

Can Only One Religion Be True?: A Dialogue

Paul F. Knitter and Harold A. Netland

OPENING REMARKS

Harold A. Netland

Given the bewildering degree of religious diversity in our world, the assertion that Christianity is the one true religion for all people strikes many today as hopelessly out of touch with current realities. The claim seems to display generous amounts of both intellectual naïveté and arrogance. Nevertheless, with proper qualification, I do believe that the Christian faith, as defined by the Christian Scriptures, is true and that this sets it apart from other religious traditions. But tonight I will not be arguing that Christianity *is* in fact the only true religion. Rather, I will be exploring what is involved in making such a claim, clarifying what is and what is not included in it, and considering in a very preliminary way how one might defend such a thesis.

But first, some preliminary remarks. Like many people today, I would very much like for all religions to be true and for all morally good and sincere religious believers, of whatever faith, to be correct in their beliefs and practices. Life would certainly be much simpler if this were the case. But, as I have discovered in other areas, reality frequently has a stubborn way of not conforming to my desires. I suspect the same is true here. Given the very different, at times mutually incompatible, claims advanced by the major religions, I simply do not see how we can affirm them all as somehow being true.¹

Let me clarify at the outset what is *not* included in the assertion that Christianity is the one true religion. Affirming Christian faith as the true religion does not mean that there is no truth or goodness or beauty in other religions. If the Christian faith is true, then any teachings from other religions

which are incompatible with essential teachings of Christianity must be rejected. But this does not mean that there are no truths embraced by other religions. Indeed, I think that the Christian faith shares some significant common beliefs with other religions, with some more so than with others. And surely we can and must acknowledge that there is goodness and beauty in other religious traditions as well.

Nor, in claiming that the Christian faith is true, am I suggesting that Christians are necessarily morally better people than, say, Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs. Nor am I defending everything that the institutional church has done or represented over the past two millennia. Sadly, there is much in the history of the Christian church that betrays the teachings of our Lord.

Furthermore, in claiming that Christianity is the true religion, I am not saying that Christians should not cooperate with other religious communities in a variety of ways to further the common good. Given the very real religious tensions in our world, I think that leaders of the major religions need to be especially vigilant in working to reduce conflict between religious communities and to cooperate together in addressing our many global problems. Nothing that I say tonight should be taken as in any way detracting from the urgency of such interreligious understanding and cooperation.

In speaking of the truth of Christianity, we must also distinguish the issue of truth from the question of salvation. To affirm that Christianity is the true religion does not, by itself, commit one to any particular view about the extent of salvation. Christians, including Evangelicals, disagree over important questions concerning the extent of salvation.² But this issue needs to be settled on the basis of criteria internal to the Christian faith itself, including questions of the proper interpretation of Scripture and the historical understandings of the church. There is no logical connection between the claim that Christianity is the true religion and any particular view of the extent of salvation.

For example, it is no doubt the case that most who believe that Christianity is the true religion also believe that not everyone will be saved. Yet there certainly are those who believe that Christianity is uniquely true but who also embrace soteriological universalism (e.g., Origen, John Scotus Erigena, Jacques Ellul, and perhaps Karl Barth). Conversely, while it might be the case that many religious pluralists are also universalists, in the sense that they hold that ultimately all people will attain the desired soteriological state, there is nothing about religious pluralism as such that requires universalism. Religious pluralism maintains that the major religions are roughly equal with respect to truth and soteriological efficacy,³ and thus it affirms “equal soteriological access” among the religions. But it is compatible with this to maintain that, despite such

equality, in fact relatively few people will actually attain the soteriological goal, however this is understood. Thus, questions about the extent of salvation must be addressed separately from the issue of the truth of Christian theism itself.

RELIGION AND TRUTH

Our world today is deeply religious. According to *The Atlas of Religion*, from the University of California, Berkeley, 80 percent of people worldwide profess some religious affiliation.⁴ There are today roughly 2.1 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims, 860 million Hindus, 380 million Buddhists, 25 million Sikhs, and 15 million Jews. To these numbers must be added the many millions who follow indigenous religious traditions or one of the thousands of new religious movements.

But what do we mean by the term *religion*, and how is truth to be understood in religion? The concept of religion is notoriously difficult to define, but we might adopt Roger Schmidt's definition of religions as "systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, a community of faith, and a worldview that articulate a view of the sacred and of what ultimately matters."⁵ Religions are thus multifaceted phenomena, and there is some overlap between the concepts of religion and culture, although neither concept can be reduced to the other. Ninian Smart has helpfully suggested that we think in terms of seven dimensions of religion.⁶ These include the ritual dimension, the mythological or narrative dimension, the experiential, the doctrinal, the ethical, the social, and the material dimensions of religion. A complete discussion of religion would also include what is called folk religion—the religious expression of the common people in ordinary life—as well as the high religion of the intellectuals and the authoritative structures of a given religion.

Religions, then, include much more than just beliefs or doctrines. Nevertheless, beliefs are central to religion. A religious community is expected to live in a certain way and to regard all of life from a particular perspective. A religious tradition expresses a distinctive worldview, or way of understanding reality. At the heart of a religious worldview are some basic beliefs about the nature of the cosmos, the religious ultimate, and the relation of humankind to this ultimate. Religious beliefs are significant, for as Ninian Smart observes, "The world religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality, through a coherent system of doctrines."⁷ Thus, religious believers are expected to accept the authoritative teachings of their tradition and to pattern their lives in accordance with such beliefs. Religions make claims, and adherents of a given religion are expected to accept

and to act upon the claims as true. As Paul Griffiths puts it, “A religious claim . . . is a claim about the way things are, acceptance of or assent to which is required or strongly suggested by the fact of belonging to a particular form of religious life.”⁸

How should we understand the concept of truth in religion? There are many issues here, but let me say simply that I think that the major religions do intend to make truth claims and that these claims can and should be understood in terms of a realist and propositionalist understanding of truth. Following William Alston, then, “a statement (proposition, belief . . .) is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case.”⁹ For our purposes, statements, beliefs, and propositions are interchangeable.

Now, understanding religious truth as propositional truth is strongly resisted by many today, especially by those in religious studies. Much more popular are pragmatic or subjective views which regard religious truth as a function of the dynamic, personal relation between a religious believer and his or her religious tradition. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, argued that religious truth should be understood as personal truth, or the faithfulness and authenticity of life that accompanies the existential appropriation by the religious believer of a particular religious way of living. Applying this to religions, Smith states, “Christianity, I would suggest, is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather, it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in actual existence.”¹⁰ Similarly, John Hick, who was influenced by Smith, speaks of religious truth as mythological truth: “A statement or set of propositions about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude toward X.”¹¹ Claims about God being incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, or about the Qur’an being dictated by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad, or about the essential identity between atman and Brahman, while not literally true nevertheless can be mythologically true to the extent that they tend to evoke in Christians, Muslims, and Hindus appropriate dispositional responses to what is religiously ultimate.

But there are at least two significant problems with these views.¹² First, it seems clear that the great religious leaders, and many ordinary believers as well, do not think of their religious beliefs as true merely in the sense of personal or mythological truth. For them, the beliefs *do* actually reflect the way reality is, whether one existentially appropriates such beliefs or not. And the religions characteristically maintain that a proper understanding of the way things are is essential to attaining the soteriological goal. Second, personal or mythological

truth cannot be an alternative to propositional truth in religion. For one can only existentially appropriate religious beliefs in the sense of personal truth, or adopt an appropriate dispositional response to the religious ultimate, as in mythological truth, if one first accepts certain beliefs about the religious ultimate and our relation to this ultimate as being true in a nonpersonal or nonmythological sense. Thus, the statement “Allah is a righteous judge” can become true for a Muslim in the sense of either personal truth or mythological truth only if the Muslim accepts certain beliefs about Allah and judgment in a propositional sense—that is, if the Muslim actually believes that Allah is a righteous judge and then responds appropriately to this belief.¹³

CONFLICTING TRUTH CLAIMS

Applying the seven dimensions of religion to the major religions will reveal both similarities and differences across the religions. And this is what produces such rich diversity in religious expression. Now, differences in dress, food, architecture, or rituals are not particularly problematic. But what does create difficulty is the fact that the religions advance very different teachings, and thus difference often turns into disagreement. Each religion regards its own assertions as correct or superior to those of its rivals.

To be sure, there are significant areas of agreement in beliefs among the religions. Such similarities are perhaps most apparent in the ethical teachings of the religions. The ethical principle behind the Golden Rule, for example, is reflected in the teachings of many religions.¹⁴ Without minimizing this, however, it is clear that when we consider carefully what the religions have to say about the religious ultimate, the human predicament, and the nature of and conditions for salvation/enlightenment/liberation, there is significant disagreement among them.

Christians and Muslims, for example, believe that the universe was created by an eternal Creator; Buddhists deny this. Christians traditionally have insisted that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, fully God and fully man. Muslims reject this as blasphemous. While Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains all agree that there is rebirth, they disagree vigorously over whether there is an enduring, substantial person or soul that is reborn. All of the religions acknowledge that the present state of the world is not as it should be, but they disagree over the cause of this unsatisfactory state and its proper remedy. For Christians, the root cause is sin against a holy God, and the cure consists in repentance and reconciliation with God through the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. For many Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains, by contrast, the cause lies in a

fundamentally mistaken view of reality, and the remedy involves overcoming the limitations of such false views. But Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains disagree among themselves over the nature of the error and how it is to be overcome. Early Indian philosophical literature contains vigorous disputes among them over just which view is correct and thus how liberation is to be attained.¹⁵

Disagreements over beliefs result in differences over how we are to pattern our lives. Differences between Christianity and Theravada Buddhism, for example, over what one ought to do—whether one should repent of one’s sins and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior or follow the Noble Eightfold Path—reflect not so much diverse *means* toward a common goal but rather very different *ends* that are to be pursued. And such differences grow out of more basic disagreements over what is religiously ultimate, the nature of the problem plaguing the universe, and the proper remedy for this predicament.

Now, some teachings in the religions which seem different might actually be compatible with each other.¹⁶ Others, however, seem not to be mutually compatible. Here it is important to distinguish two kinds of incompatible teachings.¹⁷ Two religious claims are *contradictory* if each makes a claim to truth, both cannot be true, but one claim must be true. The statements “There is an eternal creator God” and “There is not an eternal creator God” are contradictories. On the other hand, two religious claims are *contraries* if each makes a claim to truth, both cannot be true, but neither claim need be true. The statements “The ultimate reality is *sunyata*” and “The ultimate reality is Allah” are contraries. They cannot both be true, although they might both be false. Most religious disagreements that seem incompatible are examples of contraries, not contradictories. And yet there are cases in which Christianity and Islam or Buddhism do put forward contradictory claims.

WHAT IS IT FOR A RELIGION TO BE TRUE?

What does it mean for a religion to be true? Keith Ward has remarked that, given the diverse and multidimensional nature of religions, we should avoid speaking of religious traditions themselves as being true but rather focus upon the truth or falsity of particular truth claims.¹⁸ But while agreeing with his emphasis upon particular claims, I do not see how we can avoid completely assessing religions in terms of truth. The religious traditions themselves advance certain claims and reject others. Thus, for example, focusing upon the truth value of the claim that God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth has enormous implications for other religions which have very different views on God and Jesus.

The ancient Indian philosophical and religious traditions sometimes used a medical analogy to speak of religious issues. Religions typically identify something as a pervasive problem or illness, then seek to identify the cause of this problem and finally to prescribe the cure for this malady. Keith Yandell captures this well when he states, “A religion proposes a diagnosis of a deep, crippling spiritual disease universal to non-divine sentience and offers a cure. A particular religion is true if its diagnosis is correct and its cure efficacious. The diagnosis and cure occur in the setting of an account of what there is—an account whose truth is assumed by the content of the diagnosis and cure.”¹⁹

Does this mean that every claim made by a religion must be true if the religion is to be true? Here we must distinguish between beliefs or doctrines which are essential to a religion and those which are not. Not all beliefs in a religion are equally important. Some are relatively insignificant, and adherents of a religion might disagree among themselves over the truth of such beliefs. Protestant Christians, for example, disagree over the proper form of baptism. Buddhist traditions disagree over whether monks should be celibate. But in neither case are these disagreements over essentials.

Other beliefs are much more significant for a religion, and some beliefs are so important that one cannot be an adherent of that religion in good standing while simultaneously rejecting these beliefs. William Christian speaks of these as primary beliefs.²⁰ We might also think of them as defining beliefs, for they define what is essential to the worldview of the religion in question. Determining just which beliefs are defining beliefs can be a controversial matter, as adherents of a religion sometimes disagree among themselves over the question. But that there are defining beliefs for the major religions and that we can identify at least some such beliefs seems clear. For example, belief that Allah has revealed his will for humankind in the Qur’an would seem to be a defining belief of Islam. Similarly, belief in an eternal God who created the universe is generally accepted as a defining belief of Christianity. Belief that the Buddha attained enlightenment and thereby became aware of the causes of suffering is usually taken as a defining belief of Buddhism. And so on.

More specifically, we might think of the defining beliefs of Christianity as including certain beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, sin, and salvation. The apostle Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 5:19 (NIV) that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” is a concise expression of a dominant theme in the New Testament, and it is difficult to imagine a tradition that is identifiably Christian while flatly rejecting this theme. Paul’s statement in turn draws upon at least three related beliefs or teachings which find ample expression throughout the New Testament: (1) There is an eternal, righteous God; (2) Sin has separated

humankind from God and is the root cause of the human predicament; (3) In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has made possible forgiveness and reconciliation. In this sense, then, we might speak of these three statements as defining beliefs of Christianity while also acknowledging that there can be a measure of disagreement among Christians over just how we are to understand the implications of these statements.

In light of these points, I suggest that we speak of a religion as true if and only if its defining beliefs are true. For Christianity to be true, then, the defining beliefs of Christianity—certain affirmations about God, Jesus of Nazareth, sin, and salvation—must be true. If they are true, then Christianity is true.

But can there be more than one religion with true defining beliefs? Could there be other religions apart from Christianity true in this sense? The answer depends in part upon how broadly or narrowly one understands the notion of a religion. Suppose that we think of Protestant Methodism and Greek Orthodoxy as different religions. The issue then is whether Methodism and Greek Orthodoxy have mutually compatible defining beliefs. If so, it makes sense to speak of both as true religions.

More broadly, then, the question is whether it makes sense to say that the defining beliefs of religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto are all compatible. If the central teachings of these religions are taken as they are understood within their own traditions, then it is implausible to hold that there are two or more of these religions with defining beliefs which are true. For as noted earlier, some religions affirm an eternal creator God while others deny this, and no other religion that I am aware of accepts the central beliefs concerning Jesus Christ that have been at the heart of Christianity through the centuries.

CAN WE KNOW THAT CHRISTIANITY IS THE ONE TRUE RELIGION?

It is one thing to argue that there can be one true religion and to claim that Christianity is the true religion. But can we know that Christian theism is the true religion? Are there good reasons for accepting Christianity as true? Since the defining beliefs of Christianity concern the nature of God and the person of Jesus Christ, there are two critical questions to be addressed here: (1) Does God, as understood by Christians, exist? (2) Who is Jesus Christ? There are, of course, many complex and controversial issues stemming from each question. But a few general comments are appropriate.

I do not think we should expect here a demonstrative, knockdown argument for the truth of Christian theism which settles all questions and which

all reasonable persons will find persuasive. That is the wrong way to approach these issues. But I do think there are good reasons for accepting the defining beliefs of Christian theism as true. Although I will not argue for it here, I think there are good reasons for accepting both that God exists and that, in an admittedly mysterious manner, God was present and active in Jesus of Nazareth so that we can say Jesus Christ was God incarnate, both God and man.²¹

The endeavor to show that there are good reasons for accepting Christian theism is usually identified with natural theology.²² Natural theology can take many forms, and some of the most creative and rigorous work in philosophy of religion today deals with questions associated with it. Now, the agenda of natural theology calls into question what is sometimes called the “epistemic parity thesis.” This is the view that evidential and rational considerations relevant to religious belief are such that no particular religious tradition can be said to be rationally superior to others; the data are sufficiently ambiguous that the major religions all enjoy epistemic parity.²³ The claims of no single religion can be shown to be more likely to be true than those of any other. This assumption is widespread today, and it is often taken as providing support for the perspective of religious pluralism.

But suppose that there were good reason to accept the epistemic parity thesis. The proper conclusion would then be not religious pluralism but rather religious agnosticism. For if there are no good reasons for accepting any single religious tradition as true, why should we suppose that all of them collectively are equally true? Could we not just as well conclude that, although they all have various attractive features, they are all equally false? Religious pluralism thus requires a further argument to support the conclusion that, despite the fact that no single religion is true, the various religions taken together can nevertheless all be regarded as somehow “true.” This is a very difficult argument to make.

But why should we accept the epistemic parity thesis in the first place? Is it really the case that the proposition “God exists” has no greater evidential or rational support than its denial? Or is it really true that the central claims of Theravada Buddhism or Jainism or Shinto have the same degree of rational support as those of orthodox Christianity? I think not.

Those engaging in natural theology should be appropriately modest in expectations.²⁴ There is no reason to expect that an appropriate natural theology in contexts of religious diversity requires a simple algorithmic procedure for testing worldviews or even that it should seek a conclusive knockdown argument for Christian theism. There will, of course, be vigorous debate over particular beliefs, as indeed there has been among adherents of the religions for many centuries. We should not suppose that all reasonable

persons, when presented with the relevant evidence and arguments, will be readily convinced. Few issues of any real significance meet these expectations. I do think, however, that there are strong reasons for accepting Christian theism as true rather than other religious alternatives.

It is tempting at this point to sketch in broad strokes what I think an appropriate natural theology in contexts of religious diversity might look like. But rather than do this, I would like to conclude on a different note. Suppose that we are fully justified in accepting the defining beliefs of Christian theism as true. What follows from this for the way we are to think about and relate to other religious traditions? Answering this question involves us in the exciting but challenging field of theology of religions.²⁵ I would like to conclude tonight by quoting from the Manila Declaration, a statement made by a group of eighty-five Evangelical theologians from twenty-eight countries who met in 1992 at Manila under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The theologians, many of whom came from Asia, met together to address the theme “The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World”:

We evangelicals need a more adequate theology of religions. . . . The term “religion” refers to a complex phenomenon and it is important to distinguish between its various aspects. In many societies, religion forms an important part of their identity. As such, a diversity of religions—or, more accurately, a diversity of certain aspects of the religions—may be affirmed as part of the richness of God’s good creation, although it must be immediately added that people have often sinfully used these religions, including Christianity, to create a false ultimacy and superiority for their own cultures and religious groups.

Religions may also be understood as expressions of the longing for communion with God, which is an essential human characteristic since we are created in the image of God for the purpose of service to him, fellowship with him, and praise for him. Here also, while always corrupted by sin in practice, we may affirm in principle the goodness of a diversity of some aspects of the religions.

We are not able, however, to affirm the diversity of religions without qualification because religions teach a path to salvation, or a concept of salvation, that is not consistent with God’s saving action in Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible. To the extent that a religion points away from Jesus Christ, we deny the validity of that religion. We would also deny the validity of the Christian religion should it

fail to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Lord of all creation, and the sole savior of the world.

We wish to explore the Trinitarian basis of a Christian theology of religions. Remembering that the Father and Spirit created the world through the Word, and remembering also that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and always points to him, it is possible to affirm that God draws people who live far beyond the religious boundaries of Christianity towards salvation while at the same time denying that God saves any one [*sic*] “beyond” or “apart from” Jesus Christ. Thus the true aspects of the world’s religions stem from God’s creative power or from the work of the Holy Spirit as he prepares individuals, people groups, and even whole cultures to hear about Jesus Christ. Moreover, this same Trinitarian basis undergirds the decisive, normative, and unique work and person of the historical Jesus Christ.²⁶

In this carefully articulated and balanced statement, I think we have the broad contours for an Evangelical theology of religions, one which is rooted in the conviction that the central claims of the Christian faith are distinctively true and yet is also open to the presence and work of the Triune God throughout the world.

CAN CHRISTIANITY BE THE ONLY TRUE RELIGION?

Paul F. Knitter

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The answer to the question of whether Christianity can be the only true religion depends on the context. Ours is not a free-floating question. But it is a recurring question. It arises out of particular contexts. It is felt differently in different contexts. And it will be answered differently in different contexts. If “the medium is the message,” I think we can say the context is the question—and the answer.

Today we are in a very different context than that in which our Christian ancestors formulated their first confessions of faith, which became our New Testament. Yes, there was religious pluralism at the time. But I believe it was felt, perceived, reacted to in a very different way than is the case for us today. At that time, for the minority Christian community, the other religions were

primarily a threat. Today, as I will contend, the others are our fellow citizens, our fellow collaborators in promoting the well-being of this world (or what we Christians would call the reign of God).

There are also epistemological issues to consider. I do believe that in order to take our question seriously and in order to have a productive conversation, all of us—that means me as well as Harold—have to be open to the opposite answer from the one we now hold. We have to be truly open to whatever is the true, the correct answer to our question. That means that Harold has to be genuinely ready to acknowledge, if the evidence moves him in that direction, to recognize that Christianity is *not* the only true religion. And I—despite all my liberal baggage and history—have to be truly ready to affirm that Christianity *is* the only true religion. There has to be this openness, this readiness to listen and to be convinced otherwise. There cannot be any preestablished or unconscious obstacles to our ability to change our minds. I say this much more for myself than for Harold.

This leads to a convergence of reasons urging a negative response to the question “Can Christianity be the only true religion?” So let me now lay out as clearly, but also as cautiously, as I can what I truly believe is a convergence of reasons why I, as a professed Christian and struggling disciple of Jesus, can and must insist that Christianity is *not* the only true religion. Those reasons come under the categories of history, of philosophy, of ethics, of theology, and finally of sacred scripture.

HISTORY: A CHANGE IN CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

There has been a change of Christian beliefs. If we look at the history of our churches, we cannot deny that although at one time just about all the churches held firmly that Christianity is the only true religion, today many churches do not. My Roman Catholic community is an example of a major Christian denomination that, as it were, has changed its mind (although, when my church changes its mind or teachings, it never admits of doing so). Simply stated, at one time, all Christians, before the Reformation and after, held that “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”—outside the church, no salvation. (The Protestant version might read, “*Extra verbum*”—outside the preached Word, no salvation.) Today, all Catholics and most mainline Christians don’t hold such beliefs. And from the data of the recent Pew research project, as stated on the Greer-Heard website, “A majority of American Christians (52%) believe that at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.” And the website adds, “At least

37% [of these Christians] are members of evangelical churches that teach that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.”²⁷

Our question has already been answered by a broad swath of Christians. And as theologians, we have to take the faith of the faithful seriously. We Catholic theologians call that the “*sensus fidelium*,” and it must play a major role in guiding our theological deliberations.

This change in no way has diminished our commitment and discipleship. I want to point out that, as far as I can measure the fervor of my fellow Catholics at Sunday Mass or of my fellow Christians at daily chapel at Union Theological Seminary, this change of belief has in no way diminished their commitment to Christian living and witness.

This means that more change can come. One further observation from this historical perspective: what has changed can continue to change. Many of us so-called progressive theologians within the mainline churches are suggesting and trying to pave the way for a further change: if the church has shifted from exclusivism to inclusivism (I would call my friend Harold a “fuzzy inclusivist!”), a further shift from inclusivism to pluralism would seem to be possible—again, without in any way diminishing the fervor of faith and discipleship. (If such fervor is diminished by a new theological proposal, the proposal is most likely heretical.)

ETHICS: THE DANGER OF ONLY ONE TRUE RELIGION

The claim that there is only one true religion is dangerous, for two reasons: it prevents the necessary dialogue of civilizations, and it fosters the clash of civilizations.

First, holding that there is only one true religion prevents dialogue. What I’m arguing here is based on the well-known and broadly affirmed dictum of Hans Küng: “There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. And there will be no peace among religions without a greater dialogue between them.”²⁸ Küng’s admonition is based on an ethical imperative: The religions of the world have the moral obligation to engage each other in a peacemaking dialogue. It is here, in this moral imperative of dialogue, that I find the danger of exclusive truth claims. The danger, I think is evident: If we understand dialogue in its most simple and succinct description as “a mutual exchange through which all sides seek to help each other grow in knowing and doing what is true and right,” then how can any of the partners really be open to growing in the truth when they believe that they have the fullness of God’s truth? The game of dialogue is not possible when one religion enters the game

claiming that God has dealt them all the aces. What impedes a moral imperative can be considered, I believe, immoral.

If we are really serious and sincere about wanting to promote a dialogue of civilizations and religions (as, for example, Pope Benedict XVI claims), then we have to question our own assertions that God has given the only or the final revelation to our religion (which the pope refuses to do). You can't have it both ways.

Second, holding that there is only one true religion promotes violence. Claiming that my religion is the only true religion is dangerous not only because it prevents true dialogue but also because it fosters violence. I deliberately chose my words in that last sentence: exclusive claims *foster* violence between religious groups or civilizations. They do not necessarily *cause* such violence, but they can condone it, encourage it, and strengthen it. In general, the root cause of religious violence is, I believe, *not* religious. If I may indulge in an extravagant generalization, I would argue that the usual cause of religious violence is, as it is for most international (or national) violence, conflict over power, often economic power. Violence becomes a necessary tool either to carry out and defend, or to resist and change, forms of economic exploitation. But if you are a president or a king seeking to advance your cause, or if you are a political or popular leader seeking to defend your cause, it sure helps to have at your disposal a religion that holds itself up as God's privileged faith and plan for the world. If you can tell your followers that they are advancing or defending not only their own cause but God's cause, God's ultimate vision for the world, God's privileged people, then you will be able to swell your ranks not only with *more* soldiers but with *better* soldiers. Fighters in state armies or resistance movements who believe that "Gott ist mit uns" (God is with us), that they are struggling for God's truth and doing God's will, not only will be braver, they also can be more brutal—ready to give their lives as they pilot planes that crash into buildings or drop bombs on villages. As Charles Kimball has argued in his fine little book *When Religion Becomes Evil*,²⁹ one of the principal reasons (though certainly not the only) why religion can so easily be enlisted to justify and intensify violence, or why religion can so easily be used to declare that the others—terrorists or imperialists—are the evildoers while we are the good-doers, is the way religions have claimed to deliver the absolute or final or superior truth over all others. Absolute religious truth so easily becomes violent religious truth.³⁰

I believe Sharon Welch has it right: "The logic of religiously sanctioned violence is straightforward. Whether it be the Buddhist defenders of imperial Japan, the abolitionist John Brown, or the Muslim leader Osama bin Laden, the

justifications for terror and violence are the same: they and their followers are the bearers of unassailable truth and harbingers of ultimate good, commanded by the absolute to destroy their enemies and bring about a reign of peace and justice for all of humankind.”³¹

THEOLOGY: TO BE A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE A PLURALIST

For all our Christian communities, the most compelling reasons for recognizing that there is truth—and I would add *salvific* truth—in other religions are to be found not outside our own “cultural-linguistic” system, but from within our own beliefs, our own guidelines for being disciples of Christ. Let me offer three theological considerations why I believe this to be so.

First, the God that Jesus experienced and incarnated was a not just the Creator God, not just the God of history; the God of Jesus was also, and especially, the Abba God, a God best symbolized as a loving parent. Yes, this God was a God who makes demands, who insists on justice, who is intent on freeing slaves and the oppressed. But in all that, before all that, supporting all that is the first and fundamental truth about this God: the God of Jesus is a Power of pure, unbounded love. To say this is to say, further, that this God wants to embrace all of God’s children, all of God’s creation. As Saint Paul states it, this God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4 NIV).

As my teacher Karl Rahner insisted, if God wants to save all people, then God will act in such a way as to make this a real possibility for all people. In other words, if as Christians we believe that God’s grace is necessary for salvation, then God will find ways of offering God’s grace to all people. To deny or question this is not to believe in a God of love. Rahner, as you know, went on to claim that the religions are among the most available and readily-at-hand ways in which God will make this offer of grace. (This piece of Rahner’s case is based on his conviction that God’s grace and action in our lives requires some form of concrete—or incarnational—mediation.) I must admit that after all these years, I find that Rahner’s theological case for the presence of truth and grace in other religions continues to be compelling: a God who loves all will offer that love to all, and one of the most likely ways to do that is the religions.

My question for Harold would be this: It seems to me that the belief in a God of universal love is incompatible with the belief that Christianity is the only true religion. The only way to hold together these two assertions (God is love, and Christianity is the only true religion), I believe, is either to fabricate a theological *deus ex machina* and hold the God provides a special

revelation of Christ at the moment of death, or to affirm (with Karl Barth) an *apokatastasis*—everyone will be saved at the very end.

Second, the kenotic Christ is the Way that is open to other Ways. One of the richest resources for retrieving and elaborating a Christian theology of religions that recognizes the value and potential truth of other traditions is to be found in the way theologians are exploring the depths and implications of a truly kenotic Christology. If we take Paul in Phil. 2:5–11 seriously, we will have to recognize and allow ourselves to be challenged by what for Paul and the early community was an essential ingredient in proclaiming the divinity of Jesus: God incarnates God’s self—and Jesus becomes the incarnation of God—through a process of self-emptying. No self-emptying, no incarnation.

So incarnation requires kenosis. But we must ask why. Self-emptying in itself is not a value (as feminists remind us). It is always a means to an end. God empties God’s self, Jesus empties himself, in order to make room for the other—in order to embrace the other, in order to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the other. In other words, the purpose of kenosis is dialogue. And relationship and dialogue require that we affirm the value, the dignity—and that means the potential truth—of the other. A dialogue which insists that one side has the truth and the other does not is not based on the kenosis, or self-emptying, that we find in Jesus.

David Jensen makes this point beautifully and powerfully: “The movement of kenosis is to de-center the ‘self’—and anything else—from a privileged place of permanence. . . . The confession of the kenotic Christ cannot rest in pointing to the *figura* of Jesus Christ alone, above all others. . . . Christomonism—the proclamation of Jesus Christ at the expense of everything else—is a distortion of the life of discipleship and not its faithful execution. Indeed, conformity to Christ involves being claimed by others, and not claiming others as our own.”³² A kenotic, dialogical Christology leads us to a dialogical understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus. John B. Cobb Jr. formulates it as “Jesus is the Way that is open to other Ways.”³³ The truth of Jesus’ way is open to the truth of other ways.

This means that the particularity of Jesus is a strange kind of particularity: its role is to make known the universality of God. The God whom Jesus reveals is a God who reaches beyond the revelation that Jesus offers. In knowing and understanding the truth that Jesus makes known to us, we are opened to the truth that the Spirit of Jesus makes known beyond Jesus. Douglas John Hall describes this in his efforts to follow this Jesus: “What is so fascinating about the ‘necessary,’ if ‘scandalous,’ *particular* named Jesus is that, being person, he puts us in touch with a *universal*, God, who as living Person transcends our ideas and

images of the divine *in the very act of coming close to us*. . . . Contrary to later (and usually heretical) Christologies, Jesus as he is depicted in the Gospels and epistles of the newer Testament, does not wish to be considered (as it were) all the God of God there is.³⁴ And on the basis of such theological analysis, Hall makes a personal confession of faith that epitomizes a kenotic-dialogical Christology: “I can say without any doubt at all that I am far more open to Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and humanists and all kinds of other human beings, including self-declared atheists, *because of Jesus* than I should ever have been *apart from him*.”³⁵

Third, the Spirit of Christ is universal. Such a kenotic Christology views the particularity of Jesus as essentially linked to the universality of God, as emptying itself in order to make room for the universality of the Divine. Such a Christology clamors for help from pneumatology. We cannot truly understand and take seriously the particularity of Jesus unless we link it to the universality of the Holy Spirit.

Here I see what I believe is the richest resource that contemporary theologians are drawing on—especially Pentecostal theologians—in order to lay the foundations for a Christian recognition of the truth and value of other religions. Some of these theologians, such as Amos Yong, are suggesting that pneumatology is the way around the impasse that Christology has become for Christian dialogue with other believers.³⁶ The universal God that Jesus points to can best be understood as the universal Spirit who moves as she will, often as unnoticed as wind, throughout all creation.³⁷ The activity of this Spirit is essentially the same as, but reaching beyond, the work of the incarnate Word in Jesus. The Spirit, like the Incarnate Word, is at work in communicating the presence and power and love of God, drawing all of creation to an awareness of its source and true being in the Divine.

AN EGALITARIAN TRINITY

This pneumatological path around the Christological impasse is leading us toward what I would call an “egalitarian theology of the Trinity”—an understanding of the Trinity in which all three persons have equal rights and distinctive, though always interrelated, roles. Trinitarian theology affirms that the three persons are truly different from each other and one cannot be subordinated to the other, but they are also truly and essentially related to each other. This means that the work of the Spirit cannot be reduced to the work of the Word (even though both are essentially the same in their divine natures). As Saint Irenaeus reminds us, God as it were has “two hands”—the Word and

the Spirit. They are both God's hands, equally so. One might say that God is ambidextrous, not favoring the right or the left.

Here Amos Yong voices a warning that we Christian theologians have not sufficiently been aware of: "So while discerning the Spirit is intimately connected with the Christ, this should not be understood in a way that subordinates the Spirit to Christ."³⁸ He admits that "those of us exploring a pneumatological approach to the religions are confronted decisively with the finality and normativity of Jesus Christ." But he adds, "Does it serve to finally resolve the relationship between pneumatology and Christology by subordinating the former to the latter?"³⁹ If the Spirit is truly different from the Word, then we can expect to find traces of that difference *ad extra*. What the Spirit is up to will not be able to be simply reduced to what the Word has revealed.

*THE NEW TESTAMENT: EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IS CONFSSIONAL
AND PERFORMATIVE LANGUAGE*

But what about all the language in the Bible that *does* place Jesus in the center, to the apparent exclusion of any possibility of truth in other religions? "No other name . . . One mediator . . . Only begotten Son . . . No one comes to the Father except through me." We're biblical people. We have to take this language seriously. That means we have to ask not only what it meant but also what it means.

The New Testament scholar who has helped me most to figure out what it means is Krister Stendahl. He points out that all this talk about Jesus as "one and only" is essentially confessional language, not philosophical or ontological language. Or more personally, he calls it love language. The early Jesus-followers were speaking about the Jesus with whom they were in love, who had transformed their lives, whom they wanted others to know about. People in love are passionate about what they feel and exuberant in how they speak. They naturally use superlative language—"you are the most beautiful, the most adorable, the one and only." Such language is exclusive in order to be superlative. The primary intent is to be superlative, not exclusive.

The intent of such language is to say something positive about Jesus, not something negative about the Buddha. We misuse this language when we use it to degrade or exclude the Buddha or Muhammad. The intent of this "one and only" language, I would suggest, was essentially twofold: (1) to express the total, personal commitment of the Christian community to Jesus; and (2) to proclaim the universal meaning and urgency of what God had revealed in Jesus.

I am suggesting that we are faithful to this language primarily by affirming its *decisiveness* for Christian life and its *universal* significance and urgency for all peoples of all times. Exclusivity is not necessary to preserve what this language means for us today.

CONCLUSION

Allow me to conclude with a personal statement of faith: Recognizing that we are all fallible and that I may be fundamentally wrong, still, at this stage of my life—a fairly late stage coming after about forty-six years as a Christian theologian—I must confess my faith that Jesus is indeed the Way that is open to other Ways and that to be a faithful follower of Jesus I must recognize and engage the truth that the Spirit may be offering me in my Hindu and Buddhist and Muslim and Jewish and Native American brothers and sisters. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise (unless Harold—with the Holy Spirit—can convince me otherwise!).

DIALOGUE AND Q&A

Harold Netland: You have to appreciate Paul's strong Lutheran conclusion. I know I will not persuade him to change his mind, but never underestimate the power of the Spirit. (*Audience laughter.*) Seriously, his comments at the beginning were very good and very appropriate. As Christians, we do need to be deeply committed to what we believe to be the truth. There is also a dimension of intellectual integrity which demands that to the best of our ability we approach issues with open minds, looking at the evidence and when necessary making adjustments. So I do appreciate those comments.

Paul did e-mail me and ask if he could use the term *fuzzy inclusivist* in referring to me, and I responded, "I've been called a lot worse." (*Audience laughter.*) Just a comment on that: I used to use those three categories: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Of the three, the term *pluralist* is easiest to define, at least the way I define it. I have come to see, though, that those three categories really are not helpful, and in several recent articles, I have argued that we really need to drop them.⁴⁰ There are so many issues on the table. The categories are usually defined in terms of the question of salvation, but even if you're just looking at the question of salvation, it's very, very hard to fit the different, very carefully nuanced perspectives into just one of those three categories. And there are so many other issues on the table besides that question that I think forcing

positions on theologies of religion into one of those three categories just is not helpful. In my response to Professor Knitter, I have five or six issues I wish to touch on. Some of these I will raise in the form of questions for clarification from Paul; in one of them, I will respond to a challenge he made; and then there will be one or two areas where we do frankly disagree.

Paul began by drawing the contrast between the first-century world and the present. Also, I believe that at the end of his opening statement, a similar kind of a contrast was operative. Here is my first question, and I mean it seriously: How exactly is the New Testament language and the world of the New Testament, i.e., the beliefs of the first followers of Jesus as we find this codified and expressed within the written Scriptures, how is that normative for us today? Because, as one reads or listens to Professor Knitter, it's very easy to draw the conclusion that the language used about Jesus in the New Testament is simply the product of that time, and that we need to think differently today because it's now such a different world. And so my question is simply: How in fact is what the New Testament says normative for us today?

My second question is as follows: How does Paul Knitter understand the concept of truth in religion? I define truth in religion in terms of beliefs and discussion of what I call defining beliefs, and so on. That's one way to do it. I don't get a clear definition or explanation from Paul, but his understanding of religious truth seems to be a function of two things—a religion is true if it can be a means to salvation and/or if we find people within the religion manifesting what Galatians 5 speaks of as the fruit of the Spirit: love, hope, joy, long-suffering, and so on. So my question here is simply: What do we mean when we say a religion is true or that Christianity cannot be the sole true religion? If we look at these qualities that we find in people—and I don't deny that you find peace and joy and so on in followers of other religions—but if that becomes the defining characteristic for the truth of a set of beliefs or a way of living, it seems to me that we must say that atheism is also true, because I certainly have known atheists who have peace, and joy, long-suffering, and patience in their lives, and so on. So that would be a second question.

Third question—and again, I'm not intending to be facetious here, Paul. I first encountered Paul's book *No Other Name*⁴¹ when I was living in Tokyo. I read it and marked it up—as I do all good books—while riding the trains around Tokyo. Now, at that time, in the mid-1980s, Paul Knitter was clearly a pluralist, very much in the same kind of paradigm as John Hick, although articulating and nuancing things somewhat differently. In his later writings, he has begun using the wording of “mutualism,” which seems to be a little bit different from Hick's model of pluralism, or is it? I'm not entirely sure on

that. Now tonight—and I rejoice in this—he sounds very theistic, speaking in terms of God. So my question is simply this: Ontologically, what is the religious ultimate? Is it God the Holy Trinity? And in asking that, I fully admit that there is much to God the Holy Trinity that we don't understand, but for Christians, classically, God is the religious ultimate. It doesn't get any higher than that. Or is there something beyond the symbol of God that is really ultimate? This, of course, is the route that John Hick takes.⁴²

We are moving quickly, but now to an area of admitted disagreement. First of all, though, let's start on agreement here. I do agree with Paul that religious violence is a huge, huge issue today. This has to be taken seriously by all of us, and we Evangelicals, as we do so often, have come late to the discussion and the issues on religious violence. So I'm in full agreement with him on that. Moreover, I would say we Evangelicals need to clean up our act in this area. I think our discourse, and especially the discourse of American Evangelicals—having lived outside the United States for many years, I'm sensitive to how others look at American Evangelicals—we have used Christian discourse to justify and to support social-political agendas that I certainly would want to question. So these would all be areas where I think Paul and I would agree. My question, however, is this: Is the commitment to the belief that there is a true religion, and that my religion or the beliefs that I embrace are true in a distinctive manner, is that in itself conducive to religious violence? I simply don't see the evidence for that claim. I simply don't see the evidence. Religious violence is an enormously complicated phenomenon. You're talking about issues of class, power, land, ethnicity—problems and disputes that go back for centuries. The belief that you are a special people blessed by God can be and often is used to justify abusing other people and violence; I don't question that, but is there anything in the belief that there is a true religion and that I happen to believe that this is the true religion, is there anything in that belief itself that *necessarily* leads to violence? I think, with all due respect, that is a very simplistic approach. Paul makes reference to the work of Charles Kimball.⁴³ But rather than Charles Kimball, I would recommend Mark Juergensmeyer on this issue.⁴⁴ I think Juergensmeyer offers a highly nuanced and perceptive discussion of that whole issue.

Let me finish here by addressing the issue of salvation in other religions. How do we know anything about salvation—about how we should understand the nature of salvation and the necessary conditions for realizing salvation? It's not something that you just read naturally off of the natural order. I would say it's God's revelation in the Scriptures and in the incarnation that tells us about salvation, and this includes of course the idea that God is love. But the

same Scriptures that speak about God as love also speak about judgment. I wish they didn't. I wish they didn't; I'd love to excise those passages out of the Scriptures. But I don't see how we can appeal to the theme of God as love, which I firmly embrace, without also talking about this other theme that I find embedded throughout the Scriptures: judgment. And the fact, as I see it, is that not everyone ultimately will be saved. I don't want to dispute the theme that God is love. Paul Knitter has rightly emphasized that. I would simply say that's only part of the story. First Timothy 2:4 tells us that God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Yes indeed, absolutely. But I am not a Calvinist; I do believe that people can and do resist God's grace, that they refuse God's offer of salvation. So I don't see the incompatibility between that affirmation and what I also see in Scripture as the reality that not everyone will be saved.

Well, I see I am out of time. I was going to comment also on love language and so on, but perhaps that will come up in the Q&A time. Thank you. (*Applause.*)

Paul Knitter: Thank you again, Harold. I think that many of the points that I had prepared to comment on your paper are probably going to touch on most of the questions you raised. If not, we'll talk further. I wanted to address three issues coming out of Harold's presentation. The first deals with religious language. The second deals with religious differences, which are a key point in your presentation. And then the third deals with the fact that all religions make claims of having the superior truth. I think the first two will touch on some of the questions you just posed for me, Harold.

First, concerning religious language, there's probably a pretty fundamental difference here—not an unbridgeable difference, but a difference—in our understanding of what it means to talk about God and things of God, such as salvation, Jesus, the incarnation, grace, and sin. First of all, let me state where we are in agreement. I do *not* want to avoid truth statements; in fact, I want to include propositional statements of truth. I don't want to boil everything down to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's "That's just how it moves me" (that's a paraphrase). Certainly, I don't want or to reduce religious truth solely to myth. However, I do believe (and I say this both because of the influence of my training and the teachers but also on the basis of my own experience) that all of our language about God is—and I know this is not going to go over well here—symbolic. As Paul Tillich, whose chair I occupy at Union Theological Seminary, reminded us, when we do experience the reality of God, the reality of Divine Mystery, the reality of God's truth in our lives, we also realize that

what we are experiencing is beyond all of our clear, solid, definitive human comprehension. There's always a surplus; there's always more. So as true as it is that we have experienced God's reality right now—the reality of a God of love, or a God of support, or a God that empowers us to work for justice—as true as that is, and as much as we're ready to die for it, at the same time we know that there's more, that the reality of God also exceeds what we have experienced and what we know. And so our language becomes language that's more poetry than it is philosophy. It has to be. Religious language is inherently, incorrigibly, unavoidably symbolic.

Also, as symbolic, religious language is performative. It arises out of and leads to calling us to act in certain ways in the world. It calls us to *right living*. By that, I mean living our life in such a way that we find peace and purpose in our own lives and connect with others in love and compassion. The primary quality of religious language, therefore, is its power is to enable us to act in certain ways. So I do want to claim (you've heard me say this before) that right acting, orthopraxis, has a certain primacy over orthodoxy. The two, however, are essentially related. We cannot have one without the other (here I have some critical concerns about Buddhism), but the primacy is orthopraxis. So in all our religious language—that means when we speak about God as triune, when we speak about Jesus as divine, when we speak about our human predicament as sinful, when we speak about the world as having been created—we're using symbolic language. We have to take this language very seriously for it to empower us, but it's language that, while it is saying something very true, it's not saying everything that is true. It's saying something very important, important enough to die for, but it's not saying everything.

And because symbols are so powerful, because they always contain more than they say, we have to think about our symbols. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, symbols give rise to thought. Here we face the daunting task of trying to unpack the truth of symbols in propositional statements. But the propositional statements are never going to be able to capture the fullness of what is communicated to us in that poetic, symbolic, metaphoric language of God as love, God as Trinity. So you see, religious truth, the truth of the symbol, is found in its ability to affect my life. Religious truth is truth for me when it opens me to meaning and purpose that gives me an inner peace and strength, and when it enables me to engage in a life in which I am furthering the well-being of myself and others.

For me personally, the truths and the symbols that so enable me to live my life I find primarily in Jesus Christ. And that means in and through the New Testament. So I can say not simply that the New Testament is true for me, but

that it continues to be truth. It's true because it continues to work, because it continues to inspire, because it continues to animate the community. So the language of the New Testament is absolutely essential for me. It contains the first witness of the early community of Jesus-followers. And yet it is language that we can never say we have understood definitively, that we have understood finally. And as a good Catholic, let me add: we can never say that we have understood it infallibly. (On this point, the pope may disagree—but that's a Catholic issue). (*Scattered laughter.*)

The second issue I would like to explore further with you, Harold, has to do with the very real differences between religions. You speak about contrarities. I prefer that word to “contradictions.” If the differences between religions are contrary, they allow for complementarity. If they are contradictory, then we simply have to agree to disagree. This reminds me of the well-known Zen Buddhist image and reminder: We may need fingers to point to the moon. But the finger can never be the moon. So yes, our very different religious truth claims are different fingers pointing to the moon. And they are very important fingers, for there are truly different ways of approaching the moon. We need many fingers. But even when the differences between these fingers seem to contradict each other, because they can never be identified with the moon, it's possible that they may be pointing to the same moon!

I have found that most, certainly not all, of the contraries—the different fingers—that I have discovered in my exploration of other religions, and especially of Buddhism, have proven to be much more complementary than contradictory. This includes even the examples you have given of what you think are contradictions between Buddhism and Christianity: Christian claims that God created the world versus Buddhist convictions that there was not point of creation in time. Or even more fundamentally, the Christian assertion that there is a God and the Buddhist refusal to speak about a God. As you say, these certainly seem like out-and-out contradictions.

But I would urge you to be careful. Try to look more deeply, for we are dealing with symbolic language, or with fingers that point but can never be identified with what they are pointing to. I have found that what the Buddhists are suggesting to me, and to Christians in general, is that in a very real sense to think about God as a reality that exists as an object outside of ourselves, an object that we can identify, may be leading us to certain forms of idolatry; such language may end up capturing or reifying the mystery of God. What I'm saying here is that for me, my dialogue with Buddhism, and with the Buddhist assertion that there is no God as an entity that confronts me from the outside, has not only enabled me to appropriate the mystical content of our Christian

tradition; it has also helped me, I think, to appropriate Saint Paul's talk about God as ultimate mystery (1 Cor. 2:7-8; Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:26-27). To unpack all this would take a book; in fact, it's the book I've been working on for quite some time.⁴⁵

Finally, I think we need to talk more about superior-truth claims. There's no doubt about it, all religions, including Buddhism and the supposedly inclusive religions of Asia, have made claims that "my religion is better than yours." I don't want to deny that. And I don't want to deny that among particular religious truth claims or practices, some can be better than others—or some are true, and others are false. What I want to challenge are the sweeping, broad claims that my religion is on the top of God's list or at the end of the line. To put it somewhat cutely (I hope not crudely), I would like to challenge religious claims that seem to be saying, "My God is bigger than your God" or "My savior excludes your savior" or "My prophet is the final prophet over your prophet."

I want to explore the possibility that religions and religious believers, instead of making such final, absolute claims of superiority, would, rather, announce claims of universality. So in approaching the table of dialogue, religious believers will not announce that they have been given the superior or final truth over all others; rather, they will offer what they think are the universally meaningful or necessary truths that God has given them. So as a Christian, I would witness to what I have discovered in my religion, through Jesus Christ, and why I think it is true, important, powerful, and meaningful, not just for me, but also for you. And therefore I remain a missionary. All religious believers, if they take their beliefs seriously, have to be missionaries. They want to share the truth that they have been given.

But they make this witness and announce this message with what I would call "epistemic humility," which is quite different from the epistemic parity you criticize. Yes, I make my universal claims, but in the humble recognition that there may be universal claims coming from others (now I'm getting back to the Holy Spirit working in other religions) that could lay claim on me. Sometimes that will lead to contradictions where we have to choose one or the other. But we have to be careful about too quickly identifying contradictions. As I've said, for the most part, when I have encountered the universal claims of Buddhism, and often of Hinduism, I have found that they have enriched me in very unexpected ways; they have often enabled me, for instance, to reappropriate or to take another look at what the New Testament means.

I'll end with an example of a text of a New Testament passage that has come alive and claimed me through my dialogue with Buddhism in ways that

I don't think could ever have been possible without that dialogue. I'm talking about Gal. 2:20: "It is no longer I that live, it's Christ who's doing the living in me." Reading and praying over that text with my "Buddhist glasses" so to speak, I've found deeper meaning and power in it. That's just one example of such possibilities.

So I think that if we would recognize that our religious language is poetry, divine poetry, and if we take our poetry seriously but also humbly and then open ourselves to the poetry of others, maybe we'll end up being better Christians, and the world may be better off, too. (*Applause.*)

Netland: Let me briefly respond. I do want to leave time for questions, too. Two quick comments: Paul has rightly highlighted the importance of understanding religious discourse. It's a very complicated subject; some of you are familiar with that. Yes, symbols point to things. Poetry makes or can make affirmations, and in making affirmations, you rule out certain things. In speaking of propositions, I don't want to suggest that religious assertions are like physics equations. Propositions can be vague. Propositions can be precise. Of course we need to understand and admit that there is much in any statement about God that we don't fully understand. Take a simple reality like the microphone down there. In saying "There's a microphone on the stand," I'm making a true statement. There are all kinds of entailments that follow from that statement that I don't understand or couldn't be aware of. And so, yes, you do have to bear in mind the dimension that surpasses what we are aware of. Nevertheless, if religious discourse is going to have *any* purchase, if you're going to take the religious writings and the leaders from the different communities on their own terms seriously, there's something there that we do understand, and in making assertions some things are ruled out. And here I think, frankly, Paul and I do have somewhat different understandings of Buddhism, and it could be because Paul works more in the Mahayana tradition, while more recently I have been looking more at the Theravada tradition. Japan, where I grew up and then lived for ten years as an adult is Mahayana, so initially I was more familiar with the Mahayana tradition.

But more recently, I've been working in the Theravada tradition and exploring some of the earlier disputes in the Indian traditions between Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains and so on. The idea of religions themselves, as clearly identifiable, sharply different or distinct entities, is something of a modern notion, and we need to keep that in mind, so it's not like the followers of Gautama set out and said, "Let's start a new religion." There were significant similarities among various ancient Indian philosophical and religious

groups. But don't miss the point that the followers of Gautama were seen by the traditional Brahmanical, or what today we call the Hindu, community as deviant and embracing views that were rejected as heretical. There were vigorous disputes among them over a number of questions, including "Does Brahman exist?" and between Hindus and Buddhists and Jains, like "Is there a substantial enduring soul, *atman*?" The literature is full of vigorous exchanges and what we today would call sharp analytic analysis of these claims.⁴⁶ And it was very, very important because all three communities believed that how you understand reality is *directly related* to whether you attain liberation. So these are not isolated or insignificant disputes. Either God exists or God doesn't exist. Hindus and Buddhists traditionally have acknowledged that this is an important ontological question and that both sides cannot be correct in what they affirm about the reality of Brahman. Much depends on how you define the concept of God, obviously. I have a list here of eight or ten Buddhist scholars who are familiar with the Christian understanding of God and simply flat out say, "Buddhism is atheistic; if that's what you mean by God, Buddhism is atheistic." Nagarjuna, the Indian philosopher so influential with the Mahayana, has an essay explicitly arguing against the possibility of there being a creator.⁴⁷

So I want to take those kinds of disputes seriously and say they aren't just superficial disputes or language disconnects and that if you really understand what's happening, we're really on the same page here. I don't think we're on the same page. And I think that to admit that we are not ultimately in agreement about the reality of God is to take at least some of these traditional Buddhist communities seriously on their own terms. But I think from previous conversations with Paul that he and I have a little different understanding of the Buddhist tradition here on this point.

Knitter: Clearly, there have been the disputes that you point out, Harold, and I think you're better acquainted with them and have studied them more carefully than I. I want to take them seriously, but at the same time, maybe what were disputes then in that context, given that historical situation, don't necessarily have to be the same kind of disputes today.

Netland: Yes, that's fair.

Knitter: I think, as we engage in a world in which we're confronting the religious other not only more extensively but also more existentially than ever before, perhaps the context is such that we can look at some of these basic differences differently. Now, I say that not just to be nice. I want to be nice

but also serious. In trying to do so, I realize, Harold, that our understanding of language, religious language, is not the same. The encounter with other religions, especially Buddhism, is requiring us Christians to ask ourselves just what we mean when we use our language about God. The word *God* itself is a symbol. The word *God* is a pointer. The word *God* doesn't capture what this reality of God is. The dialogue with Buddhism is urging Christians to look at the reality of God in a more nondualistic way than we have in the past. We have considered God and the world as two very distinct, divided, separate realities: God there, the world here. That is a bit exaggerated, I know. But there are very clear demarcations between the divine and the finite in Christian theology. My dialogue with Buddhism has pushed me to explore a more nondualistic, a more unitive and mystical understanding of God in which God is no longer an entity outside of me, but a power that has its very being within me.

Netland: Hmm.

Knitter: Now, if that sounds strange, I want to ask you what I ask myself: Is such a nondualistic understanding of God really that foreign to Christian tradition and experience? Such a nondualistic understanding of God is, I believe, contained, or can be reappropriated, in our symbol of God as spirit. I don't think we've really taken this central symbol of God as spirit seriously enough. I've been challenged to look more deeply into Jesus' admonition that we can truly worship God only if we remind ourselves that "God is spirit" and that we must worship God "in spirit" (John 4:24).

Netland: Hmm.

Knitter: Such a nondualistic God cannot be identified with the world, but at the same time cannot be found other than in the world. And so God and the world are not simply two. That's nondualism.

Netland: Hmm.

Knitter: But that doesn't mean that they're one! Rather, God is God, and we are humans, but we have our being in each other. This doesn't mean that we are God, but that we have our being in God, and that God has God's being in us. This is one of the ways in which Buddhism has nudged me toward a more unitive, personal understanding and experience of God. Maybe I'm way off

Christian base here. But I don't think so. My prayer life, thanks to Buddhism, has improved.

Netland: Yeah. Hmm. And, in fact, you are writing, or have finished writing, a book of how the study of Buddhism has affected you or helped you.

Knitter: Yeah, I've given it the audacious title of *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*.

Netland: There you go. OK. Hmm.

Robert Stewart: All right, let's open it up for questions. This aisle for questions for Paul Knitter, and this other aisle for questions for Harold Netland. We will alternate between the two.

Question 1: Dr. Knitter, you claimed at the beginning of your presentation that the context we're in today is different from what it was with the early church, and because of this, that Christians should change their perspective on inclusivism. However, when addressing issues of eternal existence, why would context determine the legitimacy of the specific truth claim about God?

Knitter: Wait, say that last part again.

Question 1: When addressing issues of eternal existence, why would context determine the legitimacy of specific truth claims about God?

Knitter: I'm not sure what you mean by eternal existence.

Question 1: God has always been who he was since all of eternity, and so if he always has been this one person, why would the context in which we are in right now change who he is?

Knitter: The very articulation that you used, "God is one person," is one way, a very important way, of understanding the mystery that is God. It's a way that grew up at a certain time in a certain place, and it is very key for us because it grew up in the New Testament period. But still, we may be able to understand the mystery of God in other ways, not fundamentally contradictory to what went before, but really different, and that's my point.

All of our language is always, as the postmodern philosophers tell us, socially constructed, always limited. I don't want to go too far with that, but there is something to what they're claiming. So as contexts change, we have perhaps the opportunity to understand, and to feel, the mystery of God in our lives in different ways.

Question 2: Hi, this is really for both of you, but from an Episcopal perspective to offer a different take on . . .

Knitter: That's Catholic, too. (*Laughter.*)

Question 2: The question I want to raise is one of generational perspective. I was in one of the last classes in the early seventies to have to worry about the draft, and my own personal quick observation of that float is that the combination of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement caused a morality shift across all denominations, but I'm alert to it because I can see it because our prayer book in the Episcopal denomination changed in 1970. Back in that time, there was a lot of questioning of authority, including questions like "Who are we to judge anybody?" I'll also make the observation that a lot of people who didn't want to go to the Vietnam War headed for seminary. And a lot of those people are coming of age in all denominations and rising to positions of leadership. So my question for you is: Do you think there's some sort of generational bias such that we're imposing our own views on maybe some more traditional things in the Bible?

Netland: My short answer is that I'm sure that's the case, but could you be more specific?

Question 2: I'm just calling attention to words—the exact stuff that you're talking about—that we got very vague with language in trying to be inclusive within ourselves. What do we mean by justice, because that can mean a lot of different things to different people? I've learned to ask what you mean.

Netland: Can I just give a quick response?

Knitter: Oh, yeah!

Netland: I think, if I hear you, that what you're getting at is, "What is theology anyway? How do we, if we accept Scripture in any sense as

normative or as divinely inspired, take a two-thousand-plus-year-old document and appropriate it for where we are today?” I have found David Wells’s very short definition of theology very helpful. This is a very concise summary which won’t do Wells’s discussion justice, but essentially he suggests that theology involves us, from our perspective where we are located today, asking the question “What does it mean for us to be the recipient of God’s revelation in this world at this time?”⁴⁸ And so implicit in this understanding of theology is that God has revealed himself to humankind, and there clearly are differences here on how we understand that, but I take God’s revelation to be codified in Scripture and, to take the language out of Hebrews 1, the apex of God’s self-revelation is in the incarnation. God’s self-revelation then becomes normative, but then of course we have to ask the question “So what does it mean for me in 2009 where I am?”—I was going to say Chicago, but I guess this is New Orleans—“What does it mean for me to engage God’s revelation in *this* context?” In that sense, every generation has to be reworking that question.

But the issue I was probing a bit with Paul was just in what sense then is that two-thousand-plus-year-old document, Scripture, normative for us today? I would say it’s very, very normative, and that’s why to me it’s very important to try and understand the language of the apostle Paul, or the language of the Gospel writers and so on. One of my problems with pluralistic theologies of religions is simply that I think if the writers of the New Testament intended to put forward pluralistic views, they certainly had the resources to do so, and such pluralism would have been a very popular view in the first-century Mediterranean milieu. So the fact that I don’t find that kind of language in the New Testament to me is significant.

Question 2: I’d agree.

Stewart: OK, thank you. Paul, did you want to respond?

Knitter: No, that’s all right. (*Audience laughter.*)

Question 3: First, thanks for being here; it was a great debate. Dr. Knitter, I’ve read a number of your books, and I’ve enjoyed them thoroughly, and from them I get the distinct impression that you’re first a liberationist—that’s where your heart is, and that’s how your praxis has played out. And from that your pluralism grows. Is that correct?

Knitter: Yes, yes.

Question 3: Now, I've read also some critiques of your writing, one in particular by Dr. Netland, that challenge the hermeneutic of starting with liberationism and working backward toward pluralism. How does that not put you on shaky hermeneutical ground? I would like you to address that, please.

Knitter: So, just to make sure I understand your question correctly, your first name is?

Question 3: Christopher.

Knitter: Christopher, you're referring to the shift in my thinking when I moved from "theocentrism," or God-centeredness, to "soterio-centrism," or salvation-centeredness.

Question 3: In order to substantiate your liberationism, if you think of liberation as the goal, the vehicle to get you there is pluralism. So you are working backward basically from the goal in trying to justify the goal by providing a means. Isn't that kind of hermeneutically backward?

Knitter: Well, I guess I wouldn't put them in such a neat "first this, then that" order. I understand the hermeneutical task more as a circle, not a straight line.

Question 3: Or a spiral . . .

Knitter: Or a spiral. That may be even better. I can respond to your question in the general context of my own personal faith journey and of my theological career. I began as a Catholic priest in a missionary order, the Society of Divine Word. Then I had to deal with the other religions, since I wanted primarily to convert them, so at that time, I tried to take the reality of religious pluralism seriously. Then, after I left the priesthood, got married, and became involved in social action in Cincinnati, especially through my wife, we took multiple trips during the eighties to El Salvador. We worked with the base Christian communities there and together with the Jesuits, six of whom were murdered because of their work for liberation. It was then that I realized that to be a Christian, I have to confront not just the many religions, but also the reality of the many poor. And I saw that both of those hermeneutical lenses can interpret each other. I realized that if we are really going to confront and do

something about the structures of oppression that exist in our world, and which at that time I felt our government was supporting in what was going on in El Salvador, we need to draw on all the religious resources we can find, because religions have resources to confront oppression. But then I saw that that calling the religions to work together to promote human well-being and to confront oppression became a hermeneutical context in which you can carry on an even more effective interreligious dialogue. So I saw them as kind of a circle, with one feeding into the other. Does that help you?

Question 3: More or less, for right now.

Stewart: Great. Let's have another question.

Question 4: Dr. Netland, I agree with Dr. Knitter that there needs to be a great amount of dialogue among the faiths. How are we as Christians to claim Christ as the only way? How are we to reconcile that in light of what Scripture does declare in 1 Tim. 4:7 when it says to have nothing to do with irreverent or silly myths? How are we to reconcile that in light of our exclusive claims yet still having this pressing need to carry on discourse and dialogue with other faiths?

Netland: I guess I don't see the connection there, or let me put it a different way: I think that text and other similar texts like that in the New Testament are addressing in-house issues within Christian communities where you have division and discord and trouble of one kind or another. That's a qualitatively different situation than dealing with people who don't even profess any kind of allegiance explicitly to Christ.

I agree with Paul Knitter on the need for interreligious dialogue. We need to be engaged in dialogue. The word *dialogue* is a very tricky word, and especially among Evangelicals, it raises all kinds of red flags. At Trinity, when students object to interreligious dialogue, I say, "Fine, just substitute the word *conversation* for *dialogue*." We need to be talking with each other; we need to be listening to each other. We can learn from others; hopefully, they can learn from us. To put it in very, very crass terms that we Evangelicals understand and prioritize: How can you share the gospel with someone without engaging in conversation or dialogue? We need two-way listening. So dialogue has many forms. It can be informal; it can be formal, or ecclesiastical. We have many Muslim communities in the United States now. We have pastors who will invite Muslims for dinner in their church or in another more neutral site

with parishioners simply for the sake of getting to know each other. This is wonderful, so I applaud all of that.

What I disagree with is the idea that you can't engage in *real* dialogue if you believe somehow that your religious claims are true and those that conflict with yours are false. That's where I say, "Wait a minute; why not?" My own sense, too, is that those from other faith traditions expect Christians to disagree with them. They don't think we all agree. And so I don't think they're surprised when we say, "You know I disagree with you on that, and here is what I think." Can you do this respectfully while also being convinced that God has revealed himself distinctively in the Scriptures and the incarnation? I don't see why not.

Are there people who are exclusivist in a negative sense, who are belligerent and socially intolerant of others and so on? Yes, of course there are. But you don't have to be that way. So my challenge to Evangelicals is "Let's join the conversation!" But you can do that while still being fully committed that God has distinctively revealed himself in the Scriptures and in Christ.

Knitter: I'm not against making truth claims in the dialogue. And I don't think that that's an impediment to dialogue at all. But I fear that it is an impediment to the dialogue if I make truth claims that I think I have fully and finally understood.

Netland: Hmmm.

Knitter: In other words, it is one thing to make a truth claim and to say, on the one hand, "This is it; anybody who disagrees with this is out," and, on the other hand, to say, "This is the truth claim I make; this is how I understand it; this is, I believe, what God has revealed to me, but"—this is what I meant by epistemic humility—"I recognize that my grasp of what I believe God has given me may be inadequate." In fact, it *is* inadequate. No one can understand God's revealed truth fully and finally. So I enter the dialogue with truth claims; I go in with commitment to my own truth claims. But I also go in with an openness through the dialogue to revisioning my truth claims. I think if I go in feeling that this is the truth in its propositional formulation, that God has given to me in my community, and it cannot be changed in any way, then I don't see how there's any dialogue possible. Rather, I engage other religious believers with this approach: "This is a truth claim that I do believe originates from God, but I can't claim that I know what this truth claim fully entails and how this truth claim may be clarified, deepened, corrected through a dialogue with you."

Netland: Maybe we can agree on this: Any really serious, sincere, intense discussion on these kinds of matters is, to some extent, going to leave both parties changed. I think we might disagree on the nature and the extent of the change, but just given the nature of a serious interreligious conversation, both parties are going to be affected and come away somewhat changed. I would certainly agree with that.

Knitter: I don't want to have the last word, but I have a statement that I think you would agree with. It comes from John Cobb. I don't have the exact formulation, but basically it is this: "The one fundamental prerequisite for dialogue, if you want to just boil everything down to what is necessary for dialogue, is that you enter the conversation recognizing that you have something to learn."

Netland: That is a good insight.

Stewart: The sad thing about this forum is that we never have enough time for the questions. But there are other avenues of asking questions. There is the reception and book signing. You can meet these men personally and shake their hands and so forth. I have found that a great way to get your question answered is to precede it with the question "Will you sign my copy of your book?" I've never met an author who wouldn't answer a question after you bought his book and asked him to sign it.

Notes

1. For argument supporting this claim, see Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), chs. 6–7; and Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), chs. 1–3.

2. See, for example, Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Millard Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); and *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

3. I am using "religious pluralism" not as a descriptive term denoting religious diversity but rather as a term for a particular view about the relation among the various religions. In this sense, religious pluralism is the view that the major religions are all equally legitimate alternative ways of responding to the same divine reality, and that no single religious tradition can legitimately claim to be distinctively true or normative for all people. Religious pluralism in this sense is identified

primarily with John Hick, but Paul Knitter has also advocated versions of pluralism. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004 [1989]); idem, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987). See also Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1995); and idem, "It Is Not Reasonable to Believe that Only One Religion Is True," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon, 201–10 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

4. Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, *The Atlas of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 14.

5. Roger Schmidt et al. *Patterns of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 10.

6. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11–22; idem, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995).

7. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 5.

8. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 21.

9. William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

10. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 67–68 (emphasis in original). See also Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962); and idem, "A Human View of Truth", in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims*, ed. John Hick, 20–44 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

11. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 348.

12. For an elaboration of these points, see Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 197–211, 232–46.

13. This point is made nicely by William J. Wainwright, "Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Faith and Belief," *Religious Studies* 20 (September 1984): 353–66.

14. The Golden Rule is explicitly stated in the Analects of Confucius and is implicit in the writings of other religious traditions. See Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1979), 12.2 and 15.24, 112, 135. See also John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 316–25.

15. See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vols. 1–2 (New York: Macmillan, 1923); Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964); and Richard King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999).

16. On conflicting claims in the religions, see William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue among Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1972); idem, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and Ninian Smart, *A Dialogue of Religions* (London: SCM, 1960).

17. See Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 31–37.

18. Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990), 4–5.

19. Keith Yandell, "How to Sink in Cognitive Quicksand: Nuancing Religious Pluralism," in Peterson and VanArragon, *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, 191.

20. Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities*, 1–2, 5–11.

21. The literature on Christian theism is enormous. Helpful works that provide good reasons for believing that God exists include Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed.

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999). Helpful works on the incarnation in Jesus Christ include Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, eds., *The Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

22. See Eugene Thomas Long, ed., *Prospects for Natural Theology: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 25 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992); and James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

23. This is a basic assumption underlying John Hick's model of religious pluralism. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, ch. 13. See also Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. See Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); and Harold Netland, "Natural Theology and Religious Diversity," *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (October 2004): 503–18. For a creative and thoughtful approach to natural theology, see C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

25. Helpful introductions to the subject include Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

26. "The WEF Manila Manifesto," in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls, 15–16 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

27. Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum, <http://www.greerheard.com/>, accessed March 20, 2009.

28. *Global responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv.

29. Charles K. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

30. These last few paragraphs are drawn from my first lecture at Union Theological Seminary, published as "My God Is Bigger than Your God . . ."

31. Sharon D. Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 14.

32. David H. Jensen, *In the Company of Others: A Dialogical Christology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 190, 87, xii.

33. John B. Cobb Jr., "Beyond Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 91.

34. Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 33.

35. *Ibid.*, 34.

36. Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

37. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

38. *Ibid.*, 169.

39. *Ibid.*

40. See Harold Netland, "Religious Exclusivism," in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad Meister, 67–80 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); and

idem, "Inclusivism and Exclusivism," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan, 226–36 (London: Routledge, 2007).

41. Knitter, *No Other Name?*.

42. See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

43. See Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*.

44. See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and idem, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

45. It has since been published: *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011).

46. On the differences between Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain claims, see Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*; King, *Indian Philosophy*; and John M. Koller and Patricia Joyce Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998). For an excellent study of the critique of the Hindu belief in Brahman by a Buddhist thinker, see Parimal G. Patil, *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

47. See Nagarjuna, "Refutation of the View of God Being the Creator of the World and of the View of Visnu Being the Sole Creator of the Whole World," in *Papers of Th. Stcherbatsky*, trans. Harish C. Gupta, ed. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Soviet Indology Series no. 2 (Calcutta: R.D. Press, 1969), 10–11. The Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar K. N. Jayatilleke claimed that "the Buddhist is an atheist and Buddhism in both its Theravada and Mahayana forms is atheism." K. N. Jayatilleke, *The Message of the Buddha*, ed. Ninian Smart (New York: Free Press, 1974), 105. Walpola Rahula asserts that, "According to Buddhism, our ideas of God and Soul are false and empty." Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove, 1974), 52. The Burmese Buddhist U Thittila states, "In Buddhism, there is no such thing as belief in a body of dogmas which have to be taken on faith, such as belief in a Supreme Being, a creator of the universe." U Thittila, "The Fundamental Principles of Theravada Buddhism," in *The Path of the Buddha: Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), 71. For a fascinating exchange over whether Buddhism is compatible with theism, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Light and Darkness' or 'Looking through a Dim Mirror'? A Reply to Paul Williams from a Christian Perspective," in *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity*, ed. John D'Arcy May (Sankt Otien, Germany: EOS Klosterverlag, 2007), 67–87; José Cabezon, "A Response to Paul Williams's *The Unexpected Way*," in May, *Converging Ways?*, 89–115; and Paul Williams, "Buddhism, God, Aquinas and Morality: An Only Partially Repentant Reply to Perry Schmidt-Leukel and José Cabezon," in May, *Converging Ways?*, 117–53.

48. See David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 99–101.