

Blind Men, an Elephant, and a King: The Problem of Soteriocentric Pluralism

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The rise of immigration in the West has brought to the fore the issue about how the Christian church should relate to those in their midst of other faith traditions. The reigning paradigm in Western Christianity for interfaith relations has been pluralism, which is the view that all religions are essentially the same, with similar ends, and are equally valid. This essay seeks to challenge this assumption, examining the presuppositions that fuel this approach, showing how the seemingly “neutral” stance purported by its advocates is a fallacy. The author offers a different approach that seeks to take seriously the scriptural claims for the uniqueness of Christ, but also suggests a way to meaningfully engage with other faith traditions, without compromising what is essentially the foundation of Christianity—Jesus Christ.

I

Much has been said about the rise of the global village, and the vast movements of people across oceans and continents have led to an increasing diversity in the populations of our cities around the world. This has led to a greater awareness of the multiplicity of cultures, practices, and faith traditions in what was once the cradle of Christendom in the West. In Canada where I am now living, the projections are that by 2031 almost half of all Canadians aged fifteen and over will have been born in a foreign country or have at least one parent who was foreign-born. This change is also expected to affect the religious affiliation of the population. It is estimated that the number of non-Christians will nearly double from 8 percent in 2006 to 14 percent in 2031, with

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an expected decline in Christians from 75 percent to 65 percent in the same period of time.¹ The rapid pace of demographic change in the West has caused many in the church to ask questions of how we ought to relate to those of other faiths. Close encounters with those who are “other” has led to a reevaluation of some of the deeply-held assumptions of Western Christians, including those who are engaged in the work of theology in academic contexts. This has led to the rise of a movement known as “pluralism” within theological circles.

A particularly vexing issue is the whole matter of the Christian understanding of salvation, especially in light of the many people who remain outside this faith tradition. The main way in which this question is phrased is, “How can the traditional Christian understanding of salvation as being available only to some (whether it be through membership in the church, or through an explicit profession of faith) be reconciled with the vast numbers of people who are of non-Christian religions?” In simpler terms, the question is, “Who can be saved?” Attempts to answer this in the light of other faiths have been part of the intra-Christian debate for decades. Most discussions revolve around “issues concerning the nature of historical relativity, the evidence of the New Testament, the coherence of Chalcedon, the nature of God, and many other connected matters.”² It is unrealistic to believe that this essay can possibly answer all the thorny issues that surround this matter, so it will therefore confine itself to examining the presuppositions of pluralism. Pluralism has become the reigning paradigm for most contemporary Christians in the West, offering those who want to continue to hold fast to the claim that “there is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:12) but Jesus the means to do so on equally rational terms, grounded in the authority of Scripture.

The way in which I will address this problem is by first looking at the basis for pluralism and its foundation in relativistic reductionism, which attempts to equalize all faith claims, denying differences in an attempt to bring harmony. I will show that this is not only impossible to do at a practical level, but also ultimately intolerant of different faiths to the point of being just as “exclusivistic” as other Christian

¹ Statistics Canada, “Study: Projections of the Diversity of the Canadian Population,” *The Daily* for March 9, 2010. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100309/dq100309a-eng.htm>.

² Gavin D’Costa, Preface, in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), x.

approaches. Next, I will endeavor to lay out a case that the Christian account of the human condition requires that divine revelation be the basis on which Christians should base their conceptions of salvation, and that such an approach does not close the door on a meaningful ongoing dialogue and cooperation with those of other faith traditions, but rather provides a sound doctrinal basis for doing so. The hope is that this understanding can provide the necessary space for Christians of a more conservative persuasion to enter into the conversation with those interested in engaging peoples of other religious persuasions.

II

In the field of the theology of religion, the commonly accepted ways of thinking about the various approaches to other faith traditions by Christians have been roughly organized into three broad categories: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.³ Exclusivists see Christianity as the only legitimate tradition and believe that only adherents of Christianity are assured of salvation. Inclusivists likewise see Christianity as the supreme way, but as the label suggests, are open to the possibility that people of other faiths can also find salvation. Pluralists assert that all faiths are legitimate, that they are all paths that lead up the same mountain and will ultimately lead people to God. Therefore the differences between religions should not be seen as true or false propositions; rather, they are just different perceptions of the ultimate Truth.

It must be highlighted that in much of the current debates on theologies of religion, these categories are often derided as being too rigid and simplistic, leading many theorists to lament about the inadequacy of this typology in dealing with Christian understandings of religions. As Mark Heim has aptly noted, “The typology is fully coherent only on the assumption that salvation is an unequivocal, single reality. Given that assumption, it distinguishes between the limitation of salvation to one group, its qualified availability to all, or its full achievement by parallel, distinct paths.”⁴ George Sumner points out that this way of

³ This was first proposed by Alan Race in his book, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982) and has now become the default way of thinking about Christian approaches to other religions.

⁴ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 4.

categorization “conflates answers to different questions of revelation and salvation.”⁵ Sumner cites the example of Karl Barth, who is labeled an exclusivist because he affirms that all religions are “unbelief,” yet at the same time Barth asserts that all humans are *Christiani designati in spe* (or “Christians designated by hope”), which makes him seem more like an inclusivist. Sumner, following Wolfhart Pannenberg and Lesslie Newbigin, sees that this typology does offer “a measure of the truth” and considers the typology as “denoting three necessary dimensions of the Christian life . . . understood as three interrelated practices.”⁶ Yet despite the problematic nature of this typology, it is the most widely accepted one and the one that is most useful in a discussion of soteriology from a Christian perspective, which is apropos for this essay. This is especially so when discussing the matter of pluralism, as it is from this tripartite categorization that it derives its definition. In essence, pluralism posits that because diverse religious claims now stand side by side in the marketplace, it would be ignorant and insensitive to elevate one faith tradition over another. Therefore the only way forward is to put everyone on the same level and to equalize all truth claims.

For most pluralist theologians, a genuine concern is to avoid any chance for a return to oppressive and hegemonic actions that stem from a sense of superiority, fearing that violence and disrespect ride on the coattails of any sort of confessional dogmatism. The colonial and imperialistic past of Western national interests has unfortunately been linked with the missionary endeavors of Western Christians, and this has led to a commendable sensitivity among Western theologians in relating to people of other faiths. Such a complete identification may be an unfair oversimplification, however. The missiologist David Bosch has noted that while the missionaries were no doubt influenced by their social context, they “were, by and large, a breed fundamentally different from their colonizing compatriots. . . . They carried the odor of the colonial enterprise with them—much the way the stale smell of cigarette smoke clings to the clothes of a non-smoker coming

⁵ George R. Sumner, *The First and the Last: The Claim of Jesus Christ and the Claims of Other Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 53.

⁶ Sumner, *The First and the Last*, 54. For other typologies that have built on this original one, see Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), and Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002).

out of a room full of smokers.”⁷ Nevertheless, it is in this light that pluralist theologians see both exclusivism and inclusivism as another form of “imperialism.” They believe that such approaches exercise hegemony in dictating the terms on which religions are evaluated, and then patronizingly offer concessions to these other faith traditions. As such, their view is that only pluralism avoids this “evil,” as it sees all faiths as equally valid and equally salvific. Yet if we are honest, we must ask, “Does this insistence on pluralism become yet another form of imperialism?”

The problem can best be seen in the critique of a common parable offered to illustrate the position of pluralism: that of the blind men and an elephant. In the story, a king brings an elephant into the midst of a group of blind men, and asks them to describe the animal. As each of the men feels his way around the animal, his description of it corresponds to the part of the animal that he happens to be holding. This story is used to encourage those who hold religious views to learn humility and to recognize the fact that each only has a hold on one aspect of truth. Lesslie Newbigin insightfully points out that the real point of the story is something entirely different: “If the king were also blind there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth which all the world’s religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions and philosophies.”⁸ The seemingly “neutral” approach of pluralism is thus revealed to be just as arrogant as those who espouse a view from a particular perspective. Sumner points out that instead of demonstrating the objective “view from nowhere” they purport to provide, they are in fact as much a slave to a particular tradition—that of Western Enlightenment thinking. As a consequence, he points out, “pluralism quickly resembles, not a view beyond specific religious traditions, but rather a new religion of reason.”⁹

One way to avoid this pluralistic hypocrisy is by acknowledging that any approach to understanding has certain prejudgments that are assumed. The pluralist has often assumed the Western cultural

⁷ David J. Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission,” in *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 177.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 9.

⁹ Sumner, *The First and the Last*, 2.

worldview, which was shaped by the Enlightenment assumption that science and its concomitant method are the product of “pure” reason, and are hence acceptable as facts, as public truth. Everything else is “dogma,” which is only valid as personal belief.¹⁰ On this basis the assertion is made that only a person with “an open mind can hope to reach the truth, and dogma is the enemy of an open mind.”¹¹ This is a product of the Enlightenment’s privileging of reason. “Everything for the Enlightenment must be free from superstition. But its thinkers failed to recognize that everything is driven by tradition, history, and interpretation, and they nurtured the ‘nonsensical tradition’ of pure, neutral ‘consciousness.’”¹²

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the German philosopher of the last century, challenges this way of thinking in his influential work, *Truth and Method*. He rejects the notion of making objectivity the goal as a hopeless and unachievable enterprise. He points out that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere: “The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust.”¹³ This is the only way that one can approach a text, and it can also apply to how one approaches any understanding of another faith tradition. Those who disdain prejudice are themselves subjected to it. “There is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.”¹⁴ As a result, he defends the appeal to tradition. Enlightenment thinking, however, identifies tradition with authority, which has in past times proven itself to be coercive and antithetical to free thought and learning. The concern is that a reliance on authority leads to a subservience that ultimately becomes the enemy of reason. For Gadamer, though, authority is not blind obedience, and it is not “diametrically opposed to reason and freedom. . . . It rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself, which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. Authority in this sense, properly understood, . . . has to do not with obedience but rather with

¹⁰ Sumner, *The First and the Last*, 4–5.

¹¹ Sumner, *The First and the Last*, 7.

¹² Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 218.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, second revised edition (London: Continuum, 2004), 272.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272–273.

knowledge.”¹⁵ The irony is that Enlightenment rationalists can never really free themselves from authority. They are always subject to an authority, even if it is an authority of their own making. “The possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. It is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority.”¹⁶ As an interpreter of Gadamer, Chris Lawn observes: “The idea of making tradition an object of investigation wrongly assumes that there is a conceptual and critical space to be found outside tradition, an Archimedean point from which to assess the rationality of otherwise traditional activities. We can never escape tradition as we are always already within it.”¹⁷

Newbigin likewise sees the question of the authority of tradition and reason as the problem of a pluralist approach:

In discussions about the authority of the gospel the word “reason” is often used as though it were an independent source of information to be set alongside tradition or revelation. But clearly this is a confusion of categories. Reason does not operate in a vacuum. The power of a human mind to think rationally is only developed in a tradition which itself depends on the experience of previous generations.¹⁸

This lack of objectivity by pluralists is likewise identified by Mark Heim. Pluralistic theologians insist that all religions are true, all are valid, and none stands above the rest. Yet Heim notes that “the pluralistic hypothesis still distinguishes true from false religion.”¹⁹ For Heim, this inconsistency is apparent especially among pluralist theologians who bring a soteriocentric approach to pluralism. An example of this can be seen in their appeal to a common sense of justice to better the situation of the downtrodden and oppressed. Ironically, this approach is as “imperialistic” as other approaches, for in insisting on justice, the question arises as to whose justice one should accept as the norm. He asks why they do not advocate a “‘pluralist’ prescription

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280–281.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 274.

¹⁷ Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 36.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 8–9.

¹⁹ Heim, *Salvations*, 19.

for peace and relief of human suffering.”²⁰ Such a prescription would mean that “different views on economic justice, justice between the genders, and political structure should flourish, along with the different practices that go with them.”²¹ Yet the nonsensical nature of this hypothesis becomes clear when applied to a particular case of justice. For example, there are certain cultures and religions where the cutting off of an offending limb as punishment for theft is considered justice to some. However, from a Western perspective this would be seen as torture and barbaric abuse. So whose conception of justice is right? They cannot both coexist. They cannot both be valid. The reality is that the “principles (of pluralistic theology) have their primary roots not so much in discoveries made in the substance of the various religious traditions as in the premises of modern Western critiques of religion.”²² Heim continues:

This is ironic. Given the apparent insistence on the validity of many ways, we might expect pluralists to affirm the full and equal value of religious paths that are inclusivist or exclusivist in character as well. But they seem very hesitant to do so. In fact they themselves adopt a classically inclusivist posture. Unenlightened, sincere devotees of various faiths may be saved both historically and cosmically. But not on the basis they imagine. It is the Real, or faith, or justice as the pluralists know them that redeem. Ignorance and error need not bar others from salvation. Yet only the priests of world theology can lead us to its full realization. To borrow a phrase from the history of Christian theology of religions, pluralistic theology regards itself as the “crown and fulfillment” of every religious tradition.²³

Another critique that can be made about pluralistic approaches to religion is that they ultimately deny the irreconcilable differences that are inherent in the different faiths. There is a failure to take each particularity of the various religions seriously on its own terms. The oft-heard claim that all religious traditions are valid and equal sounds enticing; however, what is ignored is that the premise of this position “is that if all faiths are valid, they can be so only by passing muster at the bar of critical Western thought, the same conditions to which

²⁰ Heim, *Salvations*, 95.

²¹ Heim, *Salvations*, 95.

²² Heim, *Salvations*, 101.

²³ Heim, *Salvations*, 102.

Christianity or Judaism have long had to answer.”²⁴ Is this not also being exclusivistic in practice? “Pluralistic theologies require conversion of all faiths not to any form of Christianity,” Heim argues, “but to the cultural structures of plausibility against which modern Western Christianity has been defined.”²⁵ Efforts by such theorists to construct a meta-theology that is free from the constraints and particularities of any single faith tradition are well intentioned, but misguided. He says, “To demonstrate that one, for instance, no longer grants authority to Christian or Muslim norms is no evidence that one does not hew to others just as particular.”²⁶

This is also the observation of Rowan Williams. In an essay he wrote in the work edited by Gavin D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, he says:

The variety of the world’s forms as experienced by human minds does not conceal an absolute oneness to which perceptible difference is completely irrelevant. If there is a unifying structure, it does not exist and cannot be seen independently of the actual movement and development of differentiation, the story of life-forms growing and changing.²⁷

Kathryn Tanner is more blunt about the issue:

The idea that dialogue demands shared beliefs and norms, or a common referent for beliefs and norms not shared, brings pluralist theories of religions into line with the general structure of colonialist discourse. . . . [Their] insistence on identity of beliefs, norms, or references as a presupposition for inter-religious dialogue undermines . . . respect for other religions as other.²⁸

Furthermore, pluralists are in fact “hiding the particularity of their own perspectives by claiming to form generalizations about the religions of the world from a global outlook.”²⁹

²⁴ Heim, *Salvations*, 103.

²⁵ Heim, *Salvations*, 103.

²⁶ Heim, *Salvations*, 105.

²⁷ Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” in D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 4.

²⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse,” *Modern Theology* 9, no. 1 (1993): 1.

²⁹ Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions,” 2.

William Placher, also a critic of the intolerance of those who espouse tolerance, makes the point that a “*really* ‘open’ society might, one would have thought, be willing to try to learn even more from more ‘closed-minded’ neighbors—indeed, that would be one of the marks of its openness.”³⁰ On this basis “exclusivists” or “particularists” are excluded from the pluralists’ party. Their views are ineligible, because they will not conform to what pluralistic theologians say is the right way to think. Placher goes on to point out that those who

argue for openness, equality and tolerance . . . [ultimately espouse] a kind of *intolerance*, for anyone who defends the authority of tradition or questions the central values of the Enlightenment gets dismissed as primitive or backward or, in any event, not a legitimate candidate to join in authentic conversation. . . . [Such] contemporary philosophers of religion claim to want to foster a universal religious dialogue, but it turns out that evangelical Christians, Hasidic Jews, traditional Muslims, and so on are not really eligible to join that dialogue, because they will be unwilling to accept the proposed rules of the game, rules that seem to emerge from a modern, Western, academic tradition.³¹

Therefore it is imperative that we not reduce the differences in religions. As Gerald McDermott points out, “They face different directions, ask different questions and look for different kinds of religious fulfillments.”³² These differences can only be understood from the particularity of our own faith tradition. Mark Heim writes:

The faith that makes me different from others is the primary instrument I have for appreciating their differences. The extent to which I know my religious convictions and experience condition my approach to virtually every question is the same extent to which I can recognize the depth of an alternative. I have no resource so crucial for grasping the encompassing nature of a neighbor’s faith as the encompassing nature of my own. . . . The particularity of my own tradition prepares me to grasp the meaning of specificity

³⁰ William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, first edition (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 64.

³¹ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 146.

³² Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 91.

in another. Though I may learn much that is entirely new to me, I have nothing to learn it *with* save what has come to me through my own religious life.³³

III

How then should we approach the issue of salvation in the light of pluralism? As we have already pointed out, the “lowest common denominator” approach is not only inadequate, but can actually be disrespectful of the differences. One alternative to this is the radical proposal by Mark Heim that seeks not only to take into account the differences, but also to incorporate them. In his work *Salvations* he lays out the hypothesis that different religions might have different religious “salvations” but that these different ends are all equally valid. He suggests the possibility “that there are in fact various realities in the noumenal realm which are religiously significant and which ground diverse religious fulfillments (for instance, both some form of personal deity and a condition similar to that described as nirvana). . . . We do not require a claim to know or postulate the true reality beyond every religious ultimate.”³⁴ At first blush this seems like fanciful speculation, with an almost childish desire for multiple “happily ever after” endings for all. Yet Heim makes a strong case for it on philosophical grounds, using Nicholas Rescher’s “orientational pluralism” to resolve the dilemma of how to reconcile the “foundational commitments to truth with an enduring condition of pluralism on all major questions.”³⁵ In so doing, he elegantly improves upon John Hick’s “pluralistic hypothesis.” In his Gifford Lectures, Hick had put forward the proposal that there was an “infinite Real” and that this transcendent reality is “in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal concepts, is differently conceived, experienced and responded to from within the different cultural ways of being human.”³⁶ Heim points out that if, as Hick suggests, we are to give “a high priority to the belief that religious fulfillment is equally available to all,” then his own proposal meets this criteria, but is even “much more consistent

³³ Heim, *Salvations*, 1.

³⁴ Heim, *Salvations*, 146.

³⁵ Heim, *Salvations*, 133.

³⁶ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, second edition (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

with Hick's stress on all experience as 'experiencing-as' than his own hypothesis."³⁷ He writes:

We are only asking whether there are conceivable metaphysical conditions under which the religions could be giving accounts of human religious ends which are both truthful in their particularistic elements and also substantially different from each other. If we hypothesize that some such conditions do exist, then the possibility would exist in principle to acknowledge in the various traditions not merely some abstracted common object or attitude, but the concrete availability of some or all of the specific religious fulfillments they affirm: ineffable reals like enlightenment or communion with God. These are actual human possibilities.³⁸

This proposal certainly makes ample room for other faiths at the table. Without a doubt, it takes into account the differences of the various religions, while at the same time respecting and valuing them. It also provides a way in which we can acknowledge that God wants to save all, and not just some (2 Peter 3:9). The only problem with this hypothesis is what do we do with Jesus Christ? Newbigin, as a missionary, theologian, and one who worked in the pluralistic context of India, had sympathy with those who sought to find a way of salvation for all; however, he also had deep misgivings about such a project on the basis of his Christology: "The revelation of God's saving love and power in Jesus entitles and requires me to believe that God purposes the salvation of all men, but it does not entitle me to believe that this purpose is to be accomplished in any way that ignores or bypasses the historic event by which it was in fact revealed and effected."³⁹ The question that Jesus put before his disciples is the one that remains with us now: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

This concern with who Jesus is drives the way in which Karl Barth views religion. He has often been cast as an antagonist by pluralist theologians, because of what he wrote in the *Church Dogmatics*, and especially in paragraph 17, "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion."⁴⁰ In this paragraph, which is part of his writing on the

³⁷ Heim, *Salvations*, 147.

³⁸ Heim, *Salvations*, 146.

³⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 175.

⁴⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–1975), 1/2, 280–325. The mistrans-

doctrine of the Word of God, Barth turns his attention to the issue of religion in the light of God's revelation. He has often been misunderstood among theorists of religion because of this section. Barth's thesis in this paragraph lays out his definition of religion as "man's attempts to justify and to sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God."⁴¹ The recurring pattern of his dialectical "yes" and "no" is crucial to understanding his argument. In essence he believes that (1) Christians, because of revelation, must say "no" to human religion and yet (2) for the same reason of revelation maintain a qualified "yes" to religion.⁴²

Within the context of the larger "Doctrine of the Word of God," Barth sets out his question of religion in the light of revelation in which its reality and possibility are both found "in God, and only God."⁴³ Yet revelation encounters the human creature, and this event "has at least the form of human competence, experience and activity."⁴⁴ This is largely because for the most part, human beings have an awareness of "the spirit and of spirits and their operation."⁴⁵ It is into this reality that God's revelation enters. "The revelation of God is actually the presence of God and therefore the hiddenness of God in the world of human religion."⁴⁶ As such, Barth points out that revelation must assume a form in this human world and this is why "Christianity" is necessarily a religion. However, while there is the reality of human religion (of which Christianity is "singular but certainly not unique"), there is a problem.⁴⁷ His concern is not so much with the presence of religion, but rather with what the church in its theology has made of it. In Barth's opinion, this is where "modern Protestantism" has gone wrong: "What it has discerned and declared is not the religion

lation of the German word *aufhebung* as "abolition" in the English version of the *Church Dogmatics* is problematic. Garret Green believes that "this single prominent mistranslation has played a crucial role in encouraging the caricature of Barth's theology that has for so long distorted its reception in the English-speaking world." His retranslation of this paragraph uses the word "sublimation" to try to capture the Hegelian dialectic use of *aufheben* in German. Garrett Green, "Introduction: Barth as Theorist of Religion," in Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 5–6.

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 280.

⁴² Green, "Introduction," in Barth, *On Religion*, 11.

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 280.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 280.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 281.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 282.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 281.

of revelation but the revelation of religion.”⁴⁸ What Barth is essentially against is “religionism” and not “religion” itself.⁴⁹ It is mistaking the subject for the object. This apparently “free, theological inquiry into the truth” succumbs and falls “prey to the absolutism with which the man of that period made himself the centre and measure and goal of all things.”⁵⁰ This is the very critique that was made earlier in this essay about pluralist theologians. For Barth the crucial thing is the relationship between revelation and religion. It is the order that matters! “Revelation is God’s sovereign action upon man or it is not revelation.”⁵¹ Having dealt with the inevitability of religion, he sets out the antithesis to show the inadequacy of it in the light of revelation. He says, “Religion is unbelief.”⁵² Yet, amazingly, he points out that this is “not . . . a negative value-judgment.”⁵³ Against all instincts, he cautions that one should avoid translating “the divine judgment that religion is unbelief into human terms, into the form of definite devaluations and negations.”⁵⁴ In other words, this is not a triumphant statement about Christianity’s supremacy over other religions. He clearly considers Christianity as culpable as any other religion of this “faithlessness.” Once again it must be remembered that the context in which he is speaking is in relation to revelation, which is firstly “God’s self-offering and self-manifestation.”⁵⁵ It is the judgment of religion and the religious person. “In religion man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute.”⁵⁶ To back this up, Barth quotes Calvin, who says, “*Hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*” (“Man’s perpetual genius, so to speak, is to be a factory of idols”).⁵⁷ Secondly, revelation “is the act by which in grace He reconciles man to Himself by grace.”⁵⁸ He argues that even apart from a theological point of view, “Religion is always self-contradictory

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 284.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 291.

⁵⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 293.

⁵¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 295.

⁵² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 299.

⁵³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 300.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 300.

⁵⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 301.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 303.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 302. This is Green’s translation of the Latin, in Barth, *On Religion*, 58.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 307.

and impossible.”⁵⁹ It may attempt to overcome idolatry and self-righteousness, but it always fails. At the heart, it is driven by an internal need to find an external satisfaction. However, it cannot be anything other than “a reflection of what man is and has.”⁶⁰ (It would seem that Feuerbach was right all along!) Barth concludes that “the real crisis of religion can only break in from outside the magic circle of religion and its place of origin, i.e., from outside man.”⁶¹ It can only be overcome by God’s revelation breaking in. What Barth is saying may become clearer if we were to revisit the parable that was raised earlier concerning the blind men and the elephant. What if the sighted king in the parable is not another human being but God? If this were the case, then it stands to reason that those who are blind have to rely on the revelation of the One who sees all.

Barth’s insistence on the need for divine revelation is ultimately due to his understanding of the human condition. The fall that is spoken of in the Genesis account leads us to recognize that what led humans astray was their desire to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5). This is the root of the human condition—it is what cuts us off from God. The Christian understanding is that it would take a divinely conceived rescue plan to pull us out of this state of being a perpetual idol factory. However, almost all attempts to relativize religions ignore the problem of sin; this is what Barth was trying to address in calling religion “unbelief.” The common misperception that “all religions basically teach the same thing” stems from this root issue. Gerald McDermott points out: “There may be lines of continuity between a non-Christian religion whose method of religious advancement is human effort and a particular construal of Christianity in which salvation is earned by human striving, but this is a version of Christianity that Christ repudiated.”⁶² It is in this way that all religions, including Christianity, are ultimately faithless—they are attempts to justify ourselves, to build our own towers to reach God. So how can we find our way to God? Philip’s request for a revelation of God on the night before the crucifixion reveals the answer. Jesus himself is the revelation of God (John 14:8–9). The witness of Scripture is that Jesus is the only way to God.⁶³ Does this

⁵⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 314.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 316.

⁶¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 324.

⁶² McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, 91.

⁶³ Examples of this can be found in John 3:16–21, John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:12, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 1 Timothy 2:5, and 1 John 5:12.

preclude people of other faiths from being saved? That is a question that is not definitively answered and there are hints in the Bible that we will be surprised at the results in the end.⁶⁴ It is not something we can know and it is ultimately the Righteous Judge who will determine who is in and who is out.

IV

So the question that still remains is how such an exclusivistic conception of salvation can possibly open the door for dialogue and cooperation with those of other faiths. The key is once again found in the witness of Scripture: “[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9–10). The salvation that is revealed here is one that goes beyond an individualistic concern for eternal life. In other words, it is more than cosmic fire insurance—indeed, it is much, much more than that. It is a plan to reconcile all things in the end. This is the eschatological vision. Newbigin has rightly identified our preoccupation with the question “How can anyone be saved?” as a symptom of our self-absorption. It is a derivative of our real question, “How can I be saved?” which has its focus on the individual, reflecting the privatization of the divine work of grace, making it something that is merely for the assurance of our “longing for ultimate happiness.”⁶⁵ This longing is certainly something God-given, in that as Augustine has pointed out, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. Yet this longing for happiness is perverted by our inherent selfishness such that we crave the good things in creation like addicts while ignoring the Creator who alone can satisfy it. The gospel, the good news of salvation, is the story of how an awesome God took it upon himself to descend to us in our squalor, so as to give of himself and to take upon himself our burden of guilt and shame on the cross, thereby releasing us from the prison of our self-centered obsession with our own happiness, to focus instead on God and his glory. It is the account of the amazing grace of God, and

⁶⁴ For instance, Jesus himself said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (John 10:16), which seems to leave room for the unknown.

⁶⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

when we grasp it, it can transform our whole outlook toward others. Newbigin explains:

The Christian life, lived in the magnetic field between the two poles of the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin in which I share, has a corresponding synthesis of a godly confidence and a godly fear. The fear is lest I should put my trust in anything other than God's grace in Jesus Christ; the confidence is in the infinite abundance of his grace to me and to every one of his creatures.⁶⁶

Newbigin lists the practical working out of this understanding as threefold. First, it will cause us to be open to expect and look for "the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord."⁶⁷ Rather than this being done from an arrogant perch, it would come from a place of humility as one who is constantly aware of one's own sinfulness, one who is also totally dependent upon the grace of God. Second, Christians who believe this will be enthusiastic in their cooperation with people of other faith traditions, especially in projects that line up with the Christian understanding of God's purpose in the world.⁶⁸ Third, this "shared commitment to the business to the world . . . [provides] the context for true dialogue . . . [since] real dialogue is about real issues."⁶⁹ Interfaith encounters will cease being contrived and programmatic sessions which generate a lot of papers but little understanding, moving beyond the hallowed ivy-covered walls of academia, into the marketplace and social spaces. This is the compelling vision of the gospel. As Newbigin declares, "The Christian gospel is the Good News that a center has been provided around which it is possible for human beings to become one, because their sins against one another are forgiven and their conflicting wills and desires are cleansed of their egotism and directed toward their true goal."⁷⁰ This sounds like heaven to me!

⁶⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178.

⁶⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 180.

⁶⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 181.

⁶⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 181.

⁷⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, "Religion for the Marketplace," in D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* 139.

