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‘One Name Under Heaven’: Towards an Evangelical Response to Religious Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that today we live in a pluralist society. It is not just that society is plural in its variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as something to be approved and cherished. The New Testament proclaimed the message of salvation through Jesus and the exclusivity of that salvation. The result of these exclusivist claims was that the relationship between Christianity and other belief systems was at odds with each other. The majority of Evangelicals have sought to maintain this historic exclusivist approach of the Christian message. This article will examine some of the options from Christian scholars who favour a less rigorist position. It will then deal with what remain key sticking points for Evangelicals. Finally, it will suggest a New Testament approach that can help to shape our understanding of other religions. First, however, there is brief survey of some of the factors which have led to the popularisation of pluralism as a way to think about religious faith.

KEY WORDS Religion, pluralism, exclusivism, Evangelicals, salvation.

Lesslie Newbigin² points out in much of Europe and the Western world today religious pluralism is not merely a fact it is something to be celebrated. Kosuke Koyama comments ‘that no one can hold the truth in the palm of his or her hand is the basic orientation of sound religious pluralism.’ As he rightly points out ‘This challenges the conviction of “no other name” (Acts 4:12) which has guided Christian theology for centuries.’³

From earliest times Christians proclaimed that Jesus is both God and man.⁴ The consequence of this proclamation is that Jesus is both God’s ultimate revelation of himself in history and that it is exclusively through faith in him that salvation is to be found.⁵ Furthermore, this message of salvation through Jesus and the

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² Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

³ Kosuke Koyama. “A Theological Reflection on Religious Pluralism.” *Ecumenical Review*, 51 (2) (1999):160–171. 160.

⁴ e.g. John 1:1-3; Colossians 2:9.

⁵ Acts 4:12; 1Timothy 2:5.

exclusivity of that salvation was proclaimed from the outset in a culture where religious pluralism was both accepted and celebrated. In the New Testament we see that the result of these exclusivist claims was that the relationship between Christianity and other belief systems from the outset was one of conflict.⁶

This pattern of the message of salvation exclusively in Christ and conflict with other religious beliefs continued in the following centuries. There is no evidence that the early church sought to live with the belief that its message was compatible with other belief systems or that other belief systems were equally valid expressions of religious faith. At best, for writers like Justin Martyr, the truth found in other religions simply pointed to the one who Christians argued was ‘the truth.’ As a result Christians sought to convert all to be followers of Jesus Christ. In the ancient world no-one mistook the significance of the Christian proclamation that ‘Jesus is Lord.’ Furthermore, as Harold Netland has written, ‘Historically, exclusivism has been the dominant position of the Christian church.’⁷

This remained the case until the late twentieth century. The situation then changed, especially within the Western Church where, as Gavin D’Costa writes the situation is that ‘no major systematic theologian [now] holds a rigorist exclusivism.’⁸ It seems that for many theologians today exclusivism has given way to the pluralistic vision that is embraced in the wider society.

Despite this tendency towards pluralism in the wider Christian academy the majority of Evangelicals have sought to maintain the historic exclusivist approach of the Christian faith which raises a considerable obstacle for them. For, as Alister McGrath writes ‘the central issue is this: given that there are so many religions in the market-place, how can Christianity claim to be true?’⁹ Is rigorous exclusivism a sustainable position in the current pluralist climate?

This article will examine some of the options from Christian scholars who favour a less rigorist position. It will then deal with what remain key sticking points for Evangelicals. Finally, it will suggest a New Testament approach that can help to shape our understanding of other religions. First, however, there is brief survey

⁶ e.g. Acts 4:1-22; 19:23-41.

⁷ Harold Netland. *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

⁸ Gavin D’Costa. “Theology of Religions.” In *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* Second, edited by David Ford, 626-644. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), 629.

⁹ A. McGrath, *Religious Pluralism*. Accessed April 24th, 2020. [https:// www.bethinking.org/truth/religious-pluralism](https://www.bethinking.org/truth/religious-pluralism) n.d.

of some of the factors which have led to the popularisation of pluralism as a way to think about religious faith.

THE BACKGROUND TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

John Bowden has written:

For almost 1500 years the three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have lived together, for better or worse, in relationships ranging from mutual respect and toleration to persecution. Moreover, the world into which they came knew of yet other religions, even if the Abrahamic faiths often dismissed these in disparaging terms as idolatry or superstition, and more new religions have emerged, or have been discovered, during the course of their history. So there is a sense in which religious pluralism as a phenomenon has always been with us.¹⁰

As he goes on to point out what sets contemporary religious pluralism apart is the impact of the Enlightenment. This in turn gave rise to the narrative of modernity. Following the impact of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century people in a society once dominated by Christendom began to think about religion in different ways. A number of developments lay behind this.

The first development was the growth of the state. After the tumult of the ostensibly religious wars unleashed by the Reformation there was, by the end of the seventeenth century, a growing desire for peace amongst many educated European people. In this period as the influence of the state grew many leaders, as Juan Pablo Dominguez notes, ‘aspired to reform churches and beliefs so that they ceased to be an obstacle to political stability, social harmony, economic growth and intellectual development.’¹¹ One approach to this was to enforce religious unity. The experience of the post-Reformation period, however, had demonstrated that this simply did not work. The answer was seen to be, rather reluctantly in some cases, religious toleration.

In order to promote religious toleration many people supported ‘doctrinal minimalism.’ In other words, it was more important for Christians to unite around the tenets upon which they agreed rather than dividing over the areas of disagreement. For example, did it really matter how a person celebrated the Eucharist? Was it worth going to war over this? John Locke wrote, ‘Men will always differ on religious questions and rival parties will continue to quarrel and

¹⁰ John Bowden, “Religious Pluralism and the Heritage of the Enlightenment.” In *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, edited by Roger Boase, (2005), 13-20. Aldershot: Ashgate. 13.

¹¹ Juan Pablo Dominguez. 2017. “Introduction: Religious Toleration in the Age of the Enlightenment.” *History of European Ideas*, 43 (4) (2017), 273-287. 275.

wage war on each other unless the establishment of equal liberty for all provides a bond of mutual charity by which all may be brought together into one body.’¹²

Secondly, many people began to look back to the model of the Roman Empire for how society should function. In doing so they observed that in Rome religion did not divide people but it served a social function of bringing people together. Lee Ward cites the example of Rousseau in this regard noting that in his view the ‘civil religion of the pagan cults has the salutary effect of melding service to the state with worship of the gods, and thus “unites the divine cult with love of the laws.”’¹³ As a result, as Domínguez notes, the Enlightenment ‘aspired to reform churches and beliefs so that they ceased to be an obstacle to political stability, social harmony, economic growth and intellectual development.’¹⁴ Again this was an approach that required doctrinal minimalism. One result of this approach was that religion was viewed as less to do with what a person believed than how a person behaved. Consequently, the idea of the practice of virtue rather than the idea of godly living emerged. This idea of virtue was rooted in the belief that people are essentially good and desired to contribute to the public good. As Frederick Eden opined ‘the desire of bettering our condition...animates the world [and] gives birth to every social virtue.’¹⁵

Thirdly, whilst the Enlightenment was not intrinsically anti-religious there was a radical fringe of those who were either free-thinkers or atheists. Along with those who still embraced a form of Christianity there was amongst them a growing reliance upon ‘natural law.’ For Christian thinkers natural law was woven into the fabric of the creation by God. While the irreligious were not convinced by this many happily paid lip-service to the idea believing, perhaps rather cynically, that people were more likely to obey natural law if it came from God. As Dominguez notes ‘Voltaire even stated that the worst form of superstition was not as dangerous as atheism because most people would not follow moral and civic laws if they did not consider them to be divinely sanctioned.’¹⁶

Fourthly, as the West had more contact with other parts of the world so there was increased exposure to other religions. What tended to impress Westerners was less the religious views of others than the sophistication of their cultures. Many Westerners, even missionaries, came to have a new found respect of other

¹² Quoted in Dominguez 2017, 283.

¹³ Lee Ward. “Civil Religion, Civic Republicanism, and Enlightenment in Rousseau.” In *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, edited by Kellow Geoffrey C. and Leddy Neven, 246-68. (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press. 2016). 248.

¹⁴ Domínguez 2017, 275.

¹⁵ Quoted in Roy Porter. *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment*. (London: W.W. Norton, 2000).17.

¹⁶ Dominguez 2017, 280.

religions and cultures. This created a greater openness to other faiths. This exposure to the wider world also cast doubt on the biblical worldview. For example, how could the biblical chronology be reliable when Chinese civilization was found to be older than this? This new information led to ‘a flood of questions [that] become increasingly impossible to ward off as time goes on, because they have their foundation in the changes in the world which anyone can see.’¹⁷

Finally, by the end of the nineteenth century the trend towards modernism set in motion by the Enlightenment led to a new way of thinking about religion entirely. This new approach argued that religion could be best understood as a sociological phenomenon. While many theologians still believed the Christianity was the highest form of religion it was nonetheless increasingly believed that it was only one expression of universal religious consciousness. It should, therefore, be studied as such using the tools of the emerging disciplines of the social sciences. As one of the leading figures in this field, Ernst Troeltsch, put it:

The Christian religion is in every moment of its history a purely historical phenomenon, subject to all the limitations to which any individual historical phenomenon is exposed, just like the other religions...If one should wish to say “Christianity is a relative phenomenon”, there is no reason to object to this.¹⁸

These are not the only factors involved in the changing way that people began to think about religion and the place of Christianity among the religions of the world. They do offer us, however, some orientation in understanding the factors behind the rise of pluralism in the Western world. Notably there was a crossover between the church and the academy in how religion should be understood. Some whose work was at the intersection of the two, such as Ninian Smart and John Hick, became leading advocates of religious pluralism which caught the mood of the late twentieth century.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

As Gavin D’Costa writes, ‘Christians in the modern world cannot ignore the existence of other religions.’¹⁹ They have responded to the rise in religious pluralism in a number of ways. Some have accepted this reality rather reluctantly while others have tended to embrace it to a greater or lesser degree.

¹⁷ Klaus Scholder. *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2013), 9.

¹⁸ Ernst Troeltsch. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*. Translated by David Reid. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1971), 83.

¹⁹ D’Costa, 1997, 626.

One response has been to simply accept the prevailing mood that all the world's great religions offer some perspective on the divine reality. To believe, as Gerald O' Collins puts it that 'that love, which inspires one cosmic plan of creation and redemption, discloses its presence in an endless variety of choices, ways, degrees and intensities.'²⁰ As John Hick, the foremost apologist for pluralism in the twentieth century wrote:

the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place.²¹

For such thinkers Christianity is only one option on the smorgasbord of religion.

Another response has been to embrace inclusivism. In some ways this approach is not dissimilar to that of pluralism but unlike pluralism it seeks to maintain the priority of Christianity. This approach argues that whilst salvation is to be found in Christ alone, those who have never heard the gospel may be saved through the sincere pursuit of their own faith.

Probably the best known proponent of this approach is Karl Rahner. Rahner who, despite being under suspension by the Vatican at the time, became a key architect of the documents produced by Vatican II. This included views on salvation that were much more inclusive than those previously held by the Catholic Church. Notably Vatican II speaks of those:

who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.²²

Central to Rahner's theology is the belief that 'human persons in every age, always and everywhere, whether they realize it and reflect on it or not, are in relationship with the unutterable mystery of human life that we call God.'²³

²⁰ Gerald O'Collins. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 328.

²¹ John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), 240.

²² *Lumen Gentium*. Accessed April 24th, 2020. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

²³ Quoted in Fred Sanders. 'The Trinity' In *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, edited by Kelly Kapic and Bruce McCormack. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). 37.

However, God is an incomprehensible mystery until he reveals himself primarily in Jesus. Salvation is found only through the grace brought to us in Christ.

Nonetheless he believes that grace may be mediated through non-Christian religions, albeit imperfectly. As such there may be what Rahner terms 'anonymous Christians.' He says 'let us say, a Buddhist monk (or anyone else I might suppose) who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian.'²⁴ Rahner's point is that while a person might be saved by sincerely pursuing another religion that salvation is still through Christ.

For Rahner it is possible to be saved through 'lawful religions' without an explicit encounter with the gospel of Christ. He argues that this was the case with Israel's religion before Christ. However, once people of other faiths come into contact with the Christian gospel then they must accept its message. This gospel is mediated through the Church, which is a central Catholic concern.

While Rahner seeks to maintain the centrality of Christ he nonetheless seems to rest the possibility of salvation not upon Christ but on the sincere actions of men of faith, from any religion. Indeed, Pope Francis seemed to take this new Catholic approach further in 2018 when he suggested that a good atheist could go to heaven.²⁵

Rahner's approach further raises the question as to whether or not there are salvific structures in non-Christian religions. For example, if a Muslim sincerely follows the teaching of Islam and observes Ramadan does that contribute to their salvation?

Rahner's approach also seems to raise the possibility of sweeping resistant non-Christians into the church through the back door!²⁶ As Hans Kung states it 'It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an 'anonymous Christian' as presumptuous.'²⁷ It is for some an example of religious colonialism. Furthermore, Rahner struggles to balance the claim that there can be salvation in

²⁴ Karl Rahner. *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews*, 1965–1982. Edited by Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons. Translated by Harvey D. Egan. (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 207.

²⁵ Heartsick boy asks Pope Francis if his atheist dad is in heaven. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/04/26/heartsick-boy-asks-pope-my-dad-heaven/553844002/>. Accessed 27th April, 2020.

²⁶ D'Costa, 1997, 635.

²⁷ Hans Kung. *On Being a Christian*. Translated by Edward Quinn. (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 93.

other faiths with the traditional Catholic claim that there is no salvation outside the church.

A variation on inclusivism has been the approach that might be described as optimism and which has found support among some Evangelicals. This view is associated most often with Clark Pinnock and his concept of 'pagan saints.'²⁸ This approach argues that it cannot be said conclusively that no-one will be saved through the knowledge obtained through other faiths or indeed general revelation. God is gracious and He will reward those who earnestly seek Him and who seek eternal life, even if they do not commit themselves to the Christ of whom they have not heard. Here Pinnock draws heavily upon the OT in which he argues that there are many examples of 'faith, which is neither Jewish nor Christian, which is nonetheless noble, uplifting and sound.' E.g. Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba. He argues that we should be thankful for the wideness in God's mercy.²⁹

This optimistic view has also come to be associated with more prominent Evangelical figures such as John Stott who states:

I have never able to conjure up (as some great Evangelical missionaries have) the appalling vision of the millions who are not only perishing but will inevitably perish. On the other hand...I am not and cannot be a universalist. Between these extremes I cherish and hope that the majority of the human race will be saved. And I have solid biblical basis for this belief.³⁰

Another prominent Evangelical who argues for a more optimistic approach is JI Packer. He argues that:

We may safely say (i) if any good pagan reached the point of throwing himself on his Maker's mercy for pardon, it was grace that brought him there; (ii) God will surely save anyone he brings thus far (cf. Acts 10:34f; Rom. 10:12f); (iii) anyone thus saved would learn in the next world that he was saved through Christ. But what we cannot safely say is that God ever does save anyone this way.³¹

Those who adopt an optimistic approach argue for the finality and supremacy of God's revelation in Christ. They also argue, like Rahner, that salvation is found in Christ alone. They do, however, leave open the possibility that those who have never heard the gospel proclaimed might be saved.

²⁸ Clark H. Pinnock. *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 161.

²⁹ Pinnock 1992 92.

³⁰ David L. Edwards & John R. W. Stott. *Essentials*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 327.

³¹ J.I. Packer, J.I., 1981, *God's Words*. (Leicester: IVP, 1981), 210.

Many theologians, especially Evangelical Protestants, have continued to argue for the historic position that there is no salvation outside an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is a position, they argue, for which there is ample biblical support. Furthermore, it is this view that fuels the church's mission in the world. If exclusivism is not the biblical position then, they argue, why bother with mission? Indeed, as Hywel Jones argues, if a person can be saved by the sincere pursuit of their own religion telling them of Jesus might be risky. For if they hear of Jesus and reject him then they open themselves to condemnation.³² Those who embrace exclusivism argue that what is needed is not dialogue between religions but proclamation of the gospel. There has to be a recognition that other faiths cannot save.

In a pluralistic culture is it still tenable to argue that a rigorist exclusivist approach is viable? For Evangelicals there are at least two major issues in terms of the pluralist vision of finding salvation in other faiths. These are the nature of religion and the person of Jesus Christ.

What is Religion?

How a religion is to be defined is an important question that besets the pluralistic vision. As Woodhead and Partridge write 'there will never be an end to debates about the meaning of religion and how the term can be defined.' It is impossible to define it in a manner that would suit everyone. As Woodhead and Partridge note 'religion is always an open, empirical question, for religion is constantly being constructed in new ways.'³³

We immediately see the problem that this creates for people like John Hick who writes of, 'the great religious traditions as different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine reality.'³⁴ Yet what is a religion? Animism is widely regarded as a religion but it does not acknowledge a single divine reality. Instead, there may be multiple divine beings and divine spirits. Or we might say that Christianity and Satanism are examples of 'religion.' Does this mean that these two religions that stand fundamentally opposed to one another are in fact just different ways of experiencing the same divine reality?

Even if one takes on board Hick's view that it is 'the great religious traditions' that contribute to our understanding of the divine that does not help. On what authority are the lesser 'religions', as he conceives of them, excluded? Why include Islam and exclude ancestor worship? Why include Christianity and

³² Hywel Jones. *Only One Way: Do You Have to Believe in Christ to be Saved?* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 1996), 135.

³³ Linda Partridge Woodhead, H. Christopher & Hiroko Kawanami. *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*. (London: Routledge, 2016), 11,12.

³⁴ John Hick. *The Problem of Religious Pluralism*. (New York: St Martins, 1985). 102.

exclude Jedi Knights?³⁵ It also raises the question of the place of non-theistic belief systems such as new-ageism and atheism.

It further creates problems for inclusivism and optimism. Might God in fact save a person who sincerely pursues Satanism? Might he save the suicide bomber who sincerely believes that blowing up a church filled with Christians is the way to paradise?

The Person of Jesus Christ

The person of Jesus Christ, who is central to the Christian faith, is also a stumbling block. In order to accommodate pluralistic views he must be removed from the centre of how Christians think about religion. This involves what the theologian Harvey Cox described as ‘soft-peddalling the figure of Jesus himself.’³⁶ So we see that pluralists have tended to steer the discussion away from Christology onto the doctrine of God. Since, as Alister McGrath notes they find the identity and significance of Jesus Christ ‘an embarrassment.’³⁷

The Catholic theologian Paul Knitter is a universalist in terms of soteriology. In order to accommodate his views he writes of the need to distinguish between the ‘Jesus event’ which is unique to Christianity and the ‘Christ principle’ which is accessible to all religious traditions and stated in their own equally valid ways.³⁸ All pluralists are forced to admit, either implicitly or explicitly, that it is only by moving away from orthodox Christology that their views can be accommodated. As McGrath notes in order to fit Jesus into the new paradigms suggested by Hick and Knitter ‘it forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ.’³⁹

Yet, in Christian theology Christ holds a unique place. The place of Christ in the New Testament is particular i.e. he is uniquely the mediator of salvation. Christian theology has historically maintained that Jesus is God incarnate. The Christian vision of God is inseparably bound up in the idea of the Trinity and of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. Since Christianity maintains a unique view of Jesus the question of how non-Christian religions view Jesus then becomes a critical issue. Are

³⁵ In the 2011 United Kingdom census 177,000 people declared their religion as Jedi. *Jedi is not a religion, Charity Commission rules*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38368526>. Accessed 22nd April, 2020.

³⁶ Harvey Cox. *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths*. (London: Collins, 1989). 5.

³⁷ Alister E. McGrath. *A Passion for Truth*. (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 227.

³⁸ Alister E. McGrath. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* Second. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 230.

³⁹ McGrath, 1996, 227.

Christianity and other faiths speaking the same language when they talk about Jesus?

In Judaism from earliest times the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been a complex one with much of the NT written against this background. Certainly from earliest times there have been Jews who have accepted that Jesus is the Messiah and embraced an orthodox Christology. However, there have also been those within Judaism who have strongly rejected the idea of Jesus as the Messiah. This continues to be the position within Orthodox Judaism.⁴⁰ More recently some Jewish scholars have attempted to highlight Jesus Jewish roots and to portray him as a significant Jewish figure. For example, Hyam Maccoby notes that 'If the Jewishness of Jesus was acknowledged and understood, Christianity's exclusiveness and claim to unique salvific power could be tempered sufficiently to allow for the validity of other faiths.'⁴¹

In Islamic thought Jesus is recognised as an important prophet. He is only a messenger, however, like the many messengers such as Elijah who came before him. He is a man, a point emphasised by his frequent description in the Koran as the son of Mary. Opinion about Jesus is also divided within Islam. In orthodox Islam it is believed that Jesus was neither crucified nor did he die on the cross, although it appeared that way to the Jews. Instead, he was translated directly into heaven and some unnamed person died in his place.⁴² In another view whilst Jesus was placed upon the cross he did not die on the cross but survived his wounds, recovered in the tomb and later died in Kashmir.⁴³

In Islam God's ultimate revelation of himself comes not through Jesus but the prophet Muhammed and is contained in the Koran. The view of Jesus presented in the Bible and the Koran clearly clash.

In Buddhism there is no God or gods. Rather people go through life seeking enlightenment and are trying to break free of the endless cycle of life and death with its suffering. The central figure in Buddhism is the Buddha. He is not a divine figure but the enlightened one. He is the one who has attained the enlightenment for which his followers are searching. In the views of most Buddhists Jesus is a figure comparable to the Buddha who can help them along

⁴⁰ See for example Rabbi Stuart Federow. *Judaism and Christianity: A Contrast*. (Bloomington: Universe, 2012).

⁴¹ Hyam Maccoby. 'The Jewishness of Jesus' *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 28 (1) (1995): 52-62. 62.

⁴² See for example Gabriel Said Reynolds. "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 72 (2) (2009): 237-58.

⁴³ See for example the Official Website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, <https://www.alislam.org/jesus/> for a defence of the case that Jesus lived in Kashmir. Accessed 22nd April 2020.

to road to enlightenment. For example, José Ignacio Cabezón notes that ‘What Buddhists find objectionable is (a) the Christian characterization of the deity whose manifestation Jesus is said to be and (b) the claim that Jesus is unique in being such a manifestation.’⁴⁴

Hinduism is an umbrella term which recognises devotion to over 300,000 gods and goddesses. These are incarnated in various forms such as idols, rivers, trees etc. Hinduism is uncomfortable with the exclusive claims of the Christian faith that Jesus alone is the incarnate Son of God. Rather, it wishes to see Jesus as a figure comparable to the other manifestations of deity in its worldview.⁴⁵

It is clear from this brief survey that the place Jesus Christ occupies in the Christian faith remains a significant obstacle to a pluralistic view of religion if orthodox Christology and its implications are taken seriously.

DEVELOPING AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE

When it comes to developing a response to the issue of pluralism the aim of Evangelicals should be to consider not simply a philosophical response but they should seek to construct a scriptural response to these issues. The problem, however, has been that a scriptural response has often tended towards ‘proof texting’ and there are indeed many texts which raise significant issues for a pluralistic vision of religion. There is one important piece of Scripture, however, that is often overlooked in terms of providing us with a sustained treatment of how we should consider other religions. This is found in the opening chapters of Romans. There Paul makes a number of highly significant statements.

In 1:16-17 Paul makes what is arguably the key statement in the letter when he writes ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”’ This statement is the heartbeat of Paul’s argument where he goes on to contend at length that Jew and Gentile alike are made righteous only through depending on Christ.

This statement then leads Paul to demonstrate that both Jew and Gentile need God’s righteousness gifted to them. He begins in 1:18 to focus first of all on the Gentiles, those who are not part of God’s covenant people and who worship other gods. First of all in 1:18-20 he makes clear that while the righteousness of

⁴⁴ José Ignacio Cabezón, “Jesus through a Buddhist's Eyes.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19 (1999): 51-61. 56.

⁴⁵ See for example N. Sheth. “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison.” *Philosophy East and West*, 52 (1), (2002), 98–125. Sheth suggests that Hinduism and Christianity can learn from each other and even offer mutual correction.

God is revealed in the gospel the wrath of God is revealed against all unrighteousness. The reason for this is that in their unrighteousness people have ‘suppressed’ the truth about him. This suppression of the truth about God is Paul’s diagnosis of the human condition. For, as he continues, the knowledge of God and his nature can be clearly perceived in the world that he has made. Notably the consequence of this for Paul is not that people might believe, as advocates of general revelation might argue, but that everyone is ‘without excuse.’

Paul continues his argument in 1:21-23 by pointing out that all humanity is in sinful rebellion against God, turning away from him and descending into idolatry. This type of worship does not honour God and it is foolish. For Paul religions/belief systems are not signs of humanity’s search for God but of rebellion against God. Therefore, God is not to be found in the world’s religious systems, contrary to the pluralist vision, because their design is to suppress the knowledge of God. They are signs of the sinful rebellion that lies in the human heart.

In 1:24-25 Paul is emphatic that where people do not worship the God who reveals himself in Scripture they are embracing not true worship but false worship. They are also engaged in the dishonouring thinking and behaving to which God has given them over, which he mentions three times (1:24,26,28). If the apostle’s view of worship that is rooted in man-made traditions is correct then those who engage with these systems are not on a different path to God but are on the wrong path completely. As he goes on to point out in 1:28-31 they are subject to the same universal problem of a corrupt heart that produces all kinds of unrighteous behaviour.

In 2:12-16 Paul points out that those from a Jewish background who seek to live by the Law condemn themselves by their inability to keep the law. Likewise, those who do not have the Law bring condemnation upon themselves because they fail to live up to the dictates of their own consciences. This is something that will be revealed on the day when all people are called to give an account before God.

While this is far from being an exhaustive exegesis of Paul’s thought in these two chapters it is sufficient to demonstrate that Paul has a view of religion that is far removed from that advocated by those in favour of pluralism. It also offers us the prospect of thinking about the issue of religion not from the point of view of the philosophy of religion but from a biblical standpoint.

CONCLUSION

The pluralist viewpoint is one that has often been driven less by theological considerations than the liberal humanist concerns of the wider culture. The embrace of religious pluralism by some theologians has only been possible as a result of a significant departure from orthodox Christology. Where orthodox Christology is maintained even those who adhere to other belief systems acknowledge that it is a significant stumbling block to them developing a closer relationship with Christians. All faiths are agreed that to suggest that they are simply perspectives on the same divine reality demands, on the part of Christianity, a willingness to depart from orthodox Christology and to move Jesus himself from the centre of the Christian belief system. Those who wish to maintain an orthodox Christology consequently find themselves committed to exclusivism.

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