

# Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism

A Critical Evaluation  
of John Hick



David S. Nah



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*Soli Deo Gloria!*





# Introduction

IN TODAY'S POSTMODERN AGE of religious diversity, John Hick, the former Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Claremont Graduate University,<sup>1</sup> is widely recognized as one of the most important, if not the most influential and prolific, thinkers on religious pluralism. As possibly the most significant philosopher of religion in the second half of twentieth century, Hick's contributions to the field of philosophy of religion in general, and in religious epistemology, theistic proofs, theodicy, death and eternal life, and mysticism, in particular, have widely been recognized. It is in the area of religious pluralism, however, that Hick will long be remembered as having made his greatest and lasting contribution. Prior to Hick's influence, most discussions in philosophy of religion in the West took place almost entirely in a Judeo-Christian, if not exclusively Christian, perspective. Owing greatly to Hick's voluminous writings since the early seventies, it is now the case that no serious discussion can consciously take place outside the purview of pluralism. Hick's magnum opus, *An Interpretation of Religion*, an elaboration of his 1986 Gifford Lectures, has already become a classic in the field that no student of philosophy of religion can afford to ignore.

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that Hick's stature as the philosopher of religion *par excellence* has tended to overshadow his important theological contributions to religious pluralism. Although, to many, he is known primarily as a philosopher of religion, the field of theology has never been a completely separate discipline for Hick himself. As his writings clearly indicate, Hick sees himself as not only a philosopher but also a theologian.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Hick's contributions in Christology

1. Until his death in 2012, Hick was the emeritus professor of both the University of Birmingham and the Claremont Graduate University. He is also a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences, University of Birmingham.

2. For example, Hick writes: "I now no longer find it possible to proceed as a Christian *theologian* as though Christianity were the only religion in the world." Hick,

are of special importance from a Christian perspective since the heart of the problem of religious pluralism is, for a Christian, essentially and ultimately christological. Pluralism represents a profound challenge to the very core of Christian belief that Jesus is the unique Son of God and the only savior of all humanity. It is no accident that the development of Hick's own philosophical thoughts on pluralism closely parallels, or is even preceded by, a critical shift in the development of his own Christology. In a 1966 article written in honor of H. H. Farmer, for example, we can clearly see a glimpse of how Hick's demand for a Copernican revolution from a Christianity-centered picture to a God-centered universe of faiths was preceded by a critical move away from the traditional understanding of Christ's two natures in one person. In what was to provide the basis of his Christology for pluralism, Hick had already argued in this article for a new understanding of Jesus as *homo-agape* instead of *homoousia*.<sup>3</sup> Such a move was to have clear implications for a Christian theology of world religions.

From the very beginning of his academic career, Hick had always shown a strong interest in the area of Christology. In what may now seem, in retrospect, to be an incredible twist of irony, an article written as early as 1958 had Hick actually criticizing D. M. Baillie's Christology in *God Was in Christ* for undermining the deity of Christ in an attempt to preserve his humanity. In this article, Hick accused Baillie of embracing an unorthodox, adoptionist Christology.<sup>4</sup> However, such an orthodox form of Christology is nowhere to be found by the early seventies when Hick proposed his Copernican revolution in theology. Nevertheless, in this new and revolutionary paradigm, there emerged a clear sense in Hick's understanding that the question of the place of Christ and the Christian affirmations about him is "the most difficult of all issues" for a Copernican theology of religions.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely in this regard that Hick's contribution to the theological understanding of religious pluralism is to be valued so highly. For more than any other theologian, Hick has attempted to tackle this "most important issue" of Christology head

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*Universe of Faiths*, x (emphasis added). Also he says: "I realize more fully in the course of writing this book that the kind of *theology* at which *I* was arriving has a long and respectable ancestry." Hick, *Many Names*, 17 (emphasis added).

3. Hick, "Christology." Reprinted in Hick, *God and Universe*, 148–64.

4. See Hick, "Christology of D. M. Baillie," 1–12.

5. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 148–49.

on. Among Hick's earlier writings dealing with this issue, perhaps his best-known contributions were his controversial editing of *The Myth of God Incarnate*<sup>6</sup> and his contributing article in the important book, *Encountering Jesus*.<sup>7</sup>

John Hick's 1993 book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*,<sup>8</sup> marks an important milestone in Christian theology of religious pluralism. This book is, without doubt, Hick's most important contribution to Christology from the standpoint of religious pluralism. To date, no other theologian has come close to articulating in such comprehensive and sustained manner the detailed relationship between Christology and pluralism as Hick has done in this book. As the most systematic attack on the traditional understanding of the incarnation to have emerged from the realm of mainstream academic theology in recent years, this book is a lucid development and extension of the central thesis of his earlier edited book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In this book, Hick sets out to criticize the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus that "he was God incarnate, who became a man to die for the sins of the world and who founded the church to proclaim this." For Hick: "If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must be uniquely superior to all other religions."<sup>10</sup> As the title of the book suggests, however, his central thesis is that the incarnation of Christ is better understood as a metaphor than as literal truth. More specifically, Hick has helpfully set forth his entire arguments in terms of six theses. Hick argues:

(1) that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him; (2) that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way; (3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils; (4) that the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal—Jesus embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, so that God was able to act through him, and he accordingly embodied a love which is a human reflection of the divine

6. Hick, ed. *Myth of God Incarnate*.

7. Hick, "Inspirational Christology," 5–22.

8. Hick, *Metaphor*.

9. *Ibid.*, ix.

10. *Ibid.*

love; (5) that we can rightly take Jesus, so understood, as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence; and (6) that a non-traditional Christianity based upon this understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God, and can better serve the development of world community and world peace than a Christianity which continues to see itself as the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible for all human beings.<sup>11</sup>

Given these clear and lucid arguments, the purpose of this book is to present in greater detail Hick's overall formulation of a Christology for a pluralistic age, and then to critically evaluate his foundational arguments (theses 1 and 2) as they bear upon his views of religious pluralism. A careful examination of the structure of the above arguments indicates that Hick's metaphorical Christology (theses 4 and 5) and his insistence that Christianity see itself as only one among a number of plural responses to the ultimate Reality (thesis 6) are based upon his arguments that attempt to deconstruct the literal understanding of the idea of divine incarnation (theses 1–3). In other words, Hick's first three arguments serve as the foundation upon which his last three theses are predicated. The first two theses are especially crucial, for if it is indeed true that what the church came to believe about Jesus was not ultimately rooted in his own self-understanding, and if the church's two-natures doctrine of Christ is indeed incapable of satisfactory explanation, then Hick's move towards metaphorical Christology has much justification. On the other hand, if these two theses prove unconvincing, as I will be arguing in this book, then Hick is without much warrant in breaking away from the literal form of incarnational Christology that has been at the very core of Christianity for almost two thousand years.

My thesis then is simple and straightforward: While Hick is to be applauded for clearly and rigorously articulating an alternative position on Christology for a pluralistic age, his impressive attempts to reconstruct a metaphorical Christology must ultimately be judged a failure because his foundational attempts to deconstruct the church's literal understanding of the incarnation are mainly untenable. In other words, because he is not able to convincingly demonstrate "(1) that Jesus himself

11. *Ibid.*, ix.

did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him” and “(2) that the dogma of Jesus’ two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way,” Hick does not succeed in developing a strong enough case against the church’s orthodox and historical understanding of Jesus Christ to justify relinquishing it. Having failed to tear down the old, Hick lacks a proper foundation for his alternative Christology. I will demonstrate my thesis by showing the ways in which Hick’s arguments fail. As to his thesis “(3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils,” I will not consider it as a matter of detailed evaluation due to the limited scope of this book and the overly pragmatic nature of such an argument.

I perceive this book as making a contribution to the field of religious studies to two important ways. First, as already mentioned, John Hick is one of the most significant religious thinkers of our time whose theological contributions in the area of pluralism need greater examination. Past studies of Hick’s thought on pluralism have tended to disproportionately focus on his philosophy to the neglect of his theology. Such lopsidedness is not surprising given Hick’s reputation as a philosopher, but given the crucial importance of Hick’s christological contributions in relation to pluralism, this book fills a gap. Secondly, many of the significant monographs that have been written on Hick’s theology of pluralism are of limited value to us today simply because they were done prior to the publication of *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. Gavin D’Costa’s *John Hick’s Theology of Religions*<sup>12</sup> and G. H. Carruthers’ *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Theocentric Model of the Christian Theology of Religions*<sup>13</sup> are two cases in point. Gerald O’Collins’ article, “The Incarnation under Fire” in *Gregorianum*,<sup>14</sup> and Stephen Davis’ chapter, “John Hick on Incarnation and Trinity,” in *The Trinity*,<sup>15</sup> are two significant evaluations of Hick’s Christology that do critically engage Hick’s *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, but, as far as I am aware, no book- or a dissertation-length examination of Hick’s recent theology of pluralism is available as yet. I attempt to fill this gap with this book.

12. D’Costa, *John Hick’s Theology of Religions*.

13. Carruthers, *Uniqueness*.

14. O’Collins, “Incarnation Under Fire,” 263–80.

15. Kendall and O’Collins, eds., *Trinity*.

I shall proceed, then, as follows. In chapter 1, I shall begin by situating Hick's place within the world of religious pluralism. Here, I shall describe the pluralistic context in which we find ourselves today, the various problems such pluralism imposes on us, and the types of theological answers Christians have given in response. By briefly exploring his biography, I shall also attempt to locate Hick within this world of pluralism and his significance within it. In chapter 2, I will explore Hick's philosophy of pluralism, including his epistemology, metaphysical ontology, and ethical soteriology, in order to gain a general understanding of the philosophical framework from which Hick approaches his theology of religions. A brief evaluation of Hick's philosophy of pluralism will provide us with some preliminary foundation from which to assess his theology. Then in chapter 3, I shall present in some detail Hick's overall Christology, including his systematic attempts to deconstruct the church's traditional understanding of Christ, as well as his alternative reconstruction of a new Christology for a pluralistic age.

In chapter 4, I shall begin my evaluation of Hick's theology of pluralism by first assessing his argument that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him. I shall demonstrate how Hick's methodology, claims about Jesus' filial consciousness, account of the resurrection, and claims about the church's creative role in the deification of Jesus fall short. Finally, in chapter 5, I shall evaluate Hick's thesis that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way. By examining Hick's criticism of Morris' *two-minds* Christology and the various kenotic theories, I shall show the extent to which Hick's argument succeeds and fails.

# 1

## Religious Pluralism and John Hick

### THE PLURALISTIC SITUATION

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

1. *The World Almanac*, 682.

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

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



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

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

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

5. Sharma, "Hinduism," 4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

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

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

10. Lindner, “Trends.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

16. *Ibid.*

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

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

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

17. Hick, *Many Names*, 61.

18. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 138.

19. Hick, *Many Names*, 62–66.

20. Hick, *Interpretation*, 309–15.

21. Knitter, *No Other Name*, 171.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### TYPES OF THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

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

23. As quoted in Smith, “The Christian,” 91.

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

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

### *Religious Exclusivism*

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

25. Race, *Christians*.

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

27. Race, *Christians*, 11.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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