THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM
FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

ALISTER E. MCGRATH[*]

One of the most perceptive analysts of the consequences of pluralism for Christian churches is Lesslie Newbigin, who is able to draw on his substantial firsthand experience of Christian life in India as he reflects on what pluralism means—and does not mean—for contemporary Christianity:

> It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.[1]

Newbigin here makes a distinction between pluralism as a fact of life and pluralism as an ideology—that is, the belief that pluralism is to be encouraged and desired and that normative claims to truth are to be censured as imperialist and divisive. With the former there can be no arguing. The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions. The emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, the expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome, the establishment of the Mar Thoma church in southeastern India—all of these are examples of situations in which Christian apologists and theologians, not to mention ordinary Christian believers, have been aware that there are alternatives to Christianity on offer. Equally, it is perfectly obvious that cultural pluralism exists. Yet this poses no decisive difficulties for Christianity, in theory or in practice.[2] The ability of the gospel to transcend cultural barriers is one of its chief glories.

It is quite possible that this insight may have been lost to English or American writers of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. For such writers pluralism might have meant little more than a variety of forms of Protestantism, while "different religions" would probably have been understood to refer simply to the age-old tension between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Pluralism was situated and contained within a Christian context. But immigration from the Indian subcontinent has

*Alister McGrath is lecturer in Christian doctrine and ethics at Oxford University in Oxford, England OX2 6PW.

[1] L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 1.
[2] For a useful discussion see H. M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

changed things in England, with Hinduism and Islam becoming foci of identity for ethnic minorities, just as France has been shaken by the new presence of Islam through emigration from its former North African colonies. As a result, western theologians (who still seem to dominate global discussion of such issues) have at long last become aware of and begun to address issues that are routine facts of everyday life for Christians in many parts of the world. Yet often, as we shall see, this belated awakening to the issue of religious pluralism is often formulated and discussed on the basis of a set of western liberal—rather than Christian—assumptions.

The new accessibility of what Europeans still like to call the Far East has meant that many westerners have firsthand experience of eastern religions and feel their mystic appeal. One result of this encounter has been what is loosely known as the new-age movement.[3] This media-generated, catchall phrase sweeps into its *omnium gatherum* a remarkably diverse number of late-twentieth-century American (or perhaps one should say Californian) spiritual practices and beliefs. In many ways the new-age movement is a natural reaction to the efforts of a generation of pseudo-intellectual mainline Protestant writers and preachers who attempted to totally eradicate the supernatural, mystical and transcendent element from Christianity in the name of an imaginary "universal rationality" or "global secular culture." America got bored with the resulting liberal religion of platitudes and adopted the new age instead.[4] Part of the fuel for the new age is an interest in eastern religion, coupled with a marked aversion to adopting the social outlooks that they suggest. Thus many new-agers profess to admire the religious teachings of certain Hindu gurus but are less than enthusiastic about the rigorous programs of abstinence and chastity linked with such teachings.

The basic phenomenon of pluralism, then, is nothing new. What is new is the intellectual response to it: the suggestion that plurality of beliefs is not merely a matter of observable fact but is theoretically justified—not only in intellectual and cultural life in general, but also particularly in relation to the religions. Claims by any one group or individual to have an exclusive hold on "truth" are thus treated as the intellectual equivalent of fascism. Significantly, the first casualty of the pluralist agenda is truth.

My basic strategy, here and in the sequel to this article, can be summarized as follows. A pluralist ideology will be unimpressed by assertions on the part of evangelicals to the effect that traditional Christian values and beliefs are "true." Pluralists will, at best, treat them simply as different perspectives on a greater whole and, at worst, accuse evangelicals of arrogance and imperialism. A far more damaging strategy is to demonstrate that pluralism itself is fatally flawed, riddled with internal contradictions,

---

[3] For useful introductions see R. Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Waco: Word, 1988); D. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986).

[4] A point stressed by T. Peters, *The Cosmic Self: A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movement* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

and that it fails to correspond with the world as it really is.[5] In other words it is compromised by a series of fatal intra- and extra-paradigmatic inconsistencies, which cumulate to render it implausible, save to those who are totally precommitted to it for cultural reasons. My approach involves bringing to the level of conscious articulation some of the central presuppositions and methods of a pluralist ideology in order to subject them to the kind of critical scrutiny that is so long overdue.

Sadly—indeed, ironically—my conclusion is not merely that liberal pluralism is intellectually vacuous at certain critical junctures. It also seems guilty of precisely the dogmatism and imperialism of which evangelicals are so freely (and uncritically) accused. The idea of a dogmatic liberalism may seem a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, under serious threat from a spiritually and intellectually renewed evangelicalism, liberalism seems to many observers to have retreated into defensive positions, which it is prepared to maintain with all the vigor of an Athanasius defending the deity of Christ against the world. A pluralist ideology has become an integral part, perhaps even a cornerstone, of that defensive strategy. For this reason it is important to probe the foundations of that ideology. In what follows I shall subject both intellectual pluralism in general, and religious pluralism in particular, to critical scrutiny.

I. INTELLECTUAL PLURALISM

The intellectual foundations of this approach to pluralism are associated with postmodernism, which is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations, which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical situatedness of all human thought. Postmodernity is a vague and ill-defined notion, which perhaps could be described as the general intellectual outlook arising after the collapse of modernity.[6] Although there are those who maintain that modernity is still alive and active, this attitude is becoming increasingly rare. Further, we need to note that modernity itself is a vague idea. The very idea of postmodernism might be argued to "presuppose that our age is unified enough that we can speak of its ending."[7] Nevertheless much of western culture disagrees. The trauma of Auschwitz is a powerful and shocking indictment of the "pretense of new creation, the hatred of tradition, the idolatry of self" characteristic of

---

[5] It might be objected that this amounts to a naive "correspondence theory" of truth. In response see the writings of D. Davidson, especially "True to the Facts," *Journal of Philosophy* (1960) 216–334; "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (1974) 5–20; "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (ed. E. Lepore; Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1986) 307–319.

[6] On these general themes see D. Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); T. C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

[7] D. Kolb, *Critique of Pure Modernity*, cited in Oden, *After Modernity* 76.

modernity.[8] It is modernity, especially with its compulsive desire to break totally with the past, that gave rise to the Nazi holocaust and the Stalinist purges. There has been a general collapse of confidence in the enlightenment trust in the power of reason to provide foundations for a universally valid knowledge of the world, including God. Reason fails to deliver a morality suited to the real world in which we live. And with this collapse in confidence in universal and necessary criteria of truth, relativism and pluralism have flourished.

To give a full definition of postmodernism is virtually impossible.[9] Nevertheless it is possible to identify its leading general features insofar as it is likely to be encountered by the Christian apologist, especially on North American college and university campuses. This is the precommitment to relativism or pluralism in relation to questions of truth. To use the jargon of the movement, one could say that postmodernism represents a situation in which the signifier has replaced the signified as the focus of orientation and value. In terms of the structural linguistics developed initially by Ferdinand de Saussure and subsequently by Roman Jakobson and others, the recognition of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and its interdependence with other signs marks the end of the possibility of fixed, absolute meanings. Thus writers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard argued that language was whimsical and capricious and did not reflect any overarching, absolute linguistic laws. It was arbitrary, incapable of disclosing meaning. Thus Baudrillard argued that modern society was trapped in an endless network of artificial sign systems, which meant nothing and merely perpetuated the belief systems of those who created them.

One aspect of postmodernism that illustrates this trend particularly well, while also indicating its obsession with texts and language, is deconstruction—the critical method that virtually declares that the identity and intentions of the author of a text are an irrelevance to the interpretation of the text, prior to insisting that in any case no meaning can be found in it. All interpretations are equally valid or equally meaningless (depending upon your point of view). As Paul de Man, one of the leading American proponents of this approach, declared, the very idea of "meaning" smacked of fascism. Blossoming in post-Vietnam America, the approach was given intellectual respectability by academics such as de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom and J. Hillis Miller.[10]

The lunacy of this position only became publicly apparent with the sensational publication of some wartime articles of de Man. On December 1,

[8] Oden, *After Modernity* 77.

[9] The following works are helpful: M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University, 1987); T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); K. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989); D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); C. Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990).

[10] For an excellent analysis see D. Lehman, *Signs of the Times* (London: André Deutsch, 1991).

1989, the *New York Times* reported the discovery of anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi articles written by de Man for the Belgian Nazi newspaper *Le Soir*. A scandal resulted. Was de Man's deconstructionalism an attempt to deny his own past? Was de Man himself really a fascist, trying to escape from his own guilt? And, given the axiomatic status of the fallacy of authorial intention within postmodernism, nobody could argue that de Man had actually meant something different from the impression created by those articles. After all, the author's views were, according to deconstruction, an irrelevance. No attempt could be made to excuse de Man by an appeal to his historical circumstances, for de Man himself had written that "considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint." Deconstruction thus seemed to sink into the mire of internal inconsistency.

The area of Christian theology that is most sensitive to this development is apologetics, traditionally regarded as an attempt to defend and commend the truth-claims of Christianity to the world.[11] Apologetically the question that arises in the postmodern context is the following: How can Christianity's claims to truth be taken seriously when there are so many rival alternatives and when "truth" itself has become a devalued notion? No one can lay claim to possession of the truth. It is all a question of perspective. All claims to truth are equally valid. There is no universal or privileged vantage point that allows anyone to decide what is right and what is wrong.

This situation has both significant advantages and drawbacks for the Christian apologist. On the one hand apologetics no longer labors under the tedious limitations of the petty and asphyxiating enlightenment worldview, fettered by the illusions and pretensions of pure reason. Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a degenerate form of rational religion. The severe limitations of the modern mentality are intellectually passe and need no longer be a serious difficulty for the apologist. Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen summarizes this development well:

> In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does the world exist? and Why does it have its present order, rather than another? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings. The recognition that Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well, is a major change in our cultural situation.[12]

While intellectual dinosaurs still stalk our campuses, unaware that the days of a blind secular faith in human reason are behind us, the general

---

[11] I myself have attempted to develop an apologetic approach that deals with the specifics of the postmodern situation, including the pluralist agenda; cf. A. E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1992; North American edition forthcoming from Zondervan).

[12] Allen, *Christian Belief* 5–6.

atmosphere has changed. Christianity has as much right to gain a hearing as any other system of beliefs.

But with that advance has come a retreat. All belief systems are to be regarded as equally plausible. Something is true if it is true for me. Christianity has become acceptable because it is believed to be true by some, not because it *is* true. How can Christianity commend itself on campus when the truth question is virtually dismissed out of hand in advance? The apologist will wish to stress that Christianity believes itself, on excellent grounds, to possess insights that are both true and relevant. How can Christianity commend itself on campus when the merits of truth are not conceded?

This brings us to perhaps the real challenge: Postmodernism has an endemic aversion to questions of truth. But the need to have the truth question on the agenda is relatively easily argued. One method of approach might be the following. To the postmodern suggestion that something can be "true for me" but not "true" the following reply might be made. Is fascism as equally true as democratic libertarianism? Consider the person who believes, passionately and sincerely, that it is an excellent thing to place millions of Jews in gas chambers. That is certainly "true for him." But can it be allowed to pass unchallenged? Is it as equally true as the belief that one ought to live in peace and tolerance with one's neighbors, including Jews? Should one tolerate the burning of widows on Hindu funeral pyres?[13]

The moral seriousness of this question often acts as the intellectual equivalent of a battering-ram, bringing out the fact that certain views just cannot be allowed to be true. There must be criteria, standards of judgment, that allow one to exclude certain viewpoints as unacceptable. Otherwise postmodernism will be seen to be uncritical and naive, a breeding ground of the political and moral complacency that allowed the rise of the Third Reich in the 1930s. Even postmodernism has difficulties in allowing that Nazism is a good thing. Yet precisely that danger lies there, as evidenced by the celebrated remark of Sartre: "Tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man."

This is an important point, perhaps the point at which postmodernism is at its most vulnerable. To lend extra weight to it we may consider the consequences of the ethical views of Michel Foucault, generally regarded as one of the intellectual pillars of postmodern thought. Foucault argues passionately, in a series of highly original and creative works, that the very idea of "truth" grows out of the interests of the powerful. "Truth" can

---

[13] A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 26. For an account of the British decision to abolish the practice of *satī* see S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985) 157–158. Regulation 17 of the Bengal Code (1829) declared that "the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts."

support systems of repression by identifying standards to which people can be forced to conform.[14] Thus what is mad or criminal does not depend upon objective criteria but upon the standards and interests of those in authority. Each society has its "general politics of truth," which serves its vested interests. "Truth" thus serves the interests of society by perpetuating its ideology and providing a rational justification for the imprisonment or elimination of those who happen to contradict its general outlook. And philosophy can too easily become an accomplice in this repression by providing the oppressors with rational arguments to justify their practices. Philosophers have allowed society to believe that it was persecuting its marginal elements on the basis of "truth" or "morality"—universal and objective standards of morality, of what is right and wrong—rather than on the basis of its own vested interests.

For such reasons Foucault believes that the very idea of objective truth or morality must be challenged. This belief has passed into the structure of much of postmodernism. But is it right? Is not the truth that Foucault's criticism actually rests upon a set of quite definite beliefs about what is right and what is wrong? To give an illustration: Throughout Foucault's writings we find a passionate belief that repression is wrong. Foucault himself is committed to an objective moral value: that freedom is to be preferred to repression. It is necessary to point out that Foucault's critique of morality actually presupposes certain moral values. Beneath his critique of conventional ethics lies a hidden set of moral values and an unacknowledged commitment to them. Foucault's critique of the moral values of society seems to leave him without any moral values of his own, and yet his critique of social values rests upon his own intuitively accepted (rather than explicitly acknowledged and theoretically justified) moral values, which he clearly expects his readers to share. Yet why is struggle preferable to submission? Why is freedom to be chosen rather than repression? These normative questions demand answers if Foucault's position can be justified. But he has vigorously rejected an appeal to general normative principles as an integral part of his method. In effect he makes an appeal to sentimentality rather than to reason, to pathos rather than to principles.[15] That many shared his intuitive dislike of repression ensured he was well received, but the fundamental question remains unanswered: Why is repression wrong? And that same question remains unanswered within postmodernism, which is vulnerable precisely where Foucault is vulnerable.

As Richard Rorty, perhaps the most distinguished American philosopher to develop Foucault's dislike of general principles and normative standards, remarks, a consequence of this approach must be the recognition that

---

[14] The most important writings are M. Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973); *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

[15] S. Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987) 189–190.

> there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there our-
> selves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a prac-
> tice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no
> rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.[16]

But if this approach is right, what justification could be given for opposing
Nazism? Or Stalinism? Rorty cannot give a justification for the moral or
political rejection of totalitarianism, as he himself concedes. If he is right,
Rorty admits, then he has to acknowledge

> that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent,
> there is nothing to be said to them of the form "There is something within
> you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitar-
> ian society, which will endure forever, there is something beyond those prac-
> tices which condemns you."[17]

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for Rorty the truth of moral values
depends simply upon their existence. And it is at this point that many post-
modernists feel deeply uneasy. Something seems to be wrong here. And, as
I shall demonstrate in my second article on this theme,[18] this sense of un-
ease is an important point of entry for the Christian insistence that, in the
first place, truth matters, and that, in the second, it is accessible.

II. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

I must now turn to my second main theme. Alongside the postmodern
celebration of pluralism in general we now encounter a new concern for re-
ligious pluralism. Its rise can directly be related to the collapse of the en-
lightenment idea of universal knowledge rather than to any difficulties
within Christianity itself. Often there is a crude attempt to divert attention
from the collapse of the enlightenment vision by implying that religious
pluralism represents a new and unanswerable challenge to Christianity it-
self. Allen rightly dismisses this as a spurious claim:

> Many have been driven to relativism by the collapse of the Enlightenment's
> confidence in the power of reason to provide foundations for our truth-claims
> and to achieve finality in our search for truth in the various disciplines.
> Much of the distress concerning pluralism and relativism which is voiced to-
> day springs from a crisis in the secular mentality of modern western culture,
> not from a crisis in Christianity itself.[19]

Yet these relativistic assumptions have become deeply ingrained within
secular society, often with the assumption that they are to the detriment
of Christian faith.

---

[16] R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1982) p. xlii.
[17] Ibid.
[18] See A. E. McGrath, "The Christian Church's Response to Pluralism," forthcoming in
JETS 35/4 (December 1992).
[19] Allen, *Christian Belief* 9.

So given that there are so many religions in the marketplace, how can Christianity claim to be true? Before proceeding further, let us note a difficulty here. The word "religion" needs further examination. In his classic but highly problematic work *The Golden Bough* (1890), Sir James Frazer made the fundamental point that "there is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy everyone must obviously be impossible." Yet largely on account of the homogenizing tendencies of modern liberalism there has recently been a determined effort to reduce all religions to the same basic phenomenon.

There is a question of intellectual power here. Who makes the rules that determine what is a religion and what is not? The rules of this game determine the outcome, so who decides on them? Underlying much recent western liberal discussion of "the religions" is a naive assumption that "religion" is a genus, an agreed category. In fact it is nothing of the sort. John Milbank makes the point that the "assumption about a religious genus" is central to

> the more recent mode of encounter as dialogue, but it would be a mistake to imagine that it arose simultaneously among all the participants as the recognition of an evident truth. On the contrary, it is clear that the other religions were taken by Christian thinkers to be species of the genus "religion," because these thinkers systematically subsumed alien cultural phenomena under categories which comprise western notions of what constitutes religious thought and practice. These false categorizations have often been accepted by western-educated representatives of the other religions themselves, who are unable to resist the politically imbued rhetorical force of western discourse.[20]

We must therefore be intensely suspicious of the naive assumption that "religion" is a well-defined category that can be sharply and surgically distinguished from "culture" as a whole.

It is important to appreciate that a cultural issue is often linked in with this debate. To defend Christianity is to be seen to belittle non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multicultural society. Especially to those of liberal political convictions the multicultural agenda demands that to avoid triumphalism or imperialism religions should not be permitted to make truth claims. Indeed there seems to be a widespread perception that the rejection of religious pluralism entails intolerance or unacceptable claims to exclusivity. In effect the liberal political agenda dictates that all religions should be treated on an equal footing. It is but a small step from this political judgment to the theological declaration that all religions are the same. But is there any reason for progressing from the entirely laudable and acceptable demand that we should respect religions other than our own, to the more radical demand that we regard them all as

---

[20] J. Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. G. D'Costa; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 176. The entire essay merits detailed reading.

the same, or as equally valid manifestations of an eternal dimension of life?

In one of its more extreme forms this view might be stated as follows: All religions lead to God. But this cannot be taken seriously when some world religions are avowedly nontheistic. (Although some western writers, irritated by nontheistic religions, have argued that they really are theistic despite what their adherents believe—thus neatly forcing all religions into the same mold.) A religion can hardly lead to God if it explicitly denies the existence of a god or any gods. We therefore need to restate the question in terms of "ultimate reality" or "truth." Thus refined, this position might be stated as follows: Religion is often determined by the circumstances of one's birth. An Indian is likely to be a Hindu; an Arab is likely to be a Moslem. On account of this observation, it is argued, all religions must be equal paths to the truth.

This makes truth a function of birth. If I were to be born into Nazi Germany, I would likely be a Nazi. Does this make Nazism true? If I had been born in ancient Rome I would probably have shared its polytheism; if I had been born in modern Arabia I would bé a monotheist. Does this make them both true? Such a shockingly naive view of truth would not be taken seriously anywhere else. No other intellectual discipline would accept such a superficial approach to truth. Why accept it here? It seems to rest upon an entirely laudable wish to allow that everyone is right, which ends up destroying the notion of truth itself. Consider two propositions: (1) Different people have different religious views. (2) Therefore all religious views are equally valid. Is proposition (1) in any way implied by proposition (2)? For the form of liberalism committed to this approach, mere existence of a religious idea appears to be a guarantor of its truth. No one seems prepared to fight for the truth content of defunct religions, such as classical polytheism. Is this perhaps because there is no one alive committed to them, whose views need to be respected in a multicultural situation?

The fatal weakness of this approach usually leads to its being abandoned and being replaced with a modified version, which could be stated thus: "Any view which is held with sincerity may be regarded as true." I might thus be a Nazi, a Satanist, or a passionate believer in the flatness of the earth. My sincerity is a guarantee of the truth. On this view it would follow that if someone sincerely believes that modern Europe would be a better place if six million Jews were to be placed in gas chambers, the sincerity of those convictions allow that view to be accepted as true. British philosopher of religion John Hick summarizes the contempt with which this view is held: "To say that whatever is sincerely believed and practiced is, by definition, true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral."[21]

It is therefore more than a little ironic that the most significant advocate of the pluralist "truth-in-all-religions" approach is this same John Hick, who argues that the same basic, infinite divine reality lies at the ex-

---

[21] J. Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (London: Sheldon, 1974) 148.

periential roots of all religions. They experience and express this reality in different ways, however. Why? "Their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to an increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration."[22] This approach thus suggests that the various religions must be understood to complement one another. In other words truth does not lie in an "either-or" but in a "both-and" approach. On the basis of Hick's homogenizing approach no genuine conflicting truth claims can occur. They are ruled out of order on a priori grounds. By definition religions can only complement, not contradict, each other. In practice Hick appears to contradict himself here, frequently declaring that "exclusive" approaches to religions are wrong. For example he styles the traditional "salvation through Christ alone" statements of the 1960 Congress on World Mission as "ridiculous"—where, by his own criteria, the most stinging criticism that could be directed at them is that they represent a "difference in perception." The inherent absurdity of Hick's refusal to take an evaluative position in relation to other religions is totally compromised by his eagerness to adopt such a position in relation to versions of Christianity that threaten his outlook, both on account of their numerical strength and noninclusive theologies.

When all is said and done, and when all differences in expression arising from cultural and intellectual development are taken into account, Hick must be challenged forcefully concerning his crudely homogenizing approach to the world religions. It is absurd to say that a religion that says that there is a God complements a religion that declares with equal vigor that there is not a God (and both types of religion exist).[23] If the religious believer actually believes something, then disagreement is inevitable—and proper. As Rorty remarked, nobody "except the occasional cooperative freshman" really believes that "two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good."[24]

One of the most serious difficulties that arises here relates to the fact that, on the basis of Hick's model, it is not individual religions that have access to truth; it is the western liberal pluralist, who insists that each religion must be seen in the context of others before it can be evaluated. As many have pointed out, this means that the western liberal doctrine of religious pluralism is defined as the only valid standpoint for evaluating individual religions. Hick has set at the center of his system of religions a vague and undefined idea of "the Eternal One," which seems to be little more than a vague liberal idea of divinity, carefully defined—or, more accurately, deliberately not defined, to avoid the damage that precision entails, to include at least something from all of the major world religions that Hick feels is worth including.

Yet is not this approach shockingly imperialist? Hick's implication is that it is only the educated western liberal academic who can really

[22] J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 1977) 146.

[23] H. Meynell, "On the Idea of a World Theology," *Modern Theology* 1 (1985) 149–163.

[24] Rorty, *Consequences* 166.

understand all the religions. Their adherents may naively believe that they have access to the truth. In fact only the western liberal academic has such privileged access, which is denied to those who belong to and practice such religion. Despite not being a Buddhist, Hick is able to tell the Buddhist what he or she really believes (as opposed to what they think they believe). Perhaps one of the most astonishing claims made by liberals in this respect can be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, in which a number of contributors—such as Paul Knitter, Langdon Gilkey, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Tom Driver—assert that all the religious traditions can share a common outlook on justice and liberation. This arrogant imposition of political correctness upon the world religions glosses over the patently obvious fact that the world religions have differed—and continue to differ—significantly over social and political matters as much as over religious ideas.

Sadly, there is no shortage of such spectacular displays of liberal arrogance. A recent example is provided by Hans Küng, who asserts that "religion can guarantee supreme values, unconditional norms, the deepest motivations and the highest ideals."[25] Studiously avoiding the question of how we can be sure that the religions know what they are talking about (the whole question of revelation is treated with a superficiality that leaves one as much saddened as angered), Küng insists that the religions offer the only hope in a world that has, quite frankly, got itself into something of a mess. Happily for the human race, Küng can see how to get out of this mess, offering us a vision of a world in which there is peace and justice, equality and plurality, toleration and freedom, productivity and ecological solidarity.[26]

This liberal paradise bears little recognizable resemblance to the world of the closing decade of the twentieth century. It is a world that does not exist at present and shows no signs of being about to come into existence. To this idealized and fictional world Küng offers an ideal and fictional vision of what the religions can offer humanity: They alone (at least as interpreted by Küng) can tell the world what it means to be truly human.[27] In fact Küng takes such astonishing liberties with the religious traditions of the world that the overall effect of his book is to offer us not so much a global religious consensus concerning a future world ethic but his own personal views on the matter, elevated to the status of Olympian pronouncements and very superficially grounded in a highly selective appeal to those aspects of the world's religious traditions that Küng can force into his procrustean mold.

Now those of us familiar with debates on this issue within Christianity will be astonished at this suggestion. Christian writers seem to have a variety of opinions on what it means to be human, as Philip E. Hughes pointed out.[28] An even greater variety of opinions exists within the world religious traditions. Happily, however, Küng can sort out the muddle that the reli-

[25] H. Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM, 1991) 54.
[26] Ibid. 67–69.
[27] Ibid. 90.
[28] P. E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

gions have created for themselves. From his privileged vantage point he can see four common features within the views of what it means to be "truly human" offered by the world religious traditions: (1) the preservation of human rights, (2) the emancipation of women, (3) the realization of social justice, and (4) the immorality of war. All this may be self-evident to Küng, but it is far from self-evident to those who do not share his tendency to project the contemporary concerns of western liberal culture onto other traditions and then declare that this is what they meant (or ought to mean) anyway. It is, sad to say, little more than the crude reduction of religion to the cultural norms of liberalism, a form of imperialism that most of us had hoped was dead and gone. The book is little more than an ostentatious parade of western liberal values. It may be dressed up in the language of religion, but the religious content is firmly subordinated to values that are accepted within the social circles that Küng regards as opinion-forming. It is little more than a theology of a liberal ghetto that, like Nelson, firmly turns a blind eye to the religious realities of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, to name but two obvious instances.

Küng is of course aware that we live in a postmodern world. Postmodernity has come to replace the old worldviews, such as "state socialism" or "neocapitalism." He is clearly familiar with the jargon of postmodernity, but has he understood it? Where most of us regard postmodernism as an outlook that legitimates and even glories in pluralism, Küng knows what it really ought to mean. The same treatment meted out to world religions is in turn given to postmodernism. In his genial reinterpretation of this idea Küng looks forward to universally recognized notions of justice, freedom and toleration. One wonders: Has he actually understood the problem? Despite all his use of the jargon of postmodernity, Küng seems to be a thinker trapped in an enlightenment worldview, which treats all the religions as manifestations of a greater rational whole accessible to the intelligent thinker. Paradoxically his approach to pluralism rests upon an enlightenment worldview, which postmodernism has done so much to demolish.

I have stated my belief that pluralism is a cultural phenomenon that needs to be addressed by responsible Christian writers. Conscious that many of them are readers of this *Journal*, I hope to stimulate you to do so. But I also have no hesitations in suggesting that some of the options currently in fashion for dealing with pluralism are intellectually shallow and theologically superficial. We have to steer our way between the Scylla of denying that pluralism exists (or that it is important) and the Charybdis of dealing with the problem by asserting that all religions are basically the same (or that all opinions are equally valid). These are neat ways of avoiding the issues and represent a pragmatic means of maintaining an uneasy peace within the culturally diverse faculties of modern American universities. The price paid, however, is high—too high to allow liberalism's lazy generalizations and homogenizations to pass unchallenged. It is not simply the thinking Christian who is concerned about the shallowness and intellectual vacuity of such outlooks. In the sequel to this article I wish to begin to explore some approaches that I believe to hold promise for future responses to the challenge of pluralism.