Congenial Pluralism: Why It Does Not Work

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Introduction

In the dominant paradigm for understanding the relationship of religions to each other, there are three options:[1] exclusivism—the idea that one religion is true whereas all others are false, inclusivism—the doctrine that all religions are true because they are all ultimately all expressions of the one true religion, and pluralism—the belief that all religions are true in their own right. As we shall see below, this tripartite division is subject to critique in two directions: whether it actually corresponds to reality in its broad outline and whether it needs more refinement in its subdivisions in order to be fair. I would like to propose that pluralism really comes in two forms, the aggressive and the congenial. Congenial pluralism, as I will describe it, in important ways seeks to overcome the manifest problems of aggressive pluralism. Nevertheless, I intend to show that the congenial form, like the aggressive one, still suffers from serious defects.[2]

Aggressive Pluralism: Inclusivism Not So Thinly Disguised

Let me give a brief description of what I call "aggressive pluralism." In essence, this is a view that superficially claims that all religions have equal validity in their own right. However, there is a hitch to this apparently generous interpretation because religions have to earn the right to their validity. They have to abdicate the privilege of having their actual beliefs and practices taken at face value in favor of a higher order of interpretation by participation in which they actually derive their truth. In other words, they are true only insofar as they actually manifest a specific theoretical scheme that supposedly validates all religions. And,

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[1] The innovation of these three categories is widely attributed to Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982).

[2] This paper continues some of the thoughts in my book, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). What I am calling "congenial" pluralism in this paper, I called "bashful" in that book.

unsurprisingly, among leading advocates of this view this scheme has been some concept that has been devised by Western scholarship. The adherents of the religions themselves would presumably be totally shocked at the idea that this scheme is what they really believe; one could not plausibly imagine that they would want to embrace the scheme that some Western scholars have conspired to impose on them.

The two most celebrated defenders of this form of pluralism in the twentieth century may have been John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Hick contends that all (post-axial age) religions have the objective of putting their adherents in contact with "the Real" and thus transform people from being self-centered to Reality-centered. Even though it would appear that different religions maintain mutually exclusive beliefs, in truth, we need to look past those conceptual and verbal differences in order to recognize that beyond all the concepts and words there lurks the Real. Evangelical Christians have rightly focused their criticisms of Hick on the fact that, despite his claim that all religions are true, he *ipso facto* rules out any religion that makes exclusive truth claims unless it first of all abandons those claims and accommodates itself to his scheme. But, perhaps even more importantly, a religion that professes a little more open-mindedness, say Vedantic Hinduism, would be just as much in trouble because according to Hick nobody actually believes what they think they believe. They all believe what Hick believes; they just don't know it.[3]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, though getting at the matter from a slightly different vantage point, is just as imperialistic in his revision of other religions in order to absorb them into his supposedly pluralistic interpretation. Again there are profuse declarations of an all-embracing acceptance. The right hand of pluralistic fellowship is extended to everyone; no one should be compelled to submit to the truth dictates of any other religion. Smith avows, "No observer's statement about a group of persons is valid that cannot be appropriated by those persons."[4] What statement could express a pluralistic attitude better than such a slogan!

Nevertheless, this is all smoke and mirrors. Smith does not actually apply this statement to the outward forms and beliefs of a religion. He applies it only to the underlying "faith" that religious human beings supposedly manifest. When a Muslim declares that the Qur'an is the ultimate revelation from God, when a Hindu finds *darshan* in *puja* to Shiva, or when a Christian claims that he is saved by faith in Christ, none

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[3] John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenges of Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 54-66.

[4] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Toward a World Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 97.

of those confessions are literally true. In fact, Smith considers it a
grievous fault to claim truth for your specific religion. The real meaning
behind the particular historic or dogmatic expressions of a religion is that
of a generic, existential "faith," stripped of all tangible reality. Thus, for
Smith just as much as for Hick, a pluralistic acceptance of all religions in
fact demands that the religions must first give up their individual
expressions of truth and meaning and adopt a Western scholar's concept
that they, themselves, would never recognize as being a part of their
religion.

So we see that aggressive pluralism is really only a higher-order
inclusivism. Just as what we have usually come to call an inclusivist
position absorbs all other religions into one specific religion's beliefs,[5] so
these so-called pluralistic positions actually do the same thing. They
frog-march all religions into their single fortified camp and proceed to
strip them of their all their specific claims.[6] Some pluralism.

A Bashful Congenial Pluralism—William Alston

What I am calling "congenial pluralism" actually seems to have more
coherence at first glance. I am calling it congenial because, unlike its
more aggressive cousin, it does not try to usurp other religions into one
overarching scheme and seeks to make statements that can be accepted
by members of all religions. Still, when we are done looking at two
examples we will see that serious problems still persist.

One advocate of "congenial pluralism" is William P. Alston,[7] who
presents us with a "bashful" pluralism insofar as it retreats behind an

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[5] Perhaps the most celebrated version being Karl Rahner's idea of the "anonymous
Christian." Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, 16 vols. (Einsiedeln: Denziger, 1965),
5:183-221.

[6] For example, Philip L. Quinn, "Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on
Religious Diversity" in Quinn and Meeker, *Philosophical Challenge*, 234. Quinn makes
the following observation: "Of course this strategy will not yield interpretations of
religion that would be acceptable to most current members of the great religious
traditions. But those traditions have undergone development in the past, and no doubt
they will continue to change in the future. Hence it is worth asking whether the belief
systems of the great religious traditions ought to be altered to bring them into conformity
with the truth of the matter as it is understood by some refined pluralistic hypothesis.
Would it be rational for members of such a tradition to endeavor to changes its belief
system in the direction of such conformity?" And again: "Hence I think it would be
rational for a knowledgeable and reflective Christian to revise [Christian mystical
practice] from within in ways that are designed to bring it into line with a Kantian
understanding of Christian belief of the sort expressed by some refined pluralistic
hypothesis and to try to get [Christian mystical practice] thus revised socially
established." Ibid., 242.

[7] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*
(Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 255-85; and "Religious Diversity
and Perceptual Knowledge of God," in *Philosophical Challenge*, 193-207.

exclusivist position when pushed too far. His argument, in brief, runs like this: Both Christians, who are basing their beliefs on a mystical experience of God, and adherents of different religions, who are basing their beliefs on some other experience, are justified in holding those beliefs. Even though there is no way of adjudicating between the different belief systems since they are each coherent and productive, Christians are entitled to maintain the exclusive truth of their beliefs. However, as things stand, persons of another religion are also entitled to the truth of their beliefs since their system is coherent and productive as well.

This is a position that theoretically could earn plaudits from everyone. It respects the integrity of each religious adherent's experience; it allows the Christian to claim exclusive truth for his beliefs; and it grants the same courtesy to all other religious believers who wish to apply for it.[8] Thus, Alston, holding firmly to the truth of Christianity, will also make room for the hypothetical truth of other belief systems by the lights of his analysis.[9]

Unfortunately, the opposite is true, and Alston leaves us with a pluralism that leaves everyone dissatisfied. A pluralist or someone holding to another religion cannot be comfortable with the fact that Alston has just granted the Christian the right to consider his religion to be exclusively true. Unfortunately, the Christian cannot be comfortable either because Alston has just informed him that, even though he can consider his beliefs to be exclusively true, he may have to share that honor with some other religion as well. It would seem that the two concepts of exclusivism and pluralism are themselves mutually exclusive and cannot be accommodated to each other, not even on a hypothetical basis. Just as I cannot even hypothetically consider a square circle, I cannot hypothetically consider two religions being exclusively true.

A Generous Congenial Pluralism—S. Mark Heim

Much interest has been generated of late by the ingenious proposals put forth by S. Mark Heim. Heim has taken a number of ideas that have been floating around in the conversation on pluralism and has brought them together in an attempt to devise a truly pluralistic theory. His proposal comes under the heading of "congenial," not because it is not thoroughly

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[8]Alston, "Religious Diversity," in *Philosophical Challenge*, 204.

[9]As numerous commentators have recognized, Alston is somewhat ambivalent on this point. Since he is a philosopher who has contributed widely to the greater acceptance of Christianity in the philosophical world and has not been ashamed to let his philosophy be recognizably Christian, I want to emphasize that Alston leaves us here with an unfilled epistemological hole and not an attempt to short-sheet Christian beliefs in the way in which Hick does. Nevertheless, the hole *is* significant.

and assertively pluralistic, but because Heim deliberately avoids making the kinds of dogmatic statements that characterize Hick's and Smith's positions.

In fact, Heim's own critique of Hick and Smith is thorough.[10] Because he wants to advocate a truly pluralistic position, he shows extensively how much the so-called leading advocates of pluralism have actually compromised their pluralistic avowals. He quotes with approval Raimundo Pannikar's contention that "a pluralistic system is a contradiction in terms."[11] Whenever someone tries to justify pluralism with an over-arching scheme of their devising, their pluralism is not so pluralistic any longer. Heim asserts,

> Pluralistic theologies require conversion of all faiths not to any form of Christianity, but to the cultural structures of plausibility against which modern Western Christianity has been defined. The fullness of religions truth . . . is in fact only available to those sufficiently drawn into the modernized international economic and political system to have access to the revelatory conditions of pluralism and their proper interpretation.[12]

Instead, Heim proposes that in order to have a true pluralism, it is necessary to accept the truth claims of all religions on their own terms. If I say that Hinduism is right in its belief that moksha brings about the release of a soul from samsara (reincarnation), but do so only because this belief lines up with some other belief foreign to Hinduism, then I am not really accepting the correctness of the Hindu belief at all. I am simply making the Hindu state my own beliefs in different terms. In a delightful bit of imagery, Heim likens such attempts to "a face photographed inside a boardwalk cutout."[13] In order to be authentically pluralistic I have to say that Hinduism is right in its belief that moksha brings about the release of a soul from samsara. Period. To quote Heim,

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[10] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 13-126. Heim has developed his thesis further in *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001). Similar approaches appear in Joseph DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992) and Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Though he apparently is not aware of his writings, Dupuis in significant ways echoes the earlier work by Richard Viladesau, *Answering for Faith: Christ and the Human Search for Salvation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

[11] Raimundo Pannikar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness" in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 110.

[12] Heim, *Salvations*, 103-04.

[13] Ibid., 110.

I suggest that Christians can consistently recognize that some traditions encompass religious ends which are real states of human transformation, distinct from that Christians seek. There are paths in varying religious traditions which if consistently followed prove effective in bringing adherents to alternative fulfillments. The crucial question among the faith is *not* "Which one saves?" but "What counts as salvation?"[14]

Similarly then, the genuinely pluralistic person must affirm that the Pure Land Buddhist will actually be admitted to the Western Paradise of Amida when he dies, the Theravada Buddhist will attain nirvana, and the Christian will go to heaven. These expressions are not just code words for one and the same reality, a code that the contemporary scholar with his superior training has finally learned to break. Hindus, Buddhists of differing schools, or Christians do not, unbeknownst to them, all partake of the same reality. There are different realities in which each of these people participates, and there is no *a priori* way of establishing that one of them is dominant to the others.

Heim is calling for a genuine "pluralism of ends." He claims that "the key to such a hypothesis is the willingness to consider more than one realizable religious aim."[15] Previous pluralisms, as we have shown, have essentially been not-so-thinly disguised forms of inclusivism, and at the heart of inclusivism is the notion that all religions, despite their clearly distinct and frequently mutually exclusive methods of attaining salvation, actually lead to the same goal. To quote some celebrity spokespersons for this cause, Mahatma Gandhi declared,

> Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Where is the cause for quarreling?[16]

And his contemporary replicant, the Dalai Lama, declares,

> I believe all religions pursue the same goals, that [sic] of cultivating human goodness and bringing happiness to all human beings. Though the means may appear different, the ends are the same.[17]

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[14] Ibid., 160. (Italics his).

[15] Ibid., 130.

[16] M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 36; quoted in Heim, *Salvations*, 130.

[17] Excerpt from Tenzen Gyatso, "Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech." URL: http://magna.com.au/~prfbrown/peace_dl.html. But note that in less public circumstances, the Dalai Lama has a very different message: "Liberation in which 'a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality' is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of moksha or nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practices."

But Heim shows that this kind of pluralism is disingenuous because it does not truly allow for a religion to be appraised within its own context. Instead, he calls for not just a plurality of methods towards attaining salvation, but a plurality of salvations as well. An honest appraisal of other religions demonstrates that Christians and Hindus and Muslims and anyone else, do not mean the same thing when they talk about whatever corresponds to "salvation" in their systems. Rather than finding some artificial common denominator, we should recognize that each of these goals as well as the paths that are supposed to lead to them have integrity in their own right.

Philosophically, Heim bases his contention on a position devised by Nicholas Rescher, dubbed "orientational pluralism."[18] This concept combines two crucial insights: On the one hand, every person considers their beliefs as true or at least superior to those that differ from them. This would appear to be an undeniable fact, and we should not try to impute an inclusive view on people when they so obviously do not hold it. "I am right, and if you disagree with me, then you are wrong." What could be more basic to human belief structures? But on the other hand, as a philosopher, I recognize that my I may be living on the edge in terms of which beliefs I can actually justify with full confidence. Clearly, I have to reckon with my finitude and concede that another person may have just as valid a set of reasons for his beliefs as I have for mine. So, for the time being, I may have to concede that the other person is just as entitled to his beliefs as I am to mine. Nevertheless, (on a third hand, if you will), if I try to explain how it is that another person can hold to views that differ from mine, I will try to do so from the vantage point of my system. That is to say, I invoke my system to show why the other person is wrong. "In the end," Heim concedes, "we are all inclusivists."[19]

But it is what happens in the meantime that is of interest here. To put it simply, the Christian has no choice but to live in his own world. He must speak from his vantage point, in the light of which his beliefs are right and those of others are false. However, recognizing his epistemological limitations, the Christian also allows for the fact that some other believer, a Hindu, say, lives within his own world and that the Hindu must judge the Christian's beliefs by the lights of his Hinduism. Furthermore, there is no way to bridge the gap between the two without introducing artificial external categories. And thus, the Christian, without compromising reality as he knows it, will also

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"The Bodhgaya Interviews" in Paul Griffiths, ed. *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 160.

[18] Nicholas Rescher, *The Strife of Systems* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1985).

[19] Heim, *Salvations*, 138.

acknowledge the validity of reality as the Hindu knows it. Heim avers that,

> the hypothesis of multiple religious ends "relativizes" each faith path in a rather different way. It affirms that more than one may be truthful in their account of themselves, and that these truths are distinct. That is, it relativizes the religions precisely by actual relation to each other.[20]

This is a pluralism that, at least on the surface, makes sense. It truly allows the Hindu to be Hindu and the Christian to be Christian, and so on with any adherent of any religion. To be sure, we have to recognize an unavoidable tension in this approach insofar as the Christian must at the same time recognize the validity of others' beliefs while holding firmly to his own. But Heim considers this tension not a detriment but a virtue because it emphasizes the nature of faith. "The alternative perspective I am suggesting would acknowledge frankly the venturesome dimension of religious faiths."[21]

Finally Heim, now speaking from within his own system as a Christian, believes that his view is compatible with Christian theology because it grows out of the doctrine of the Trinity. He says,

> The possibility of a more thoroughgoing diversity in the future of humanity is in some measure authorized by the trinitarian vision of God and a notion of divine plenitude.[22]

Heim believes that a correct understanding of the Trinity will not only permit the pluralism he seeks to endorse, it will actually mandate it.

The Trinity, Heim tells us, exemplifies the epitome of "communion-in-personal-difference."[23] In fact, it is the difference that makes the communion possible, and this applies to the communion between the three persons of the Trinity as well as to the relationship between God and human beings.

> Because God's own nature is a communion-nature (Trinity) and human nature is a reflection of this (we are persons only in relation) the two can meet at a point of extraordinary similarity. In the divine-human communion that is salvation, the *difference* between humanity and God is not the primary obstacle to religious fulfillment, but a necessary

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[20] Ibid., 146.
[21] Ibid., 125.
[22] Ibid., 163.
[23] Heim, *Depth*, 126.

prerequisite to the deepest relation with God, one that recapitulates God's own mode of relation.[24]

Thus, "in claiming communion with the triune God as their religious end, Christians make Trinity central to their understanding of religious diversity."[25] The Trinity teaches us that diversity is what makes communion possible.

Now, both for the sake of guarding against a purely abstract understanding of the Trinity and of embracing the reality that actually does make such a communion-in-identity possible, Heim emphasizes that he is referring to the Trinity as expounded in Christian theology. He insists that he is "speaking of the reality of God as presented in the doctrine of the Christian church, which presupposes the incarnation of the Word as crucial revelation and act of God."[26] For Heim, the incarnation is a further aspect of the trinitarian doctrine that supports his scheme. The Trinity is not just a belief, but it is a fact of being. It is not just expressed in words and thoughts, but in reality.

Consequently, the Trinity as manifest through the incarnation becomes the template from which we can understand the relationships between religions. "The Trinity is Christianity's 'pluralistic theology.'"[27] By looking at the fact that the very nature of God exemplifies diversity and that this God became incarnate in Christ, we realize that it is impossible for us to draw lines as to what "fits" into our understanding of God and salvation.

> The Trinity teaches us that Jesus Christ cannot be an exhaustive or exclusive source for knowledge of God nor the exhaustive and exclusive act of God to save us.[28]

And thus, Heim concludes that the Christian's foundational beliefs are not only not opposed to a genuine pluralism, they do not even need to be accommodated to a genuine pluralism, because by themselves they demand a genuine pluralism.

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[24] Ibid., 126.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 130-31. Note his earlier dismissive comments on "cheap" (my word) trinitarian approaches. "By 'Trinity' I do not mean to refer to a generic and symbolic scheme of abstract threeness. With such a minimalist pattern, one can run merrily through the religions gathering 'trinities,' from the *Brahma-Shiva-Vishnu* triumvirate of Hinuism to the *trikay* or "three bodies' doctrine of Buddhism." Ibid., 130.

[27] Ibid., 133.

[28] Ibid., 134.

Responses

Heim's proposal is intelligent, sensitive, and—perhaps above all—rooted in some sound common sense. For anyone who has for years felt himself shouted down by Hick, Smith, and other aggressive pluralists, Heim infuses some much-needed fresh air into the discussion.[29] He attempts at one and the same time to allow each religious tradition all the integrity it asks for while clinging tightly to his own Christian convictions, as demonstrated in his Trinitarianism. Thus, I offer the following critical responses with the underlying assumption that Heim's conclusions represent the best effort to date at establishing a pluralistic theology.

1. As a steadfast exclusivist, I always ask myself when reading any writers advocating inclusivism or pluralism why we should even go in the direction of their views. Why not simply accept an exclusive view rather than go to the extreme lengths that many writers seem to pursue in order to promote their pluralistic schemes? Paradoxically, most of the time, despite the enormous amount of work that they have put into their systems, the answer to the question of why even establish such a system to begin with, tends to be extremely thin. As often as not, it is either *ad hominem*, impugning the integrity of those who are unwilling to get on their train,[30] or it simply comes down to an appeal to virtual self-evidence. Given the state of the religious world today, we just should abandon exclusivism for one of the other alternatives.[31] No further reason should be necessary.

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[29] Perhaps needless to say, these comments are made in response to the discussion outside of the evangelical circle. I am responding positively to what a non-evangelical is saying. It seems to me that an evangelical position forecloses the possibilities that Heim proposes *a priori*.

[30] Such as, on a personal level, Clark H. Pinnock's accusation of Millard Erickson for seeming to "want to ensure that there is as little Good News as possible." Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1992), 163. Or, on a wider level, John Hick believes that there is a "realization that Christian absolutism, in collaboration with acquisitive and violent human nature, has done much to poison the relationships between the Christian minority and the non-Christian majority of the world's population by sanctifying exploitation and oppression on a gigantic scale." "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in Hick and Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 17.

[31] This seems to me to be the underlying assumption of Jacques Dupuis in *Toward a Christian Theology of Pluralism.* He says things like "The 1970's marked the beginning of a new quest, arising worldwide from the situation created by the ever-increasing interaction between people of different religious faiths" (Ibid., 3), and he argues again and again that we must respect the integrity of other religions and not write them off as false, but he never really provides a cogent answer of how a situation of plurality necessitates a pluralistic theology. He takes one particular writer to task for espousing exclusivism within Catholic theology by stating that he manifests a "hardened position" in which he "lacks the openness and sympathy toward the other religious traditions which alone make it possible to recognize in them the action of God and the presence of God's

When it comes to writers like Heim who are genuinely attempting to do justice to the plurality of the world of religions, this question becomes particularly fascinating. Heim, for one, recognizes that an individual believer will normally see his or her religion in exclusivist terms. He recognizes that "it would seem that religious traditions are simply, descriptively exclusivist."[32] That being the case, there ought to be powerfully compelling reasons to abandon an *a priori* exclusivism in favor of even as benign a pluralism as he is advocating.

Just to clarify this question a little more, I am not asking here whether his solution is plausible or biblical or whether there are good reasons to accept his solution over all others. The question is whether there even is a problem crying out for a solution. Why must we even look beyond the surface exclusivism of religious traditions to find a further scheme that violates this basic notion?

As it turns out, Heim's answer to this fundamental question is not any more helpful than any others. He does a solid job of showing that Hick, Smith, and others are not as pluralistic as they claim, and that his theory is definitely more pluralistic than theirs, but the question of why be pluralistic to begin with does not get much of an answer. It seems to come down primarily to the idea that exclusivism in its traditional form leads to strife and physical violence,[33] and that we need a truly pluralistic point of view to guide us in "the concern to remove Christian motives for oppression or persecution, the desire to foster nonviolence, mutual respect, and active cooperation among the faiths."[34] The harmful effects of exclusivism are assumed, and the need for greater pluralism essentially taken for granted. Heim gives himself credit that,

> the pluralistic hypothesis I have proposed rules out as much as Hick's does any dogmatic assertion on the part of one tradition that all others are simply wrong.[35]

In other words, the exclusion of exclusivism is presented as a virtue, not as the conclusion of an argument. Now, one should not necessarily chalk this up as a flaw in Heim's contribution; he deliberately directs himself

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spirit" (Ibid., 13), but even though Dupuis correctly observes that this openness and sympathy is permitted by the official teaching of the church, he does not show that, therefore, one *must* take it. Perhaps Dupuis' most telling criticism is found in his statement: "Such an attitude betrays on the part of a Catholic theologian a striking affinity to a rigid 'evangelical' standpoint" (Ibid.). The writing referred to is H. van Straelen, *L'eglise et les religions non chrétiennes au seuil du XXIe siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994).

[32] Heim, *Salvations*, 5.
[33] Ibid., 88-89.
[34] Ibid., 126.
[35] Ibid., 156.

to an audience that already assumes the need for a pluralistic theology, and he does not owe me an accounting of why I should join him in his position. Nevertheless, if I do not share his starting point, I do not get much help towards becoming motivated to walk along the road he proposes.

2. The fact of the matter is that Heim, all of his protests notwithstanding, cannot allow the Christian (or any other) exclusivist to maintain his beliefs. I am not just making the indisputable observation here that a Christian exclusivist and Heim cannot both be right in their theologies. If I do not share his pluralism of ends, I am clearly not agreeing with him. But even more importantly, my point is that, even if Heim is right, the Christian still has to modify his beliefs in order to fit them into his scheme. He himself states that his proposal "requires a significant revision of traditional Christian outlooks."[36] Specifically, he sees himself as advancing Christian theology from its first stage of simply dividing the world into saved and lost, which was followed by a second stage of allowing for diversity among the saved (various inclusivist views), into a third stage that is exemplified by his pluralism. But then he is not really simply taking Christianity as it is given, he is asking Christianity to change in response to his proposal. The "pluralism of ends" requires that at least one "end," namely the Christian one, rethink itself.

3. Even though Heim rightly exposes the underlying philosophical scheme that the aggressive pluralists attempt to make mandatory, he himself brings a number of categories to the task, at least some of which are not beyond controversy. Specifically, in order to buy into Heim's proposal, one needs to subscribe to the following ideas:[37] (a) There is at least one metaphysical reality constituting a religious end. (b) The achievement of (a) religious end(s) is a human possibility. (c) Various different religious traditions have their own validity. (d) Truth claims arising out of different religious traditions can only be appraised relative to each other (viz. not absolutely). (e) Different religions provide different fulfillments. Obviously, these statements are encompassed by the very nature of Heim's proposal, but that does not change the fact that they are also extrinsic to the religions themselves. To take just one example, Heim casts his discussion in terms of religious traditions providing "fulfillment."[38] But we need to ask ourselves whether as a universal category it is accurate to describe the aims of all religions as fulfillment. Does Christianity, for example, provide "fulfillment"? If it is not an accurate category, then what Heim is doing is essentially no

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[36] Ibid., 160.
[37] Ibid., 146-48.
[38] Ibid., 148.

different from Hick and Smith, viz. imposing an external philosophical concept on the religious manifold. To be sure, Heim does not make imperialistic claims as Hick or Smith do for what may qualify as a genuine religion, but he does ask his co-religionists to make these *a priori* concessions in order to qualify his pluralistic offer.

4. Heim himself acknowledges the fact that there is a glaring conceptual problem with his scheme, namely the logical exclusion of various religious beliefs towards each other. He asks,

> Does not my hypothesis involve too much affirmation, appearing to agree with systems whose accounts of the way things are cannot consistently be true?[39]

Thus, for example, if it is true that human beings have only one lifetime on the basis of which they will be judged, it cannot also be true that they have multiple lives into which they are reincarnated. Heim sees this problem and responds to it, but his answer reveals that, when you come right down to it, his proposal has really not solved anything at all. His response to the problem appears to move in two stages.

First of all, Heim asks us to distinguish between accepting the reality of various religious ends on the one hand, and the truth of the beliefs surrounding them on the other. Yes, after having roundly taken Hick and Smith to task for revising other religions in order to accommodate them to their schemes, specifically to judge what is and what is not of the essence for them, suddenly Heim makes a similar move.

> It is important to recognize that the hypothesis affirms the reality of different experiential states of religious fulfillment; it does not require that all of the elements a tradition associates with attainment of that state are also the case. . . . To regard the religious fulfillments as real does not entail accepting in their entirety both sides of these oppositions.[40]

But then what is left? How can a religious person conceivably make such a distinction? Their religion comes in a package; the beliefs and practices cannot be isolated from the attainment of the ends. Will Heim do it for them? If so, is Heim not now doing exactly what he saw as so problematic in Hick and Smith? He knows better, as he demonstrated throughout the book leading up to this point and again right afterwards. This passage leaves one baffled.

Second (and in an apparent paradox with the previous point), Heim counsels us to accept the reality of the conflicts and to see the issues as

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[39] Ibid., 154.
[40] Ibid.

of ultimate significance within each tradition. Hick said that we should realize that there are differences, but that we should disregard them. Heim states,

> I argue on the contrary that one's commitments about these matters and others are integrally constitutive of the distinct religious fulfillment that is realized, if any are. Further, at least some of the factual differences implied in the diversity of these commitments have a crucial bearing on how the various religious ends relate to each other.[41]

So, now Heim insists that such issues are vital, that as a believer of a particular religion I cannot help but embrace one of the options, and that consequently in my relationship to other religions I need to take account of them in "how these fulfillments are ultimately ordered."[42] This assertion is entirely consistent with the part of Heim's proposal that says that each believer must view other religions from their own perspective, which means if not as exclusively true then at least as superior. But the problem that Heim skirts is that we are not talking about beliefs that can be "ordered," or arranged as "superior" and "inferior." We are looking at mutually exclusive beliefs, only one of which can be true. They cannot just be significant; they are constitutive, and as such they and their contradictories cannot both be true.

And so we come to the conclusion that, regretfully, Heim has not really provided a conceptually viable scheme for understanding religious pluralism. I do not at this point wish to address his trinitarian theology because on the one hand, the ambivalence of grounding a true pluralism in an essentially Christian theology is too obvious to need pointing out, and also because on the other hand, given Heim's scheme, for him to take recourse to a model within his own religion is entirely appropriate. It is the entire scheme that is ambiguous. Does it really help to point out that there are many legitimate religious fulfillments while at the same time recognizing that any given religious tradition must see itself as uniquely true and standing mute on the question of how it is that logically contradictory beliefs can be incorporated into such a framework? Other than the benefits presumably accrued under the heading of values, such as tolerance, acceptance, respect, or non-violence, which can presumably be earned in some other way, Heim's proposal does not actually take us any further than the previous discussion. His congenial—or at lest courteous and respectful—pluralism is no more helpful than the aggressive versions were.

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[41] Ibid., 155.
[42] Ibid.

Heim has the right intuition when he realizes that religious traditions see themselves as exclusive and that it is impossible to jamb them together into one overarching scheme without doing violence to a religion's self-expression. He also observes correctly that religions do have different "ends" which cannot be translated into each other. And if the concern is that an exclusive belief system necessarily leads to violence and persecution, I believe it can be shown that no such correlation, let alone cause-and-effect relationship can be shown. Intolerance does not grow out of commitment to belief, but out of the fear of disbelief.

I have tried to show that there are two kinds of pluralism being advocated today, the aggressive kind defended by John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and the more congenial species promoted by William Alston and S. Mark Heim. Neither option, however, does justice to the reality of the world of religions.