶ (exclamation point hers).

This appropriation of the right to create a canon is in equal measure an attempt to free the two-thirds world cultures from domination by a west that demanded for itself the right to determine what truth was. It is also necessary if the message contained in the canon, however constituted, is to mean anything to the culturally diverse populations it attempts to reach. Kwok quotes fellow Chinese theologian Wu Yahozhong: "Such terms as original sin, atonement, salvation, the Trinity, the Godhead, the incarnation, may have rich meanings for those who understand their origins and implications, but they are just so much superstition and speculation for the average Chinese."⁵⁷

To deal with the diverse conceptions of truth, canon and authority and, indeed, theology, among the various Asian communities that Kwok writes for and to, she proposes a new hermeneutical horizon, based on what she calls 'dialogical imagination.'⁵⁸

Dialogical imagination is based on what Kwok observes Asian theologians to be doing, engaging in "mutuality, active listening and openness to what one's partner has to say."⁵⁹

This means, of course, that the partners in discussion must *a priori* be given the chance to be right. "Our fellow Asians who have other faiths must not be treated as missiological objects but as dialogical partners in an ongoing search for truth."⁶⁰

And the purpose of the dialogue, in keeping with her earlier observation that 99% of Chinese "can only judge the meaningfulness of the biblical tradition by looking at how it is acted out (...),"⁶¹ Kwok sees the purpose of the dialog as being the sharing of "religious insights to build a better society."⁶²

⁵⁵ Kwok, p. 10

⁵⁶ Idem

⁵⁷ Kwok, p. 11

⁵⁸ Kwok, p. 12

⁵⁹ Idem

⁶⁰ Idem

⁶¹ Idem

⁶² Kwok, p. 13

This is a very praxis-oriented theology, where salvation as it is traditionally understood by EurAmerican theologians takes a back seat. And it presupposes that the religious insights of others have at least as much to contribute as one's own do.

Conclusion

The review of the positions outlined above shows that there is much that is similar, and still much that divides the positions of the theologians selected. It demonstrates that there is a large divide separating the extremes of the exclusivist and totally inclusivist positions. It also shows, however, that pluralistic views, to greater and lesser degrees are more common than may generally be thought.

Hans Küng, at least as his position is reflected in *On Being a Christian*, non-Christian religions are *paths* to truth, but do not contain the whole truth. Dialog among the religions is important and enriches both sides in the discussion, both positively and negatively. The ultimate aim, however, is to prepare the other religions to receive the gospel.

Küng's countrywoman, Dorothee Sölle, on the other hand, sees all religions in a mystical circle, facing inwards towards an unknowable "X" where differences between them will disappear as we approach the "heart of God." Sölle joins with Küng, however, in her emphasis on ethics, "the criteria of true mysticism."

The Americans Smart and Konstantine accept that the "transforming and saving power of divine grace is operative widely in other faiths," and believe "unequivocally" that there will be "universal salvation ultimately." At the moment, however, Christians do already have a better view of ultimate Reality than other faiths do, according to Smart and Konstantine. Religious plurality does have its place in the divine plan, however, in that each will help to keep the others 'honest.'

A similar view can be found in Sugirtharajah, for whom dialog has always taken place — Buddhism has influenced Christianity, there is an acceptable Hindu Jesus — and for whom truth may be found in different sources of inspiration. Sugirtharajah also sees a place for inter-mural "ideological and cultural critique of both Christian and other religious traditions and [to] expose their virulent sides." A natural alliance exists between "Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and Mohammed" against "mammon and Satan."

Truth is a major factor for Kwok, who disputes the Western monopoly on it. Dialog must be encouraged among different faiths, without claiming final truth *a priori* for one's self. And the purpose of the dialog is "the sharing of religious insights to build a better society."

Fellow travellers

Two common themes run through the positions outlined above.

First, that dialog can help the different faiths in their search for their own truths and keep their paths straighter.

Second, that ethical considerations have a major part to play in the expression of any religious truths...by their fruits ye shall know them, indeed.

It will be clear from the above that the pluralistic discussion has, without very much fanfare, moved to near the top of the theological agenda of the early 21st century. With the centre of Christianity continuing to move from its long-standing EurAmerican base to a two-thirds world bolwerk, where multiplicity of religious culture has long been more the norm than the exception, the importance of the pluralistic discussion will very likely grow rather than decrease.

Which makes the question of the discerning of spirits even more important than it otherwise might be.

Quo vademus?

Having reviewed a number of authors at the pluralistic end of the exclusivist-pluralistic continuum, we are now able to make a number of observations.

First, the working out of, on the one hand, remorse on the side of the EurAmerican theologians for their previous sins of arrogance and, on the other hand, the development of pride in one's own traditions in the Two-thirds World coupled with the development of new intellectual tools and theoretical models have led to a relatively new openness among the religions, Christianity not least of all. This development has gone hand in hand with similar developments in philosophy, politics and inter-cultural relations and communication.

Second, the resultant relativistic/pluralistic worldview has, to some degree, become part of the theological baggage of a large number of theologians and adherents across a wide range of Christian positions.

Third, for reasons known best to the authors themselves, and going back to Troeltsch, most of the attention has been focused on the so-called World Religions, by which has been meant in practice those religions with significant numbers of adherents or, in the case of Judaism, that share theological bases with them. Little to nothing has been said about the inaptly named New Age religions and other numerically marginal belief systems. Given the changing religious environment, in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, this approach is no longer valid, if in fact it ever was.

Fourth, the pluralistic view enunciated by Hick and Knitter, among others, has to be considered a negative one: we can no longer afford to not be open either due to imminent nuclear destruction (Hick) or imminent environmental disaster (Knitter) or because different faith communities now live too close together in an increasingly globalised world to hold exclusivist views (both and others). The positive view, that we should adopt a pluralistic perspective because it might actually be correct, gets short shrift.

And fifth, and in the context of this paper, the most relevant, very little has been said about the limits of the openness.

Whether out of fear of falling once again into the sin of arrogance or for some other reason, none of the authors reviewed here, and none others I have found who do not hold strict exclusivist views, have been willing or able to say: there are some religions which do not meet the

Quo vademus

litmus test of acceptability...beliefs with which a Christian, or Buddhist or Hindu, cannot in good conscience enter into discussion as equals on the path to Sölle's mystical core or Smart and Konstantine's Social Trinity.

Before I proceed, let me first lay out a number of points that are important for an accurate understanding of what follows. Most important of these is that I share with Smart and Konstantine, Hick and others going back as far as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa¹ the conviction that there will be universal salvation, *apokatastasis panton* ultimately. This conviction dates back to my own original hermeneutical crisis some 15 years ago when I was faced with the apposition of imperfect humanity and a loving God. Given those two conditions, the concept of an eternal hell became untenable.

And yet, if religion is to mean anything, is to make any contribution whatsoever, then it must bring some added value to the discussion, which means it must have some value in the here and now, during our earthly existence. If that is not the case, then we might just as well dispense with religion altogether, which has, of course, been suggested.

I do believe that religion — both in its institutionalised forms and its personal expressions — has something to contribute. My very strong suspicion is that that added value is the peace that comes from knowing that one is already approaching, or already in the presence of YHWH, the Ultimate, etc., with no further action required on the part of the believer, which would amount in fact to little more than justification by works, even if those works were nothing more than having faith *with the expectation that that results in salvation*.² But that does not mean — and here my original Salvation Army roots may be showing — that all religions are of equal value and worthy of the same consideration.

The analysis that follows³ can just as easily be applied to the world religions, but I have chosen to put some more marginal religions in the spotlight by way of illustration. Before I enumerate them, it will be necessary to provide some definitions.

First, of course, a working definition of religion is required, not an easy task.

¹ See Smart & Konstantine, 294

² For a good discussion of this, see Sölle 95 ff. Compare also *The Bhagavad Gita* 4.19-23 and elsewhere on the benefits of freedom from the results of action.

³ This analysis is not based on an abstract extrapolation of values drawn from nowhere, but is a reflection of the positive values that I accept from my own tradition and that I see in other traditions around me. I expect that others will proceed on a similar basis.

For the purposes of this paper, religion is: an organised and conscious focus on a transcendent ultimate reality that informs the actions and attitudes of believers both within and outside ritualised settings and activities.⁴

Organised because without structure of practice, of belief, religion cannot hold.

Conscious because the believer has to be aware of what s/he is doing and preferably why for the belief or actions to have any significance.

Transcendent ultimate reality because otherwise we're dealing only with philosophy.

It must inform the actions and attitudes of believers or there is no value, either sociological or theological, in the belief.

Within and outside ritualised settings means that conduct and the underlying reasons for it during cultic services and activities and/or in day-to-day life must be involved, even if through negation.

A second distinction must be made between the religion as experienced by the believer, regardless of that person's position within the organised expression of the belief (church, temple, ashram, etc.), and the religion as a self-contained 'product' presented by an organisation. In the cases of the world religions, and in most other cases as well, the two will merge. That will not always be so, however, as our examples will show.

I now want to ask the question, can a Christian, even one with the most liberal of pluralistic views, engage in dialogue with and consider as religious equals, Satanists, Scientologists and Wiccans?

The second question immediately presents itself: if not, why not?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go at any length into the development of any of the three and the state of their belief systems. Let me, however, mention just a few points that are germane to this discussion.

First, as currently constituted, all three of the religions named are conscious creations of single (male) individuals (Anton LaVey, L. Ron Hubbard and Gerald Gardner, respectively), in the so-called First World (the United States in the case of the first two and England in the third) over the course of the 20th century, and in the first two instances, in the second half of that century. While this should compel us to consider them in the context of revelations, we have learned from

⁴ I am more than sufficiently aware of the quagmire opening the issue of a definition of religion presents. My own as yet incomplete research into alternate definitions of religion has so far turned up more than 100 well-considered definitions, ranging from the legal to the practical to the theological. I offer this definition only as a working guideline and not as a final, all-encompassing definition, which I consider to be a work in progress.

Quo vademus

Troeltsch that such considerations, not being subject to empirical proofs, are fruitless, so we have to find some other analytical tool.

Second, the public expressions of each of the three through ritual and the faces they present to the outside differ sharply from one another, ranging from differing degrees of suspicion and secrecy (Satanism and Scientology) to active, though not always welcome, participation in the social discourse (Scientology and Wicca). The strangeness of these public faces, however, which may at times shock and repel, can also not be the criterion by which we judge them. Then we would be guilty of nothing less than xenophobia.

Nor can the fact that they sometimes stand in opposition to beliefs we already hold though that is a strong and immediate reaction especially in the case of Satanism, cause us to reject them out of hand. Islam, too, rejects as blasphemy much of what Christianity holds dear, but is considered by most observers as equals in this discussion. What is needed is a way to focus our investigation to be able to determine whether, in fact, the three religions named fall within or outside the great progression to YHWH, the Ultimate or the mystical core.

Fortunately, we already have such a methodology, though it has not often been applied in this way.

With all respect to Dorothee Sölle's hermeneutics of hunger, which definitely has its place in today's shifting sands, it is the hermeneutics of suspicion that will be of most use here. The hermeneutics of suspicion have most often been applied to analyses of one's current religious situation, to correct abuses and uncover weaknesses, but the same principles can also be applied in evaluating other religions to determine their value in the grand scheme.

The first question to be asked critically is whom the religion serves. The answer must be terrestrial, however, if we are alert to Troeltsch's warnings. Possible answers include, the founder, the organisation, the adherent, the Other, and society. If it serves only the founder or the organisation, then alarm bells should go off. If it serves the adherent by providing some key element missing in his or her life, but at the cost of third parties or relationships or his or her physical, psychological or financial well being, then again the alarm bells should start. If it provides a mechanism for serving the Other — however the Other is understood — or society, but at a price, again, alertness is called for. If it provides a mechanism for serving the Other or society for the benefit of the person being helped or of society, regardless of reward, then we can reasonably consider it to be a religion that is at the least worthy of further consideration on our continuum.

This does not mean that the members of every group that fails this test must be considered bad or evil. Even if I feel (and after three years of investigation of Satanism in North America, I do feel) that Satanism is certainly not worthy of inclusion in the collective religious experience as an equal, I also understand the psychological forces at work — alienation, low self-worth, a need for self-validation — that lead some people to it. I don't like it...I am saddened by it, but I understand it and feel there is more to be gained by helping them deal with those problems, which will usually, of itself, be sufficient to motivate them to leave on their own and choose a more positive path.

The second key question that must be asked is what values the religion in question promotes. Armed with K  ng's Declaration, we have, as it were, a checklist of minimum requirements that enables us to test the religion under examination for its *humanity*. For all its transcendental pretensions, a religion *against humanity and human values* must be rejected. If fear, hatred, self-loathing or xenophobia, to name but a few are key pillars in a religion's doctrine, then, again, we are dealing with a religion that, in whole or in part, ought not to be accepted into the family of religions.

A third, though less binding criterion of judgement is whether the religion's doctrines are patent nonsense. I refer here not to their transcendental statements, which we remember are not under investigation here, but their references to the here and now. Statements such as those made by the Heaven's Gate adherents who committed suicide in blissful expectation of being intercepted by superior beings flying in with the Hale-Bopp comet certainly qualify. As would any belief which held that humans could sustain unassisted controlled flight or remain unassisted for long periods of time under water without a breathing apparatus.

A fourth criterion is whether the religion in question has a positive message or simply a negative one. Notwithstanding the importance of role of the nabi⁵ in pointing out society's errors and urging correction, a religion which is only a rejection of what has gone before, without making a positive contribution of its own, is not, I submit, a religion which meets the criterion of acceptability. This is not the same as a religion that, having identified abuses that have not been corrected, chooses to go its own way. It then has a positive message supposedly purged of the offences of the community it left.

It must be remembered that these criteria of judgement must be used judiciously and with respect. Even the generally accepted world religions, and especially in their popular variations and

⁵ Prophet in the Hebrew Bible.

Quo vademus

expressions, will find it hard to pass all these tests. The goal must be to determine in open discussion whether one is dealing with a structural phenomenon, whereby the religion should be placed outside the family of religions, or only a minor error, which would not require them to be placed outside it.

Is this arrogance? Those religions judged inadequate will certainly claim that it is. I don't think so, however. If one doesn't stand for anything, then, by definition, one stands for nothing. If religion is to mean anything, then we must be able to say without shame or embarrassment, this far and no further.

This approach also has value in another aspect of the dialog identified by most of the theologians discussed in this paper: the purpose of the dialog in inter-faith relations. A number of the theologians have singled out the role of dialog in "keeping each other honest," of ensuring that we collectively stay on the straight and narrow. With the analytical tools presented by the methods described above, we will be able to approach our fellow religious travellers and honestly offer critique, based on expressed not transcendent truth, based on what we observe. All religions have elements which can be and have been abused and misused to oppress and to exploit. That is a theme which crosses all faith boundaries. When such abuse is identified, then we should be able to say without embarrassment, this is not what 'your faith' is about. And be taken seriously. And when 'they' say it to 'us,' we have to be able to accept it in the same spirit. Only in that way will our collective spiritual journey mean anything at all. Such criticism must of course be well informed and well intentioned, lest it fall into meaningless chauvinism.

The inter-faith dialog(s) that have been undertaken to date have accomplished a great deal in creating a climate where we live in more religious harmony than the world has seen in many a century. When we actually expand the oecumene to include all believers and all faiths, and begin to dialog on that basis, with the mutual improvement of all as the goal, then we shall have a dialog worthy of the name.

The question may reasonably be asked as to whether the project covered by the methodology outlined above is not actually a program to do something completely different than the stated objective. To wit, to identify and separate those belief systems which qualify as "religion" and those which do not, however they are called. I fear that the methodology could lend itself to such an application, but that is not my project, and for the following reasons.

First, because there is not, as yet, a universally accepted definition of what religion is. I have offered only a working definition that has no pretensions to being universally applicable. In order to achieve the division of belief systems into religion/not religion, a universally applicable and acceptable definition is required.

Second, because, in the context of this paper and following Troeltsch, it is the phenomenological and empirical, the philosophical and the ethical, and not the transcendent which concerns me here, and I see little value and have no interest in sorting out the tangle of religions that adopting such a position would require.

Thirdly, and finally, in the context of dialog, such an approach would interfere with or prevent entirely, constructive dialog as it quickly degenerated into a back-and-forth “am too,” “are not” exchange which distracts from the content of the discussion by focusing on inconsequential detail.

For the purposes of the practical approach that I propose in this paper, a religion is anything whose adherents consider it to be a religion. The discussion begins at that point.

To answer the question posed earlier as to whether Satanism, Scientology and Wicca can be considered equals in the dialog of religions: my answer is No, Possibly and Yes, respectively.

Appendix 1: Complementary literature

It is not possible within the context of a thesis to provide a detailed analysis of the three belief systems discussed in Chapter 4, Satanism, Scientology and Wicca. The following resources are available for those who wish to investigate these belief systems more thoroughly.

Satanism

Acquino, Michael, *The Crystal Tablet of Set*, (Temple of Set)
Barton, Blanche, *The Church of Satan*, (Hells Kitchen Productions) November 1990, (ISBN: 0962328626)
Barton, Blanche, *The Secret Life of a Satanist*, (Los Angeles: Feral House) 1992
LaVey, Anton Szander, *The Satanic Bible*, (New York: Avon Books), 1969.
Lavey, Anton, *The Satanic Witch*, (Los Angeles: Feral Books), 1989 (Reissue)
LaVey, Anton, *The Satanic Rituals*, (New York: Avon Books), 1991 (Reissue).
Rhodes, H.T.F., *The Satanic Mass*, (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press) 1974

Scientology

A thorough listing of Scientology-related materials (pro and con) is available in Frenschkowski, Marco, L. "Ron Hubbard and Scientology: An annotated bibliographical survey of primary and selected secondary literature," in *Marburg Journal of Religion*, Volume 4, No.1 (July 1999) (<http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/frenschkowski.html#H2>)

Wicca

Adler, Margot *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* .1979 Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, (Revised and Expanded Edition)
Albanese, Catherine L. *Nature Religion in America*. U. Chicago Press, 1990.
Buckland, Raymond *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*. 1975 St Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1993
Campanelli, Pauline *Illus: Dan Campanelli, Wheel of the Year: Living the Magical Life*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1989
Crowley, Aleister *Magick: In Theory and Practice*, Secaucus: Castle Books, 1991 Eller, Cynthia. *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*. Beacon Press, 1993.
Gardner, Gerald, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*.1959 New York: Magickal Childe Publishing, 1991
Gardner, Gerald, *Witchcraft Today* 1954 New York: Magickal Childe Publishing, 1991
Harvey, Graham and Charlotte Hardman, editors. *Paganism Today*. Thorsons, 1996
Hopman, Ellen E. and Lawrence Bond, editors. *People of the Earth*. Destiny Books, 1996.
Lewis, James R., editor. *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*. SUNY Press, 1996.
Luhmann, T.H. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. Harvard U. Press, 1989.
Murray, Margaret A. *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* 1921 London: Oxford, Paperback edition, 1967.
Orion, Loretta. *Never Again the Burning Times*. Waveland, 1994.
Starhawk, *Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, San Francisco: Harper, 1979

Abstract

The debate surrounding theological absolutism in general, and the absoluteness of Christianity in particular, has taken on a greater role over the previous century as the world's cultures have become more intertwined and mutually dependent. An increasingly heard assertion has been that all religions are equal, that all religions strive for the same goals and that none may claim superiority. This thesis is an examination of that question and with its corollary: if all religions are *not* equal, by what means can one make a distinction between those which may be considered equal and those which may not.

In Chapter 1, I begin with an examination of the work of German theologian Ernst Troeltsch, a leading member of the "History of Religion" school who examined the question of absoluteness from within the restrictions imposed by the discipline of historical empiricism. His position is most clearly stated as follows:

"It is impossible to construct a theory of Christianity as the absolute religion on the basis of a historical way of thinking or by the use of historical means. Much that looks weak, shadowy, and unstable in the theology of our day is rooted in the impossibility of putting such a construction on Christianity."¹

Troeltsch concludes by ranking the religions broadly into two groups—those which are not worthy of consideration—especially polytheism and the religions of "uncivilised" societies—and those which are, including all the monotheistic religions, western rational philosophy and some Asian belief systems, such as Buddhism. Troeltsch concludes his study, *The absoluteness of Christianity and the history of Religion*, with the assertion that Christianity does occupy the penultimate rank among the religions, surpassed only by a yet-to-be-introduced superior version. But it is a distinction of quality and not of kind.

In Chapter Two, I examine the work of two modern pluralistic theologians, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, for whom the many ills that afflict modern global society, and especially the fears of nuclear war, environmental disaster and the needs of multicultural societies, are imperatives that require a pluralistic, not arrogant religious perspective. While differing from Troeltsch in their complete denial of the innate superiority of any religion, and especially Christianity, the two follow Troeltsch in granting equal status only to the great "world religions." The analysis

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concludes that their perspectives seem to be based on a negative reactionary analysis rather than on a positive appreciation for the philosophical or theological correctness of their own position.

The work of six contemporary working theologians from various cultural and theological positions is reviewed in Chapter Three to demonstrate that pluralistic perspectives have a wider base than may commonly be thought. The six—Hans Küng, Dorothee Sölle, Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, Kwok Pui-Lan and R.S. Sugirtharajah—have all voiced opinions in which, to greater or lesser degrees, a positive valuation of other faiths—albeit still among the world religions—plays an important part.

The thesis concludes in Chapter Four with a summary of the preceding analysis and the introduction of a methodology based on a hermeneutics of suspicion and the Declaration of a Global Ethic for determining whether a given religion—on empirical, phenomenological and philosophical grounds—may reasonably be considered an equal participant in a pluralistic theology.

¹ Troeltsch, 62

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- Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the non-Biblical World*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 1995.
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- Smart, Ninian and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a world context*, (London: Marshall Pickering), 1991.
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- Sugirtharajah, R.S., *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 1998.
- The Bhagavad Gita* 4.19-23
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