

# **CHRISTIANITY & PLURALISM**

**Lyle Douglas White  
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## INTRODUCTION

Christian theology continues to be altered and amended as the world moves forward in religious thought. Inter-faith dialogue has provided a means to a better understanding of other religions and cultures. Pluralism is a key concept in this discussion. Christians and other religions are progressing toward different types of toleration and acceptance. The different theories of pluralism have appeared in a developing world that desires peace. Michael Barnes claims that many people follow their beliefs because they were born into a culture or religion which they have known all their life. Culture, family and other factors have a great deal to do with what people decide on as their religion or beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Jim Leffel shares the opinion that "[religious] truth is a 'social construction.' It is created through social consensus and tradition, not discovered in reality that exists independently of our beliefs." If this were true the multiplicity or plurality of religions and religious belief in America would demonstrate or be demonstrated by the many different cultures that have moved here from other regions.<sup>2</sup> This idea of plurality and the dialogue between faiths has become a topic of great interest. Theologians in America and the world are leaning towards inter-faith dialogue as a means to better understand the "others" truths.

Believing in pluralism leads to complications of Christian theology. If we believe in a singular path to God than multiple paths logically can't exist. At the same time our

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Barnes, *Christian Identity & Religious Pluralism : Religions In Conversation*, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Leffel, *Family World News, Christian Witness In A Pluralistic Age, Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin*, Autumn 1997

culture has conditioned us to be tolerant of other religions and peoples. American money is even printed with the Latin "E Pluribus Unum", meaning out of many, one.

The world is becoming more attentive to worldly religions and tolerance of the "other" is more acceptable than its denial. It certainly would seem a blunder to deny other religions because of some immovable belief that Christianity must be the only valid religion. Certainly the attitude of evangelism is prevalent in Christian history and present. What does the acceptance of pluralism do the understanding of evangelism? Simply put pluralism can complicate Christianity, especially in regards to personal belief and salvation. Another question though would be how deep is this complication and what are the true affects of a pluralistic world on the Christian Truths? The truth claims we make in regards to Christianity can reflect along with the concept of pluralism several distinct choices. Christianity can embrace pluralism and the two together may help the other to exist. In this manner pluralism provides for Christianity and the understanding of Christian truths. Christianity also allows for specific forms of pluralism. The two can also be seen as in tension with the other. In this approach the two may conflict at points and agree at others. Certainly they do co-exist in this world but do they compliment or complicate each other? Another example of the existence of Christian truth and pluralism could be that Christianity cannot embrace pluralism, simply that the two are different and cannot exist together and maintain their respective truths. Other possibilities exist and room is left to consider and examine these.

Christianity may have appeared simpler or more straightforward in a pre-modern society. In these non-pluralistic societies Christianity seemed to be the dominant and desired. However, are these examples options for us in the post-modern society? Would

Christianity again be desirable in a non-pluralistic world? Barnes says no, also that retreating to the Golden Age when Christianity was the staple would not be desirable but in addition dangerous. Where then are we left? If we identify this plurality concept as heterodoxy and not heresy than we leave room for it Christian truth. Some connection between the two must be made in order to understand that which we cannot separate from our truths.

John Hick puts it best when he say we need a new theory that not only allows our own perception of the truth to be reality but also admits its own lacking. A new theory that sets up Christianity and the others not looking at right and wrong but rather the similarities and differences in the truths of each.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Westminster Press, 1982.

## **PART I:**

### **GETTING A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The concept of pluralism leads to complications of Christian theology. If we give legitimacy to a singular path to God than multiple paths logically can't exist. Apologetic theology, for example, suggests that the Christian God is a unique and solitary Ultimate reality is concerned.<sup>4</sup> At the same time our culture has conditioned us to be tolerant of other religions and peoples. Various Christological issues are the basis for denominational distinction and the division within assorted churches.<sup>5</sup> Through history attempts have been made to settle these issues of Christian perspective.

#### **CHRISTIANITIES BEGINNINGS**

Jesus Christ and salvation represent two of the most intensely scrutinized issues. However little leeway has been made in finding an acceptable solution that is agreeable among many. This chapter will provide a historical background for the understanding of these issues and key definitions. Without first clarifying the positions of such terms we would be in danger of confusing the question we are asking of Christianity and pluralism. In discussing and thinking about Christianity and pluralism it is imperative to identify what exactly we are in conversation about. Many terms have multiple meanings and definitions and it is important to clarify perspectives before attempting to establish the

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<sup>4</sup> Roger A. Badham, *Introduction To Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> John B. Cobb, *Christian Theology: An Introduction To Its Traditions And Tasks*, Eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert King, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1994.



connection between Christianity and plurality. These concepts are both ideas that have been evolving for hundreds of years and require at least some specificity in defining is understood as Christianity and pluralism.

Prior to the adoption of Christianity many of its followers were members of Judaism. Jesus of Nazareth seemed to unintentionally spark the beginnings of a new religion with His teachings. Christianity began to grow and people followed Christ. Although some assert Jesus did not teach of salvation or His own divine nature. This point is vehemently argued from all sides. After Jesus death and resurrection the number of followers grew faster. However not all Jews adopted Christianity and not all who accepted Christ were Jews. One opinion that helps to explain why some Jews didn't follow Jesus is that many believed only the true Israelites turned to Him for guidance.<sup>6</sup> This sect of Christianity was born into a world that was already struggling for tolerance and pluralism. Ironically that subject has reversed itself in a manner of speaking in contemporary times and we can observe Christians desiring only a certain level of pluralism.

Government officials desired people's support of the government and if they complied they were granted the right to pursue their own religious beliefs. Pagans and Jews, Greeks and Romans were all allowed to grow and develop. Though simplistic in design this early form of pluralism found several religious beliefs living in close proximity to each other. Christianity however would find more resistance than others,

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<sup>6</sup> Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, *A New Handbook Of Christian Theologians*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996.

primarily due to its strict beliefs in God and Jesus as the Lord and Savior.<sup>7</sup> Christianity took shape in a time and place that didn't believe Him to be the Messiah or the Son of God.

## PERSECUTION TO DOMINATION

Christianity from the death of Jesus until roughly 300 A.D. remained a small sect and was heavily persecuted. In those 300 years some Roman emperors persecuted (Nero 54-68, Trajan 98-117, Marcus Aurelius 161-180, Diocletian 284-305) Christians while other emperors like Domitian 81-96 simply inquired into what Christianity was and giving little head to it as a threat. Despite persecution Christianity continued to grow until in 313 AD Emperor Constantine saw a vision in his dreams and having followed the vision found victory in battle. Constantine began the conversion of the entirety of the Roman Empire to Christianity. Roman religion had previously required allegiance to the Emperor in a godlike sense. Even worship and adoration were to be given only to Emperors, which helps explain why Christians had been persecuted so fanatically until Constantine.<sup>8</sup> Constantine's direct action in instigating Christian law and punishment for non-believers gave rise to a Constantinian Era. Over this period of sixteen centuries Christianity was usually able to call on support from the state. Pluralism was ruled out as an option and penalties came for those who did not follow Christian thought and desired a plural Rome. Christianity as it found little toleration also returned little toleration. All government officials were replaced with Christians, churches were government funded,

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, Ed. Richard Plantinga. *Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary readings*, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View*, New York, New York, 1983.

moneys were directed from other efforts to the church, and Christianity became dominant.

### **JESUS: MAN OR/AND GOD**

As Christianity developed certain issues arose in the theology of Jesus Christ. Was He a man? Was He God? Did He live a sinless life? All of these and more began to be questioned and in 451 C.E. church representatives met at Chalcedon and came up with a formula to explain some of these issues. Their findings were that "There is one person, Jesus, who is truly of the same being as God the Father and creator in his divine aspect and truly of the same being as we are in his human aspect; when Jesus acts it is always God acting and man acting."<sup>9</sup> Many Christian churches still accept this as the orthodox formula of Christian faith. However it is also acknowledged that the Chalcedonian decision left significant room for variance in the application of this formula. Some disagree with the Chalcedonian formula and others agree with the formula but find concepts within or around it to protest or disagree with. Despite much work in uniting Christian theologies tension and division continues to be an element within Christianity. In regards to pluralism this formula would deny the validity of other religious Ultimate Truths. If it accepted that Jesus of Nazareth was God on this earth than following paths not suggested by God himself incarnate of man on this earth would not be a path to the Ultimate Reality.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Iain R. Torrance, *Christology After Chalcedon*, Norwich, England, Canterbury Press, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1982.

I have hinted at the concept of other religions as much as I can without fully addressing the issue. The “other” in the sense that I seek to use the term represents the other religions of the world. This can range from Islam and Hinduism to different denominations of Christianity that don’t follow the traditional Christianity that is represented by the following and divinity of Jesus Christ.

## ISLAM

In the eighth and ninth centuries a new issue presented itself to Christianity. Muhammad founded Islam in roughly 570 C.E. and it evolved from a polytheistic religion into a monotheistic religion based on a vision or dream Muhammad shared with his followers. Catholicism had never firmly established itself in Africa and soon shrewd Islamic leaders established control over the Arabian Peninsula. Islam allowed a Christian majority to stay in Africa as long as they paid extra taxes. This system would develop into an Islamic superiority over the religions it allowed. Tolerance was put off as an issue and like Christian powers in Byzantine or Rome Muslims enforced their beliefs in their land. For many Christians it was simply too difficult to maintain their faith in the region and Islam would take victory. In the time and place religious toleration or acceptance similar to pluralism flourished. Islam, like earlier Christianity, sought to set up itself as the dominant or supreme religion. By allowing others Islam was wearing away at others systems of religion. Eventually finding them false and enforcing Islam as truth. The others, including Christianity, would decline and Islam found success in the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John B. Carman and Donald G. Dawe, *Christian Faith In A Religiously Plural World*, Maryknoll, New York; Orbis Books, 1978.

The crusades began around 1095 with Papal support they would bring death and destruction to both Jews and Muslims. Pope Urban II gave a speech that sparked hundreds of years of killing and war between Christians and non-Christians. Many fought because they believed it was their contribution to the Church and their guarantee to heaven.<sup>12</sup> In addition some believed their Christian brothers in other regions were under heavy persecution. Economic and capital gains were also an underlying goal of those who fought in the crusades and it was primarily these reasons that would allow them to continue. During this time the concept of pluralism dwindled as people on all sides fought for their beliefs as the only truth. Christians held little or no regard for the possibility of the others truth and killed to preserve their own superiority. These conflicts are still heatedly discussed and criticized today as the relationship between Muslim and Christians seems to have burnt a bridge is extremely difficult to rebuild.<sup>13 14</sup>

## RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance was the forerunner to the reformations. Between 1350 and 1550 the Catholic Church lost the confidence of the people and the Great Schism resulted in two popes and little papal authority. During this time the church was in disorder and scholars looked outside Rome to Italy for both secular and religious suggestion. Catholic popes during this time, though not entirely understanding this discontentment of the

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<sup>12</sup> James A. Brundage, *The Catholic Historical Review*, v88 January 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Tollison. *Library Journal*, Feb 15, 1991 v116 n3 p206(1) *Impact On Today's World*

<sup>14</sup> Powell, James M. *The Catholic Historical Review*, Jan 2002 v88 i1 p112(3) *Byzantium And The Muslim World. Named Works: The Crusades From The Perspective Of Byzantium And The Muslim*

people, commissioned translators and librarians to organize the Vatican's library and other scholars sought to discover new manuscripts and help the church regain its lost power. These criticisms of the Catholic Church would eventually lead to Martin Luther's questioning of papal policy and specifically the selling of papal indulgences.

## **MARTIN LUTHER**

Martin Luther a theologian and student believed Christ to be the only way to God and even further that God only wanted to be known through Christ. Certainly this thin view of an Ultimate Truth took much bearing in his work and writing.

In 1517 Luther questioned aspects of Roman Catholicism in his "Ninety-five theses." Roman Catholicism had developed into a hierarchical authoritative power resolved in exclusivism and papal authority. Luther questioned some of the practices of the church and unintentionally caused a split in theology. The result was the formation of a new more personal religion, a Lutheran church. Luther desired for people to have relationships with God and not through the Pope. Eventually and only after much turmoil the Lutherans were given freedom to follow their religious convictions. Shortly later, however, that freedom was withdrawn and some of the Lutherans protested dawning the title Protestants.<sup>15</sup> This brief but immensely important mark in Catholic history demonstrates something of a desire for peace through a tolerance of pluralism. Allowing Lutherans to pursue their religion treads very closely to the contrary of the beliefs of salvation in the Church. If Lutherans were given the right to follow their own beliefs it would condone that multiple perspectives might be valid.

## **CALVINISM**

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Readings In Christian Theology: Lectures On Galatians*, Eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Fortress Press, 1985.

Later John Calvin helped the reform move along to an understanding in basic principles like Gods sovereignty, election, predestination, human sinfulness, discipline and the understanding of the will of God. Calvinism would eventually displace Lutheranism in the expression of Protestantism. Widespread discontentment with Catholicism led to many splits and several new reformed churches. Another reformation came from the Anabaptists that argued over the right of infant or adult baptism.<sup>16</sup> Eventually there would be a Catholic Reformation; it would result in some regained strength in the Catholic image. This counter-reformation brought to its fronts defenders of the Catholic doctrines and certainly the canonization and veneration of saints as a cornerstone to the Church.<sup>17</sup>

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO CHRISTENDOM?**

Another useful term to understand is Christendom. When we talk or discuss these concepts of reformation they all lie within a Christendom state and that state should be better defined. The term Christendom is usually given to an area ruled or dominated by Christians. The new world was earlier described by the term Christendom however in more contemporary circumstances the word lacks a certain reality.<sup>18</sup> In a sense Christendom is over and we have moved past it into a period of post-Christendom consisting of tolerance, diversity, pluralism, openness etc... Post-Christendom is more accurate in describing a world and in a more local perspective a nation with many distinct

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<sup>16</sup> Ernest George Schwiebert, *The Reformation*, Minneapolis, Minnesota : Fortress Press 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Broderick, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Nashville, Tennessee: 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Critical Terms For Religious Studies*, Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

authorities and no true rule or domination, at least not in a religious sense. In fact the reality is that with technology in communications, travel and other areas cultures are melding more and more every day. It is a necessity to be open to others at least to some degree as we are in contact with them in so many aspects of day-to-day life. Post-Christendom is in a way a pluralist world itself. Post-Christendom says that we have moved past Christian domination and exist today in something altogether new and different.<sup>19</sup>

Much of these new concepts and ideas came about in the same era. Specific periods were separated and distinguished by the affects they had on Christianity and the world. It is certainly true that these periods make up a large chunk of the historical perspective from which we draw our perceptions.

## **ENLIGHTENMENT**

The Enlightenment ushered in a sharp break from the medieval world and more modern concepts and ideas began to emerge. A common foundation was sought within Christianity and the incongruities and contradictions were harshly questioned. These questions had direct bearing on the spread and development of some of the most modern forms of secularism.<sup>20</sup> In fact many forms found their origin in the questions raised during the Enlightenment. These questions also reflected positively on Christian study and scholarship. The Enlightenment brought with it a passionate devotion to biblical scholarship, dogmatic skepticism and the insistence that religion be practical. Questions

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity : Christian Theology In A Pluralistic World*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Fortress Press, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ed. Willard Oxtoby, *Religious Diversity : Essays*, New York, New York, Harper & Row, 1976.



were raised and the answers were heavily debated and argued with many perspectives in mind. The Enlightenment also spurred a sort of toleration attitude in regards to the other and in fact the toleration the Enlightenment had a part in would eventually be considered as the basis for democracy.<sup>21</sup>

## MODERNISM

Modernism has been used to identify several movements of religious and theological thought. Many of these ways of thought criticize the traditional ideas of Christianity and work to adapt it to a more modern world. Modernism developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century inquiring and asking questions regarding evolution, dogma and radical biblical criticism and other theological questions. The goal of modernism, although the pope condemned the movement, was to use methods of modern science to find, state and use the permanent central values of inherited orthodoxy to meet the needs of a modern world.<sup>22</sup> Modernism often found a voice in such people that had a certain disdain for fundamentalism and the orthodox beliefs of the church. One such voice was Harry Emerson Fosdick. In his sermons speaking his beliefs Fosdick claimed many positions not in compliance with the orthodox perspective of Christianity. In his sermon he claims to believe in the virgin birth but not in the inerrancy of scripture or the literal second coming of Christ. He further stated that, "The present world situation smells to heaven....And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the

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<sup>21</sup> Hubert Jedin, *History Of The Church*, Eds. Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, New York, New York: Seabury Press, 1980.

<sup>22</sup> John Crossley P. Jr., *A New Handbook Of Christian Theologians*, Eds. Donald Musser and Joseph L. Price, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!"<sup>23</sup> Fosdick was right in his approach and though perhaps not entirely accepted in his time he hit on key issues of pluralism. A single perspective of truth however central is likely not accurate. In reality the negation of others due to such foolishness would be a mistake.

## **PLURALISM**

Pluralism can be loosely defined as "A condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are present and tolerated within a society." As well as, "The belief that such a condition is desirable or socially beneficial."<sup>24</sup> Pluralism almost certainly goes beyond these definitions. If we imagine a continuum, the concept of pluralism lies on many levels between the possibility of amalgamism, the unification of many religions to form something new, or the more commonly held belief that there exist multiple means to the "Ultimate Reality or Truth". Raimon Panikkar describes this as parallelism, that is to say that many hold different core beliefs in regards to what religion or religions are valid as well as what they see for the future of religion.<sup>25</sup>

## **EXCLUSIVISM AND INCLUSIVISM**

Exclusivism and inclusivism also deserve mention and discussion. The later of the two is an extreme allowing salvation to come too many. However, inclusivism also tends to include those who would not consider themselves Christian. By including them in the

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<sup>23</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Christian History: Modernism's Moses*, March 10, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Ed. Phillip Gove, Merriam Webster's Inc., Springfield, Massachusetts, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony : Essays On Contemplation And Responsibility*, Ed. Harry James Cargas, Minneapolis, Minnesota : Fortress Press, 1995.

all-encompassing mercy of Christ it implies they have a very imperfect Knowledge of Him. Some of these people included would prefer not to be included. To the inclusivist there is salvation in no other name but that of Christ and those finally saved will only be saved through Him. Does it not conflict that inclusivists can include others based on some piece of the other religion to something they do not believe in? Also similar is Universalism, the concept that God will save everyone despite beliefs or practices in religions other than Christianity. This idea doesn't delve into or explain much as far as the Christian Truths. Christian exclusivism went to extreme lengths with many denominations claiming that they were the one true faith and the other denominations of Christianity were corrupt or even in league with the anti-Christ.<sup>26</sup>

### **NINIAN SMART'S POSITIONS ON PLURALISM**

In order to really discuss these topics is it first necessary to define some additional words and ideas. Its also important that we mutually understand the terms I will identify and if we don't share a common perception of these we can at least agree that the definitions are generally suitable. Pluralism though briefly discussed thus far has yet to be set out with a definition. Ninian Smart suggests that there are at least three definitions of pluralism. The first of these is simply that multiple religions, beliefs, cultures etc... exist in a singular space, for example New York. Smart also writes that the use of this term in the sense of simply being plural would probably benefit from replacing the term with another such as diversity. The second definition Smart suggests is that of political plurality. This idea is that we are all free to follow or exercise diverse religious practices

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Race, *Christians And Religious Pluralism : Patterns In The Christian Theology Of Religions*, Maryknoll, NewYork, Orbis Books, 1983.

and political positions. The third definition of the term is a theory that all religions lead to the same Ultimate Truth. Smart later defines this pluralism as relating to regulative pluralism.

Smart goes on to further define pluralism and he chooses five positions to help us better understand. He lists the following five as responses to the idea or concept of pluralism. The positions include absolute exclusivism, absolute relativism, hegemonistic inclusivism, realistic pluralism and regulative pluralism.<sup>27</sup> All of these concepts are drawn from John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths, An Interpretation of Religion*, Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Ninian Smart, *Beyond Ideology, A Christian Systematic Theology in World Context*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* and R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord*.

### **ABSOLUTE EXCLUSIVISM**

The first of these choices Smart presents is absolute exclusivism and the most extreme end of the spectrum. Absolute is a key term here meaning the totality to which everything may be reduced or which in the estimation of its proponent constitutes the ultimate or final referent. The core idea of absolute exclusivism is that a religion, in our case Christianity, is true and the others are false. Others here refer to the religions and religious practices that would not be considered traditionally Christian. This position is well defined but difficult to prove and has a history of undeveloped evidence. In Hendrik Kraemer's earlier works he wrote of the gospel in Christ transcending religion and whereas other religions are simple projections Christianity is a projection in response to

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<sup>27</sup> Ninian Smart, *Pluralism, A New Handbook Of Christian Theology*, Musser, Donald W. and Joseph L. Price, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1996.

the gospel of Christ. However, Buddhism and Hinduism can use a similar argument as evidence for the validity of their respective religions. These beliefs in *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church no salvation") leave no room for discussion or dialogue between religions or varying religious belief, even intense criticism of beliefs varying only slightly from their own.<sup>28</sup> Some movements that endorse a kind of absolute exclusivism would include the Muslim Brotherhood, Hindu revivalism, Russian Orthodox patriotism, and Jewish religious nationalism. The situation has improved during the past 50 years, but '*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' is still the official policy of the Vatican.

### **ABSOLUTE RELATIVISM**

The next position is absolute relativism in which lie many similarities to absolute exclusivism. However the relativist perspective says that every religion or faith insists on its own unique authority and Ultimate Truth. It is difficult to examine this concept due to its negation of the "others". The others are negated by the reality that only one born, raised, educated and faithful to and Ultimate Truth can really follow it. No access to the Ultimate Truth of the others is therefore available, making any type of interfaith dialogue impossible. In fact it appears to destroy notions of truth and rightness in its stubbornness to be inerrant. By avoiding truths absolute relativism can rely on inerrancy, which may have been proven otherwise.

### **HEGEMONISTIC PLURALISM**

The third position is the one that Smart herself believes will remain the primary choice due mostly to the necessity of peaceful coexistence. Hegemonistic pluralism can

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<sup>28</sup> Smart, *Pluralism, A New Handbook Of Christian Theology*

be best described as seeing some aspects of our truth in other faiths. So in a sense these other religions are only in some small part accurate and our faith is the most accurate. This is likely the most common perspective among Christians as it allows for some acceptance of the "others" without negating Christian Truths.

### **REALISTIC PLURALISM**

The fourth idea is that of realistic pluralism. Similar to hegemonistic pluralism but allows for a much greater understanding of other truths. Swami Vivekenanda presented realistic pluralism or the suggestion that many different religions are many different paths to, and versions of, one Ultimate Truth. John Hick helped describe this theory with an illustration similar to that of planetary movements.<sup>29</sup> The world's religions are not in orbit around Christianity with parts of Christianity but rather all religions are in orbit around the Ultimate Truth and Christianity simply orbits the closest to that truth. This theory is also similar to that of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's theory of a personal pluralism in which each person conceives of his or her own personal Ultimate.<sup>30</sup>

### **REGULATIVE PLURALISM**

The last theory that Smart provides us with is that of regulative pluralism. This theory is that different religions with different values, beliefs and truths are all evolving toward a common truth that is yet undefined. Also resembling realistic pluralism except instead of the orbit we can imagine a sort of upward movement all of us striving toward a common Ultimate.

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<sup>29</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names*

<sup>30</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity : Essays*

## **SUMMARY**

This section has served to introduce the terms and concepts that will be important throughout the paper. The historical perspective presented should allow you to envision the use of such terms and a brief context in which the term was conceived and used. The goal of this was to enrich the material that is to come and in doing so provide a basis for the discussion and dialogue that will take place.

These definitions and historical background should serve to set up the conflicts that will arrive in the following chapter. It's certainly true that the difficulties and complications that will be suggested are a large part of this conversation and deserve adequate introduction. The connection between pluralism and Christianity is not entirely clear and the next part should better explain their respective relationship. In addition to enhancing the explanation of these concepts part two will look to popular positions and manners of defense between Christianity and Pluralism.

## **PART II:**

### **IT GETS COMPLICATED**

John Hick writes that Christianity cannot exist without a pluralist world and in fact we have always lived in a pluralist world.<sup>31</sup> Chapter three will move to the discussion of Christianity's existence in a pluralist world. However, it is first necessary to advance the complications that pluralism brings to Christianity. It is apparent that pluralism may not have been in direct contact with Christianity until at least the foundation of modernism or perhaps even post-modernism. However, we can acknowledge that the concept of pluralism obviously existed prior to being so heavily debated and discussed. Hick also makes the argument that we need to re-understand our faiths as one of several and not as the only. In order to do something like re-understand out faith it is necessary that we should begin with little or no bias and an open mind to the possibilities that would be presented.

### **MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE**

Karl Barth discusses the missionary attitude of Christianity that asserts superiority over the others.<sup>32</sup> This would obviously not be a good catalyst for such different possible perspectives to gel into a conversation in regards to plurality and Christianity. This

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<sup>31</sup> John Hick, *God And The Universe Of Faiths; Essays In The Philosophy Of Religion*, London, Macmillan, 1973.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth, *The Way Of Theology In Karl Barth : Essays And Comments*, Ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt, Allison Park, Pennsylvania, Pickwick Publications, 1986.



missionary perspective is a commonly held position that seeks to evangelize the world. In other words these Christians desire to convert people of other religions to accept Christian truth in place of whatever they currently follow.

## **DIFFERENCES**

Hick's argument is like that of Fosdick in part one. It is an enormous blunder not to recognize these others. The conflict then arises after recognizing them. For in recognizing them we are accustomed to a sort of interfaith dialogue, which really does not address the problems, and questions that come up between two different religions and cultures. So we are presented with complications between a sort of us and them. Christians and others are the groups that are sifted out as Christians attempt to establish positions regarding people who do not believe or follow that which they themselves believe. It is certainly true that these others can be vastly different from Christianity and at the same time somewhat similar.

Chapter one illustrates a historical model of Christianity and pluralism growing parallel to one another as they develop to modern standards. As we understand the changing periods of Christendom in earlier centuries we can come to better understand the modern situation of pluralism. The conversation requires discussion of these complications after a basis of logic and reason can be laid down. Usually one acknowledges pluralism as something different and external to Christianity and when the two are brought together with open minds and eager participants a discussion of possibilities is inevitable. Ernst Troeltsch tells us that validity is historically demonstrable and in fact history shows not a movement toward unity or Christianity. Troeltsch argued

that Christianity could not claim ultimate validity but only a high degree of validity.<sup>33</sup>

This approach echoes in Smart's realistic pluralism demonstrated by a planetary example of religions revolving around the Ultimate, some being close and some being far from the truth.

In order to further expand and define the complications between Christianity and a plural world, concepts like exclusivism and inclusivism will be put in discussion with each other. Also terms like parallelism, universalism, relativism, fundamentalism and amalgamism will play a part in the discussion. Which is why they were touched on in the first part. First of all Christianity needs to be set up in order to allow for these discussions to take place. The previous chapter laid a substantial basis for understanding the contemporary situation of Christianity and pluralism.

## **THE BIBLE**

One very popular means to reach some understanding, at least on behalf of the questioning Christian, is to explore biblical texts. The Bible has been used to draw extremely different opinions and positions and is certainly a problematic point of unbalance in this discussion. It is very obvious that the Bible is an important factor in creating our understanding of pluralism. However, we must also accept that the Bible is partly a cause of some of the problematic positions that Christianity and pluralism have come to contain.

Beginning with Christianity it is important to note that specific translations or readings of biblical texts allow Christians to set up a sort of relationship with their

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<sup>33</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Christianity Among World Religions: Christianity And Plurality*, Ed. Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

choices in a Christian response to pluralism. With many translators and individuals interpreting subjectively it is impossible to ascertain what each person reads as Christian truth. This complication within Christianity is extremely substantial. The Bible has throughout existence been a means to arguing ones side but from numerous different sides. Furthermore in contemporary times people are encouraged more and more to read the Bible on their own and apart from the church, even to find for themselves meaning in their respective beliefs. This discord among believers from the same religion promotes a certain pluralistic aspect to Christianity within itself. A large varying pattern of belief has evolved from Christianity allowing a colossal range of convictions among these masses. Pluralism within Christianity is just as much if not more prominent than the concept outside of Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

## FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism puts forward the "fundamentals" of faith. On this list would be the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, bodily resurrection and atonement. Fundamentalism found opposition in modernism as the two clashed on their beliefs. Whereas the fundamentalist would read the Bible as infallible and divinely produced a modernist would reinterpret and attempt understanding. The modern view was seen as corrupt by those fundamentalists. This protestant movement exists today and it is exactly this

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<sup>34</sup> Mortimer Jerome Adler, *Truth In Religion : The Plurality Of Religions And The Unity Of Truth : An Essay On The Philosophy Of Religion*, Macmillan Pub. Co. Toronto, Collier Macmillan Canada, 1990.

attitude that does not allow for simple conversation between Christianity and the others religions.<sup>35</sup>

## **BIBLICAL EXPLANATIONS**

Returning to the Bible as a source for this disagreement within the church one finds potential reasoning not only for Christianity but also a rationale for other religions to make similar claims. Many of the points brought up by these scholars to defend Christianity can be a card played for either side or almost any religion. Certainly with arguments like these Christianity should not desire a non-pluralist world in which to exist alone.

As whole the Bible is generally understood as a compilation of works inspired by God and edited together from several different authors over the course of hundreds of years. One popular view demonstrates the Bible setting up God as the Ultimate Truth for Christians and Jesus Christ as the bridge with which to cross the gap and reach that Ultimate Truth. If we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and acknowledge his death on the cross for our sins then we will reach that Ultimate Truth. In Richard J. Plantinga's Christianity and plurality, he discusses the Bible as the source we use to identify and prove God's power by the historical arrangement of God's people and handling of humankind in biblical times.

## **PLANTINGA'S PERSPECTIVE/ GOD IS THE CREATOR**

Plantinga discusses five things that should be drawn from this biblical text in regards to Christianity and religious pluralism.<sup>36</sup> The first of these is that God created all

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<sup>35</sup> Christian Smith, *Christian America? : What Evangelicals Really Want*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 2000.

of creation. In Genesis and the Old Testament we have read and studied the creation stories and other Old Testament text, Moses leading Israelites out of Egypt, Joshua's victories and other accounts of God using people to set up or arrange humanity the way He desires. In Genesis 1-2, God creates everything; He separates light from dark and earth from heavens. This first chapter of the first book of the Bible sets up God creating all of creation. Some other religions also hold Genesis as a book of truth within their own religion and it demonstrates their god establishing humanity. It is not mentioned nor discussed whether this first criteria allows for varying perspectives of God. It is possible that non-Christian religions follow a god and they hold the belief that that god created all of creation.

### **CONNECTION TO GOD**

The second point Plantinga makes is that humanity is ineluctably connected to this God. Christian faith and history hold true that we are inescapably connected to God. Biblical perspective illustrates that no matter what humans did, they were connected to God in some way. In addition if we hold true to Plantinga's first statement then obviously as part of Gods creation we are connected to Him. Another example of the connection to God would ones personal faith, tradition and belief in God and whatever relationship that might entail. Other religious faiths have their own perspectives and many may also that they are also ineluctably connected to their god. It seems a vague point to bring up that we are completely connected to God as nearly all people who believe in any sort or type of god can easily make the same suggestion.

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<sup>36</sup> Richard J. Plantinga, *Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary Readings*, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

### **GOD DESIRES WORSHIP**

The third point is that biblical attitude toward religion is doxological that is worshipful or praiseful toward God. Again the reasoning allows for multiple religions to believe in the same or similar concept. The doxology of Christianity or Judaism definitely has the possibility of paralleling some other religious faiths perspective of praising a god. Of course that is or resembles the basis for almost any religion. To say that praising of God is required by our doxological attitude can just as easily be said about Buddhism and the reaching of enlightenment or even Native religions of America that worship animals and natural elements as a god.

### **MISDIRECTED RELIGION IS BAD**

The fourth point claims that the Bible condemns misdirected religion. We read specific examples of this in both the Old and New Testaments but in order to more fully understand we must lead into Plantinga's fifth point that contrary truths must be recognized simultaneously. These points do not interfere with the each other the point Plantinga seeks to make is that these "others" are not examples of misdirected religion but are simply partial religions that are lacking part of the truth. This fifth point asserts that Christianity though not whole or complete is the closest or purist path we have to the Ultimate. Therefore the fourth point allows the following of other religions but rules out the following of others that are not aimed in the right direction. This point seems to be awkward and easily fallacious as anyone desiring to follow these points can simply make the excuse that all other religions are misdirected until having to defend that position. When the times comes for defense a retreat to the fifth point is easily maneuverable and

maneuverable and then one can claim that Christianity is closest to the Ultimate truth and in fact whichever religion is attempting to challenge that is only partially true or further away from the truth. Plantinga's fifth point bares a resemblance to Smarts hegemonistic pluralism that says some aspects of Christian truth are observable in other religions. Of course Plantinga still manages to avoid the regulative pluralism of even Christianity working toward some unknown Ultimate.

### **HERBERT OF CHERBURY'S PERSPECTIVE**

Herbert of Cherbury follows five similar but somewhat different points. Under the general reasoning that "every religion is not good nor is every doctrine taught under its authority always essential or even valuable." Herbert gives his reasons from a perspective that seems to lean more towards an exclusivist mentality but he also addresses the other points in regards to pluralism.<sup>37</sup> The first two of these points bare almost an identical correlation with those of Plantinga however his other points seem to move in an entirely different direction and therefore deserve comment. The points that resemble Plantinga's are "that there is a supreme God and that this sovereign deity must be worshiped".

### **HUMANS SHOULD BE PIETOUS**

The second point that Cherbury brings up is that "the connection of virtue and piety is the most important part of religious practice". This point illustrates Cherbury's belief that a specific religious attitude must be held in regards to God. However several

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<sup>37</sup> Herbert of Cherbury, *Common Notions Concerning Religion: Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary Readings*, Ed. Plantinga, Richard, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

religions of the world hold some moral code or standard with which to live by.

Unfortunately this point is also debatable in accordance with other religions.

### **MEN FEAR THEMSELVES**

He also asserts that "the minds of men have always been filled with horror for their wickedness, vices and their crimes which have always been obvious to them of which they must be expiated and repent". This fourth point is very different than that of Plantinga. Cherbury makes the claim that men knowingly sin and fall short of Gods glory and not only do they know but also it terrifies them.

### **MEN MUST BE FORGIVEN**

Men must also be expiated which could mean cleansed or pay a penalty for their sins and they should also repent for that which they know to be wicked or evil. This point leaves a heavy burden on humanity that Plantinga's seem to overlook. Also related is that men are given to some evil or bad that requires this payment for their sin. Other religions have the same self-sacrifice and even denial of self. Within and outside of Christianity this position is widely debated, whether or not humans are predominantly good or evil has always been a topic worth thinking about.

### **PUNISHMENT AWAITS SIN**

Finally "that there is reward or punishment awaiting after this life." This last point declares that there will be some heaven or hell after life for Christians and if another religion is to follow the same line of thinking as Cherbury then an Ultimate must exist and it will be one of either reward or punishment for our actions on earth. Bearing remarkable similarity to the Karma of Buddhism, this point identifies that something exists to be living for that is beyond our world or life. In Christianity these are heaven



and hell in other religions enlightenment, righteousness, and other Ultimates are the reason for following. Buddhism suggests that everything is subjective and therefore cannot exist without being in relation to another. Which means that nothing is real and the Buddha seeks to reach Samsara, Nirvana, or their respective Ultimate, in a similar manner by leaving behind the worldly things and striving for Ultimate Truth.<sup>38</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The perspectives of Plantinga and Chertbury demonstrate concepts that do not necessarily negate the possibility of other religions having the same elements and leading to some Ultimate Reality. Using the Bible to defend the Christian Ultimate Truth one can single out a narrow path to that Ultimate, however the flaw is that other religions can do the same. Many religions use books or other texts to identify the path they must take to their respective Ultimate. Christianity may view it as salvation but other religions have very different perception of the Ultimate.

## PLURALISM

Moving on the ways the pluralism complicates Christianity the first and most obvious is that Christianity suggests a singular path to the Ultimate. Some division within the Christian church varies on this topic however the core belief of many Christians is that Jesus Christ came to earth for the salvation of humankind. Outside of faith and confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior there is no salvation. This is only one point of view in an extremely divided and varying religion. Other positions suggest that some

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<sup>38</sup> Masao Abe, *Buddhism And Interfaith Dialogue : Part One Of A Two-Volume Sequel To Zen And Western Thought*, Ed. Steven Heine, Honolulu, Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

Christians even rejected the beliefs of other Christians as false or corrupt. The official position of the Vatican suggests that outside of its core values there is no Ultimate. For example the "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus" referred specifically to other Christians that did not assume the same core beliefs as the Church.<sup>39</sup>

Pluralism provides further difficulties in Christian faith, as it requires a much broader acceptance of many more outlooks that Christianity is generally used to. Christians cannot in good sense believe in a single and unique path to a single Ultimate Truth and Smart's open positions of pluralism. These positions refer to hegemonistic and regulative pluralism as they suggest alternate paths as acceptable. Both positions also threaten Christianity and its exclusive Ultimate truth. Exclusive suggests that Christianity does not allow the truths of others to claim validity. Not only does this exclusivism apply to different religions outside of Christianity but also the different denominations and sects of Christianity itself. It seems awkward and odd that a religion would claim validity in a sole path to the Ultimate and yet have so many variations in the manner of which to follow that path. Even divisions of Christianity that desire to unify their efforts find it difficult if not impossible compromise on their beliefs. With so much dissidence within Christianity an outwardly projection of exclusivism seems almost contradictory.<sup>40</sup> Still it remains that Christians hold their beliefs as the only possible truth.

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Olson, *The Mosaic Of Christian Belief : Twenty Centuries Of Unity And Diversity*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press ; Leicester, England : Apollo's, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Dean, *Religious Pluralism And Truth : Essays On Cross-Cultural Philosophy Of Religion*, Albany : State University of New York Press, 1995.

## BARTH'S PERSPECTIVE

Karl Barth demonstrated in his opposition to the acceptance of Nazism to be analogous with Christianity a certain exclusive mentality. Barth believed that Christians should follow God and that their God had elevated Christianity above other religions. If we relate this to Smart's positions we find that Barth would fit neatly into absolute relativism. For Barth Christianity was the "true religion".<sup>41</sup>

## RAHNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Looking to another theologian Karl Rahner we find a similar position of Christianity as the true religion but with a different sort of qualification. Rahner believed as Barth however in addition he added that other religions are valid until Christianity comes to them. In a way he was saying that obviously Christianity could not reach everyone, everywhere simultaneously. Instead Rahner describes a certain timely occurrence of people becoming aware of the true religion, Christianity.<sup>42</sup> This attitude does not really seem to have a place in Smart's five positions in regards to pluralism, however it does bring to light a certain inclusive approach that would allow for other religions to have validity until presented with Christianity.

## DIVERSITY

One of the reasons behind pluralism encroaching upon Christianity is that the world is becoming more diverse as time pushes forward. Religions that may have only

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<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth, *The Revelation Of God As The Abolition Of Religion: Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary Readings*, Ed. Richard J. Plantinga, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Rahner, *Christianity And The Non-Christian Religions, Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary Readings*, Ed. Richard J. Plantinga, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

existed in small seldom-visited areas are moving out into the world as technology enables the spread of new ideas at an almost unbelievable rate. Twenty years ago so much different theology was not so readily available.<sup>43</sup> With all the diversity Christians are coming to a fork in which they must decide which path to take. Either they can stay with strict exclusive beliefs or they can choose a side that allows at least some acceptance of other religions.

### MELDING POT

The United States especially has become a place where many peoples have come from all over the world to form a new nation. It is obvious that political diversity and pluralism are promoted in the United States and officially the nation promotes acceptance and tolerance of all cultures, races and religions. In fact our currency even promotes the same concepts. The head side of a U.S. quarter reads "In God We Trust" and the eagle side "E Pluribus Unum" which means out of many, one.<sup>44</sup> This message of simultaneous Christian belief and diversity and pluralism is similar to Smarts position of regulative pluralism. Regulative pluralism, briefly touched upon in chapter one, suggests that various religions are all evolving toward a single Ultimate and yet undefined Truth. Regulative pluralism allows for the possibility of a combination of various different positions. By suggesting a common truth that is thus far undefined it is difficult or

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Dupuis, *Toward A Christian Theology Of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll, New York, New York, Orbis Books, 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America : How A "Christian Country" Has Now Become The World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, San Francisco, California, Harper San Francisco, 2001.

impossible to separate what is valid and what is not. Using this position as a basis for understanding of pluralism would simply open our minds to the acceptance of others as aiding the discovery of an open-ended Ultimate Truth. It would be possible for all religions to have some level of truth or none at all, it would also allow for Christianity to believe it is closer to the Ultimate than other religions however at the same time requiring Christians to at least believe that others are on the same path with different parts.

## **SUMMARY**

Part two outlined and discussed the various conflicts and complications that pluralism presents to Christianity. In addition to outlining these we also get important perspectives like that of a scriptural approach and several different scholars and theologians. Some additional definitions and concepts are introduced and elaborated as they create the complexity between Christianity and pluralism. The focus of part two was to bring the complications to the surface in order that we might better understand them and reference them as we hypothesize about Christianity in a non-pluralist world.

Part three will analyze Christianity as it pertains to a non-pluralist world. The question of desirability will be brought up and confronted in multiple situational positions. We will also look to the supportiveness of these complications between Christianity and pluralism. In addition I will address the validity of such positions and the outcome of these complications meeting Christianity.

### **PART III:**

### **IT GETS COMPLICATED**

Finally to make use of the previous chapters we come to the question of pluralism and Christianity. Would Christianity be easier in a non-pluralist world? The many possibilities between the two have been discussed up until this point as connecting with each other though not necessarily embracing one another. Historical examples and conversation between pluralism and Christianity are numerous and important in this discussion. The way we will approach this question is to parallel the concept of Christianity as solo in regards to other concepts discussed earlier.<sup>45</sup>

Can Christianity embrace pluralism and does it benefit from the tolerance allowed by a pluralist world? The answer is yes. Christianity has already benefited immensely from the pluralism that it has existed with for thousands of years. Although varying opinions range on the others as taken from a Christian perspective the dialogue between Christianity and the others is incalculable.

### **SMART'S PERSPECTIVE REVISTED**

Earlier Ninian Smart outlined five different terms to divide the terms in regards to the various levels of pluralism in the world. These five allow on some level Christianity to be viewed as a singular religion. Some of these however are left lacking when compared next to Christianity in a non-pluralist world. That is to say from each of these perspectives Christianity as the only religion is affected in a different way. It is important

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<sup>45</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Christianity Among World Religions: Christianity And Plurality*, Ed. Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

to note that we are no longer discussing the role of pluralism and its relationship to Christianity. Rather we have moved onto another aspect of the topic, as Christians how do we respond to the idea of Christianity in a non-pluralist world? Certainly the opinions can range from desiring for Christianity to be the only religion in the world with no variation all the way to the idea that pluralism actually aids Christianity and helps its existence in this world.

In addition historically we have had the opportunity to bear witness to Christianity and other religions that attempted a non-pluralist society. We are able to see the consequences in their flawed ideas and use their experience as an example for making our decision.<sup>46</sup>

### **CHRISTIANITY ALONE?**

The first concept that Smart identified was that of absolute exclusivism. Surprisingly those who believe that their perspective is uniquely true and all others are false is more widely held than expected. It seems a mistake to rule out so many other truths simply through an "us and them" mentality. However, there exist today many religions, denominations and Christians that see only their own small view as the Ultimate Truth. It is not true however that this perspective simply denotes those older or more strictly traditional members of our churches. Rather this perspective tends to come from those who have taken up the cause of Jesus Christ. These are young and old, traditional and non-traditional who believe Jesus is the only way. An absolute exclusivist would desire Christianity for the entire world's population. With such a narrow

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<sup>46</sup> Ninian Smart, *Pluralism, A New Handbook Of Christian Theology*, Musser, Donald W. and Joseph L. Price, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1996.

perspective the other religions are viewed as wrong. The concept of pluralism no doubt gets mixed up with absolute exclusivists. With the increasing spread of other religions across the globe this extreme group of Christians only views others as those whom must be evangelized or lost. However, it is from this radically historical perspective that we are able to draw much of the reasoning for the desire to have a single world religion.

Whether that is Christianity or some other variation is still up in the air. For example before Emperor Constantine took the throne in 313 a period of some type of pluralism had existed. However, Constantine took steps to secure Christianity as the Ultimate Truth. He in fact forcibly instituted Christian religion and regulations upon those who previously followed another religion. Constantine did not have a tolerance for pluralism in his world and sought Christian domination of the spiritual population. He was perhaps an absolute exclusivist who desired Christianity for the world without other religions, or in a non-pluralist world. As we look back we can also note the many changes to Christianity as time passed. It seems this concept of Christianity going solo in the world did not necessarily work as Constantine and others had hoped.

### **THE QUESTION OF PEACE**

Another issue brought up by absolute exclusivists is that in a non-pluralist world peace is inevitable. Perhaps some truth can be found in this theory but a single religion in the world can lead to serious repercussions otherwise avoided through pluralism.<sup>47</sup> The conversation and discussion that is sparked by pluralism and multiple perspectives coming together helps to establish each respective perspective. People who come with

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<sup>47</sup> Panikkar, Raimon, *Invisible Harmony : Essays On Contemplation And Responsibility*, Ed. Harry James Cargas, Minneapolis, Minnesota : Fortress Press, 1995.



and open mind still find themselves further understanding their own religion and rooting it even more fully in themselves as they share with others. This concept of inter-religious conversation is not new but certainly has been coming to be more significant in contemporary times than in previous thought. Not only does this sharing of thought allow for a mutual growth of religions it also works toward a common ground.

### **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IS IMPORTANT**

The next concept Smart discussed was absolute relativism. No interfaith dialogue is possible from this perspective. At least not interfaith dialogue as one might tend to think of it. Rather than having a sharing of ideas and concepts and feelings of mutual growing and understanding a dialogue would consist of little learning and probably more of an exclusivist mentality. Absolute relativism suggests that in order for an Ultimate Truth to be valid for an individual they must experience all aspects of the religion leading to that Ultimate. This is nearly the same as an exclusivist perspective except that the idea acknowledges that multiple possibilities for an Ultimate exist and are simply subjective each individuals experiences. Returning to the question of whether or not Christianity would be easier in a non-pluralist world as viewed from this perspective we would get a neutral response. For someone holding an absolute relativist position it would be difficult to comprehend other Ultimate Truth's and at the same time know that they exist. The question of Christianity without other from this perspective would simply acknowledge itself as the only religion to exist. The question of easier or not would likely lie in lack of testing and challenging of religion. What I mean is that without the challenges and

questions presented by the others, without the difficulty of living in a pluralist world Christianity would really be stagnant.<sup>48</sup>

### **A CRUCIAL CHOICE**

Smart discusses hegemonistic pluralism as the concept that will likely remain the primary choice, at least among Christians, due to the worldly need for a peaceful coexistence of multiple religions and beliefs. With this aspect coming to light we realize that this position allows for other religions by situating its own truths, at least in part, within them. By allowing this small aspect of truth to be present in the others religious truth Christianity really negates that the others are not part of Christianity. Christianity from this perspective sets itself up as the Ultimate Truth to which the others are attempting to aspire. In one sense hegemonists are seeing the world as non-plural and focusing of Christianity as the only with lesser religions attempting to mimic it. The dialogue here is difficult especially for the others as Christianity does not really accept them as others. By installing its own truths in others Christianity is claiming superiority but not denying other aspects of the others.

### **STILL MUCH TO LEARN**

Realistic pluralism suggests an orbital type of pluralism in which all religions track around a single Ultimate Truth and vary in their respective distance from it. Christianity alone in a non-pluralist world would be envisioned as a single planet orbiting a truth it would almost certainly never reach. The concept of a non-pluralist world would

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<sup>48</sup> J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity And World Religions : The Challenge Of Pluralism*, Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 1984.

leave Christianity with no means of advancement.<sup>49</sup> In reality it would not have any dialogue to help move that orbit closer to the truth. The reality of the matter is that without the modernist questioning and study that pluralism brings to Christianity realistic pluralists would never experience a challenge to their beliefs. Christianity has developed and evolved over the course of thousands of years usually as a result from some challenge to the orthodoxy of the church. These challenges have aided Christianity in presenting options that Christians alone may never have conceived.

### **AND YET UNDEFINED**

Finally regulative pluralism suggests that all religions are working towards a singular undefined Ultimate Truth. This position allows for all religions to be valid. Attempting to hypothesize the perspective of Christianity in a non-pluralist world is unclear from this situation. Would Christianity work towards an Ultimate Truth without the others to push towards that same Ultimate? As with realistic pluralism and the other positions no challenges would be presented to Christianity. No tests for Christians to develop their beliefs and reorganize their religion. What I am saying is that Christianity would not have anything to aspire to if it were the only religion.

### **DESIRABILITY**

We then return to the question concerning the desirability of Christianity in a non-pluralist world. The previous information suggests that Christianity would be stagnant and not dynamic. The questions and challenges that have been presented in regards to Christianity, especially during the Modernist period, would not be made. Christianity

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<sup>49</sup> Daniel Stout and Judith Mitchell Buddenbaum, *Religion And Popular Culture :Studies On The Interaction Of Worldviews*, Ames, Iowa : Iowa State University Press, 2001.

would prosper little from being the only religion.<sup>50</sup> Being the sole religion in a non-pluralist world would leave only two alternatives. First one could adopt Christianity and follow its rules and beliefs. Certainly not an easy decision to make in itself but when presented with only Christianity curiously I believe many would choose atheism or some form of atheism. Christianity itself cannot support the vast cultural perspectives across the globe. Billions of people are accustomed to a particular way of life with organized traditions and rituals in their own right. Even if they had not grown up within their culture and been affected by their entire environment they would still have doubts regarding Christianity.

### **CHRISTIAN RIPS**

Dissension within Christianity would outweigh the good of the uniqueness of the sole religion. Christianity already has a vast number of denominations and followings. Without an interfaith dialogue with others Christianity would have to turn inward. Unfortunately the number of groups would likely splinter even further and not precisely in an advantageous manner as the challenging of others has aided us in doing. The comparison would only be weighed by those within and descending from the orthodox way of Christian right.<sup>51</sup> With less unity even more would adopt an atheist perspective.

### **IS IT WORTHWHILE?**

Christianity has very little to gain from being the sole religion. The pluralist world is exactly the factor that helps and has helped Christianity develop into what it is today.

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<sup>50</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message In A Non-Christian World*, New York, New York, International Missionary Council Harper & Bros, 1938.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Plantinga, *Christianity And Plurality : Classic And Contemporary Readings*, Oxford ; Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

In addition the negation of validity for the numerous other religions of the world would only create further hindrances in the acceptance of Christianity. Some of the perspectives that Smart offers are highly probably options. From these options we as Christians can adopt a position and our own truths will remain intact.

In part two John Hick says that we have always lived in a pluralist world. Dating all the way back to pre-Christian times other religions and various forms of worship have existed. It is misleading to identify that pluralism and Christianity are not in proximity to each other. Certainly they have been present in the same places at the same times as the other. However, until recently it was more rare for pluralism and Christianity to confront one another. They may have coexisted as they always have but they certainly have not always been at odds. In fact from the historical perspective we can ascertain that Christianities meager beginnings were aided by the tolerance provided through a pluralist society. This relationship in itself warrants at least an open mind in thinking about and discussing the subjects of pluralism and Christianity in confrontation and harmony. Christianity can embrace pluralism and draw from its resources means of development, growth and maturity.

## **CHRISTIANITY AND PLURALISM**

As pluralism allows a level of tolerance in this pluralist world Christianity is aided by the challenges and dialogue provided for only by other religions. Returning to the words of John Hick, Christianity needs pluralism to survive. In fact we need the interfaith dialogue to learn of the other religions and cultures. Certainly with this tool a peaceful arrangement can be made. The attempt to move forward instead of back must come from a letting down of walls and an opening of minds.

Perhaps we do not yet know what position we hold or even which is most likely. Is the Ultimate Truth yet undefined and undiscovered? Are we moving toward it, around it, away from it or even within it? These questions remain unanswered yet we know that in order to continue the search for the Ultimate Truth we must continue to seek and what we find may be beyond our comprehension. That concept should ring true as we desire a complete knowledge of that which is yet undefined.

### **SUMMARY**

In conclusion we see that pluralism is a necessity for the advancement not only of a world theology but also of Christianity itself. Certainly without pluralism and tolerance the world would be made up quite differently. It is important to notice that the interfaith dialogue with the other though seemingly dragging on is yet beginning and there are truly exciting things to come through the advancement and open sharing of ideas and concepts of one another's theological background.

Christianity at its best will embrace pluralism and the others of the world. Together they will seek out an Ultimate Truth of which is unknown to all and still highly discussed. It is true that Christian often has a superiority complex of sorts but it can be circumvented reasonably simply. The key to the discovery of truth lies in openness to that truth and in this world openness to the world.

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