THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO PLURALISM

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In an earlier paper[1] I outlined the difficulties that are raised for Christian thought and practice by the rise of a pluralist ideology. In this second contribution I propose to address some of those difficulties. I begin, however, by making a point that needs to be heard, especially in relation to religious pluralism.

The pluralist agenda has certain important theological consequences. It is a simple matter of fact that traditional Christian theology does not lend itself particularly well to the homogenizing agenda of religious pluralists. The suggestion that all religions are more or less talking about vaguely the same thing finds itself in difficulty in relation to certain essentially Christian ideas—most notably, the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity. Such distinctive doctrines are embarrassing to those who wish to debunk what they term the "myth of Christian uniqueness." We are invited, on the weak and lazy grounds of pragmatism, to abandon those doctrines in order that the pluralist agenda might be advanced.

In response to this pressure a number of major Christological and theological developments may be observed. Let me note two of them briefly before exploring them in more detail. (1) Doctrines such as the incarnation, which imply a high profile of identification between Jesus Christ and God, are discarded in favor of various degree Christologies, which are more amenable to the reductionist program of liberalism. (2) The idea that God is in any sense disclosed or defined Christologically is set to one side on account of its theologically momentous implications for the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, which liberal pluralism finds an embarrassment. Let us turn to consider these two points.

First, the idea of the incarnation is rejected, often dismissively, as a myth.[2] Thus John Hick and his collaborators reject the incarnation on various logical and common-sense counts and yet fail to deal with the question of why Christians should have developed this doctrine in the first place.[3] There is an underlying agenda to this dismissal of the incarnation, and a central part of that agenda is the elimination of the sheer distinc-

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[1] A. E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *JETS* 35/3 (September 1992) 361–373.

[2] Perhaps most notably in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick; London: SCM, 1977).

[3] See A. E. McGrath, "Resurrection and Incarnation: The Foundations of the Christian Faith," *Different Gospels* (ed. A. Walker; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988) 79–96.

tiveness of Christianity. A sharp distinction is thus drawn between the historical person of Jesus Christ and the principles that he is alleged to represent. Paul Knitter is but one of a small galaxy of pluralist writers concerned to drive a wedge between the "Jesus-event" (unique to Christianity) and the "Christ-principle" (accessible to all religious traditions and expressed in their own distinctive but equally valid ways).

It is fair, and indeed necessary, to inquire concerning the pressure for such developments, for a hidden pluralist agenda appears to govern the outcome of this Christological assault—a point made by Wolfhart Pannenberg in a highly perceptive critique of Hick's incarnational views: "Hick's proposal of religious pluralism as an option of authentically Christian theology hinges on the condition of a prior demolition of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation." Hick, Pannenberg notes, assumes that this demolition has already taken place, and he chides him for his excessive selectivity—not to mention his lack of familiarity with recent German theology—in drawing such a conclusion.[4]

It is significant that the pluralist agenda forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ in order to meet its needs. In an effort to fit Jesus into the mold of the "great religious teachers of humanity" category, the Ebionite heresy has been revived and made politically correct. Jesus is one of the religious options made available by the great human teachers of religion.

Second, the idea that God is in some manner made known through Christ has been dismissed. Captivated by the image of a "Copernican revolution" (probably one of the most overworked and misleading phrases in recent writings in this field), pluralists demand that Christians move away from a discussion of Christ to a discussion of God, failing to recognize that the "God of the Christians" (Tertullian) might be rather different from other divinities and that the doctrine of the Trinity spells out the nature of that distinction. The loose and vague talk about "God" or "Reality" found in much pluralist writing is not a result of theological sloppiness or confusion. It is a considered response to the recognition that for Christians to talk about the Trinity is to speak about a specific God (not just "deity" in general) who has chosen to make himself known in and through Jesus Christ. It is a deliberate rejection of authentically and distinctive Christian insights into God in order to suggest that Christianity, to rework a phrase of John Toland, is simply the republication of the religion of nature.

Yet human religious history shows that natural human ideas of the number, nature and character of the gods are notoriously vague and muddled. The Christian emphasis is upon the need to worship not gods in general (Israel's strictures against Canaanite religion being especially important here) but a God who has chosen to make himself known. As Robert Jenson has persuasively argued, the doctrine of the Trinity is an

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[4] W Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed G D'Costa, Maryknoll Orbis, 1990) 100

attempt to spell out the identity of this God and to avoid confusion with rival claimants to this title.[5] The doctrine of the Trinity defines and defends the distinctiveness—no, more than that: the uniqueness—of the "God of the Christians." The NT gives a further twist to this development through its language about "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," locating the identity of God in the actions and passions of Jesus Christ. To put it bluntly: God is Christologically disclosed.

This point is important, given the obvious confusion within the pages of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* concerning the nature and identity of the god(s) or goddess(es) of the pluralists. Pluralism, it seems to me, possesses a certain tendency to self-destruction in that there is—if I could put it like this—"a plurality of pluralisms." For example, a vigorously polemical defense of "pluralism" (a word used frequently throughout its pages) may be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. According to the authors of this volume, Christianity has to be seen in a "pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father." Yet having agreed that Christianity does not provide absolute or superior knowledge of God, the pluralist contributors to the volume proceed to display such divergence over the nature of God that it becomes far from clear that they are talking about the same thing.

But there is a more important point here. Pluralism is fatally vulnerable to the charge that it reaches an accommodation between Christianity and other religious traditions by wilfully discarding every distinctive Christian doctrine traditionally regarded as identity-giving and identity-preserving (to say nothing of the reductionist liberties taken with the other religious traditions). The "Christianity" that is declared to be homogeneous with all other "higher religions" would not be recognizable as such to most of its adherents. It would be a theologically, Christologically and soteriologically reduced version of the real thing. It is thus not Christianity that is being related to other world faiths; it is little more than a parody and caricature of this living faith, grounded in the presuppositions and agendas of western liberalism rather than in the self-revelation of God, which is being related to theologically-reduced and -homogenized versions of other living religions.[6] Dialogue turns out to involve the sacrifice of integrity. The identity of Christianity is inextricably linked with the uniqueness of Christ.

So the question arises: Can one remain faithful to Christianity and engage positively with the challenge of pluralism? Or is the price of such engagement an abandonment of much of what is distinctively and authentically Christian? In what follows I wish to suggest that the Christian gospel

[5] R. Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 1–20.

[6] See J. Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," *Christian Uniqueness* (ed. D'Costa) 174–191, esp. 176–177. Milbank's critique of the shallow assumption that "religion" constitutes a well-defined genus should be noted (176).

possesses resources, neglected by pluralists, that allow us to address the modern pluralist situation with integrity and confidence.

I. BEING CRITICAL ABOUT DIALOGUE

Every now and then one gains the impression that a word has become overworked and increasingly incapable of bearing the strain that has been placed upon it. The word "dialogue" has had the misfortune to be treated in this way in recent years. The literature of pluralism is saturated with this word, almost to the point of inducing an intellectual torpor on the part of its unfortunate readers. This fixation is understandable, given the presuppositions of pluralism, especially the unjustified (and in any case unjustifiable) foundational belief that "religion" constitutes a genus. If the pluralist assumption that the various religions as members of a common genus must be understood to complement one another is correct, it follows that truth does not lie in an "either-or" but in a "both-and" approach. This naturally leads to the idea that dialogue between religions can lead to an enhancement of truth, in that the limited perspectives of one religion can be complemented by the differing perspectives of another. As all religions are held to relate to the same reality, dialogue thus constitutes a privileged mode of access to truth.

Yet the time has surely come to emancipate "dialogue" from the bonds of such assumptions. It is perfectly possible for the Christian to engage in dialogue with non-Christians, whether of a religious persuasion or not, without in any way being committed to the intellectually shallow and paternalist view that "we're all saying the same thing."[7] As Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis put it in an aptly entitled article: "It is both logically and practically possible for us, as Christians, to respect and revere worthy representatives of other traditions while still believing—on rational grounds—that some aspects of their world-view are simply mistaken."[8] Contrary to Hick's homogenizing approach, John V. Taylor remarked that dialogue is "a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking."[9]

Dialogue thus implies respect, not agreement, between parties—and, at best, a willingness to take the profound risk that the other person may be right and that recognition of this fact may lead to the changing of positions. This is precisely the apologetic approach commended by Francis Schaeffer and others. Dialogue enables the apologist to explore the other person's worldview and to probe its defenses. For example, all belief systems rest upon presuppositions. Schaeffer treats the manner in which dialogue enables these presuppositions to be identified and explored:

[7] See A. Camps, *Partners in Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 30.

[8] P. Griffiths and D. Lewis, "On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People: A Reply to Professor Hick," *RelS* 19 (1983) 78.

[9] J. V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," *Christianity and Other Religions* (ed. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 212.

> Let us remember that every person we speak to . . . has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not. . . . It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice. . . . A man may try to bury the tension and you may have to help him find it, but somewhere there is a point of inconsistency. He stands in a position which he cannot pursue to the end; and this is not just an intellectual concept of tension, it is what is wrapped up in what he is as a man.[10]

The basic point Schaeffer makes is of considerable importance to a person-centered apologetics: Many people base their lives on a set of presuppositions that are (1) unrecognized and (2) inadequate and that gentle and patient inquiry through dialogue can bring to light. Experience suggests that such gentle explorations can sometimes be devastating, in that they expose the inner contradictions and confusions within someone's outlook on life. A crisis may result, in which faith can be born. (Schaeffer himself provides a number of examples of cases in which exposure of contradictions and tensions within worldviews has important [and negative] implications for their credibility.)

But I do not wish to suggest that Christian dialogue with non-Christians will be of benefit only to the latter. One of my interests concerns the development of Christian doctrine.[11] I have often noticed how significant doctrinal developments are in response to dialogue with those outside the Christian faith. I am not for one moment suggesting that this means that some Christian doctrines are a response to non-Christian pressures. Rather, I am stating as a matter of observable fact that dialogue with non-Christians can provide a stimulus to Christians to reexamine long-held views, which turn out to rest upon inadequate Scriptural foundations.

To give an example: It was not so long ago that it was regarded as irresponsible and shocking for Christians to speak of God suffering or experiencing pain. Yet dialogue with non-Christians, especially those who espoused what has become known as "protest atheism," provided a stimulus to reexamine the Biblical and theological basis of the doctrine of the *apatheia* of God.[12] This stimulus led to the rediscovery of the suffering of God, both in Scripture and in Christian tradition (exemplified by writers such as Martin Luther and Charles Wesley). Dialogue is a pressure to constantly

[10] F. Schaeffer, *Trilogy* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990) 132–133.

[11] See A. E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

[12] See R. B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God," *RelS* 14 (1975) 305–313; J. G. McLelland, *God the Anonymous: A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge, 1976) 37–40; J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (Cambridge, 1926); T. E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," *SJT* 8 (1955) 353–364. On the notion of a suffering God see J. Y. Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Nijhof, 1974); A. E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); W. McWilliams, "Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology," *SJT* 33 (1980) 35–54; J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). On the more general question of the intrusion of secular philosophical ideas into Christian theology during the patristic period see J. S. O'Leary, *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis, 1985); W. Pannenberg, "The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology," *Basic Questions in Theology* (London, 1971) 2.119–183.

reexamine our doctrinal formulations with a view to ensuring that they are as faithful as possible to what they purport to represent. Evangelicalism must be committed to the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Dialogue is one pressure to ensuring that this process of continual self-examination and reformation continues. It is a bulwark against complacency and laziness and a stimulus to return to the sources of faith rather than resting content in some currently acceptable interpretation of them.

II. THE PLURALIST BLIND SPOT:
THE NEED FOR AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK

Experience demands to be interpreted. But what interpretative framework is to be used? As George Lindbeck has so persuasively argued, the "experiential-expressive" approach is fatally vulnerable. Lindbeck notes that the contemporary preoccupation with interreligious dialogue is considerably assisted by the suggestion that the various religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience, such as an isolable core of encounter or an unmediated awareness of the transcendent.[13] The principal objection to this approach is its obvious failure to correspond with the data of observation. As Lindbeck points out, the possibility of religious experience is shaped by religious expectation so that religious experience is conceptually derivative if not vacuous. "It is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous." The assertion that "the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate"[14] is ultimately an axiom, an unverifiable hypothesis—perhaps even a dogma, in the pejorative sense of the term—not least on account of the difficulty of locating and describing the "core experience" concerned.

As Lindbeck rightly points out, this would appear to suggest that there is "at least the logical possibility that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently."[15] The theory can only be credible if it is possible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and behavior and demonstrate that the latter two are articulations of or responses to the former. The notion of a common core experience that remains constant throughout the diversity of human cultures and the flux of history, while being articulated and expressed in an astonishing variety of manners, is vigorously defended (although, it seems to me, through an appeal to rhetoric and liberal values rather than any real concrete evidence) by Friedrich Heiler.[16] Yet it is a notion that remains profoundly unconvincing.

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[13] G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 23.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. 17.
[16] F. Heiler, "The History of Religion as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions," *The History of Religions* (ed. M. Eliade and J. Kitagawa; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959) 142–153.

Without having established a framework that allows him to identify what is being experienced, how can Heiler speak so confidently of a common core experience of the transcendent? Experience itself requires to be interpreted as experience of something. The form of pluralism adopted by Hick and his associates provides such a framework. On the basis of the unjustified (and, it seems to me, inherently unjustifiable) assumption that all religions are more or less the same, it follows that all must experience more or less the same things. The liberal framework precludes divergence at this crucial point. But where does this assumption come from? There is an inherent circularity to the argument, by which the belief that all religions are talking about the same absolute reality leads to the interpretation of all religious experience as relating to that same reality. There is a self-perpetuating circle here at a point at which theological rigor is clearly appropriate and necessary.

My argument, however, is not merely to point out the weakness of this pluralist approach. It is to stress the need to have a standpoint from which experience may be interpreted and to ask hard questions concerning the provenance and credentials of the standpoint adopted. To develop this let us consider a well-worn analogy concerning the relation of the religions. Let us allow Lesslie Newbigin to describe it and make a vitally important observation:

> In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant . . . the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.[17]

Newbigin brings out with clarity the arrogance of the liberal claim to be able to see all the religions from the standpoint of one who sees the full truth. On the basis of this familiar story he demonstrates the importance of the possession of an appropriate framework to interpret experience. The apparently unrelated experiences of the blind men are brought together in a greater and consistent whole by the king, who is able to interpret them in the light of the overall elephantine framework. The liberal pluralist is the king; the unfortunate evangelical is the blindfolded beggar—or so the pluralist would have us believe. Perhaps a more responsible—and considerably less arrogant—approach would be to suggest that we are all, pluralists included, blind beggars, to whom God graciously makes himself known.

[17] L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 9–10.

But what framework is to be used for understanding the religions? Elephants have limited potential in this respect. John Hick and Wilfrid Cantwell Smith object to interpreting both the place and the contents of other religious traditions from a Christian point of view. But they seem to miss the fact that they have to be interpreted from *some* interpretative standpoint—and if they have excluded, as a matter of principle, a specifically *Christian* viewpoint they are obliged to adopt one that by definition is non-Christian. Further, Hick appears to labor under the misunderstanding that where Christian frameworks are biased, those of liberalism are neutral and disinterested. Yet one of the more significant developments within the recent sociology of knowledge has been the realization that there is no neutral point from which a religion or culture may be evaluated. All vantage points imply a valuation. Hick and Cantwell Smith naively assume that their liberal pluralist approach is detached or objective, whereas it is obviously nothing of the sort.

Let us hear one of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Olympian pronouncements on the relation of the religions. She clearly does not intend to enter into dialogue with her opponents when, like Zeus hurling a thunderbolt at those far below him, she delivers her verdict that "the idea that Christianity, or even the Biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism."[18] Yet the assumption that underlies the thinking of most of the contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is that a liberal pluralism does, in effect, have a monopoly on religious truth by allowing religions to be seen in their proper context. It alone provides the vantage point from which the true relation of the religions can be seen. Is this not also an "outrageous and absurd" imperialism? Ruether effectively treats her own religious position as privileged, detached, objective and correct, whereas that of Christianity (or, at least, those forms of Christianity that she dislikes) is treated with little more than scorn and a sneer.

So why should we accept a liberal interpretative standpoint, which owes little if anything to Christian beliefs and is only "objective" in the minds of those who espouse it? All vantage points are committed, in some way or another. There is no neutral Archimedean point. We need to expose "the myth of a pluralistic theology of religions," to quote the subtitle of a significant recent publication in this field.[19] Given this observation, is there not a real need to develop an authentically Christian framework by which religious experience in general may be interpreted? This brings me to my next point: There is a real need to develop genuinely Christian approaches to other religions. The marketplace is dominated by secular or secularizing approaches, or those that rest upon the most shallow and reductionist of theological foundations.

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[18] R. R. Ruether, "Feminism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (ed. J. Hick and P. Knitter; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 141.

[19] *Christian Uniqueness* (ed. D'Costa).

III. DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

If a naive pluralism has gained the upper hand in the academic world, it is partly because evangelicals have allowed it to do so by failing to articulate a credible, coherent, convincing, Christian interpretation of the place of the world religions[20] and to ensure that this is heard and noticed in the public arena. Earlier I stressed the importance of developing a framework to make sense of and evaluate the place and ideas of other religions. Carl E. Braaten makes this point as follows:

> For Christian theology, the religions cannot establish their meaning in a final way apart from the light that falls on them from the gospel: that is, we know what we know about what God is doing in them in the light of Christ; otherwise, we would not know what sense to make of them. Some definite perspective needs to guide our interpretations and appropriations.[21]

Let me offer a modest perspective, which stands within a consensual evangelical tradition and which is grounded in the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. The first major insight encountered by the reader of Scripture is that God created the world. Is it therefore surprising that creation should bear witness to him? Or that the height of his creation—human nature—should carry a recognizable imprint of his nature?[22] And that this imprint might have considerable value as a starting point for understanding the religious impulse of the human race? Through the grace of God the creation is able to point to its Creator. Through the generosity of God we have been left with a latent memory of him, capable of stirring us to recollect him in his fullness. Although there is a fracture, a disjuncture, between the ideal and the empirical, between the realms of fallen and redeemed creation, the memory of that connection lives on, along with the intimation of its restoration through redemption.

Yet the Christian doctrine of redemption affirms that human nature, as we now see and know it, is not human nature as God intended it to be. It forces us to draw a sharp dividing line between pristine and fallen human nature, between the ideal and the real, between the prototype and the actual. The image of God in us is marred but not destroyed. We continue to be the creatures of God, even if we are nonetheless the fallen creatures of God. We have been created for the presence of God; yet, on account of our sin, that presence is but a dream. What should have been filled with the knowledge, glory and presence of God lies empty and unfulfilled instead.

There is thus a fractured relationship with God and an unfulfilled receptivity toward God within us. Creation establishes a potentiality, which sin frustrates—and yet the hurt and pain of that frustration lives on in

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[20] Happily there are promising developments on offer, cf e g P V Martinson, *A Theology of World Religions* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1987), D Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 185–196, C E Braaten, *No Other Gospel' Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1992) 83–102

[21] Braaten, *No Other Gospel'* 71

[22] See D Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London Collins, 1973)

our experience. It is this very sense of being unfulfilled that in itself underlies the idea of a point of contact. We are aware that something is missing. We may not be able to put a name to it. We may not be able to do anything about it. But the Christian gospel is able to interpret our sense of longing, our feeling of unfulfillment, as an awareness of the absence of God, and thus to prepare the way for its fulfillment. Once we realize that we are incomplete, that we lack something, then we begin to wonder if that spiritual emptiness could be filled. It is this impulse that underlies the human quest for religious fulfillment, a quest that the gospel turns upside down through its declaration that we have been sought out by the grace of God.

It is precisely this idea that underlies the famous words of Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."[23] The doctrines of creation and redemption combine to interpret our sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment as a loss, a loss of fellowship with God, that can be restored. They yield a picture of a broken human nature that still possesses an ability to be aware of its loss and to hope that it might be restored. There is a natural point of contact for the gospel, grounded in the frustration of human nature to satisfy itself by its own devices. Augustine captured this idea perfectly when he spoke of the "loving memory"[24] of God. It is a memory of God in that it is grounded in the doctrines of creation and redemption, which affirm that we have partially lost something through sin and are somehow made aware of that loss through grace. It is a loving memory in that it is experienced as a sense of divine nostalgia, of spiritual wistfulness. There is a thirst to have more of what we already have only in part.

The point of contact is thus an awareness or consciousness of the past presence of God and the present impoverishment of that presence, sufficient to stir us to will to recollect it in its totality through the grace of God. It is a trigger, a stimulus, a foretaste of what is yet to come and a disclosure of the inadequacy and poverty of what we now have. To use Augustine's vocabulary, the point of contact is a latent memory of God reinforced by an encounter with his creation, which possesses the potential to point us to the source through which its sense of bittersweet longing may be satisfied.

Here, then, is a powerful interpretative framework, firmly grounded in Scripture and the Christian tradition, which aims to make sense of much of human religious experience. A fundamental impulse that seems to lie behind religious experience—the quest for the transcendent—can be accounted for within the framework of Christian theology. It is not my intention to develop this point further, simply because space does not permit. But my basic contention is that the gospel itself enables us to understand

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[23] Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1. See the translation of H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991) 3.

[24] *Confessions* 7.17.23; Chadwick 126–127: "I carried with me only a loving memory and a desire for that of which I had the aroma but which I had not yet the capacity to eat."

why the various religious traditions of humanity exist and why there might well be at least some degree of convergence among them in relation to a search for fulfillment. That degree of convergence can be theologically justified and must be apologetically exploited.

IV. ORIENTATION TOWARD AN EVENT, NOT AN IDEA

With the advent of pluralism, many traditional modes of Christian apologetics now find themselves in a difficult position. The idea of a "universal rationality" that could act as the basis of apologetics has been seriously weakened. Instead pluralism invites us to think of a variety of rationalities, each of which has a claim to be taken seriously. None can be allowed to be "right" for all of humanity (which would constitute intolerance). They are "right" for those who accept them.

Yet at its heart the gospel concerns an historical event—or, more accurately, a cluster of historical events culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now as every historian of Christian thought knows, there exists a plurality of interpretations of Jesus Christ.[25] Yet the identification of a fixed starting point—the history of Jesus as witnessed to in Scripture and the living experience of the Christian community—is of vital importance in anchoring Christian theology in the midst of a pluralist sea. Here is the center and the starting point of all theological reflection and adoration. It is something that is historically given and theologically justifiable.

But the pluralism of interpretations of Jesus is itself radically restricted if one pays attention to the historical context in which that history is located. Wolfhart Pannenberg is but one writer to draw attention to the fact that the theological interpretation of the Christ-event is fixed by the historical context in which it takes place. For Pannenberg the complex matrix of ideas found in contemporary Jewish apocalypticism provides an interpretative framework within the context of which the history of Jesus (and supremely the resurrection) may be interpreted.[26] Standing in the historicist tradition associated with Ernst Troeltsch, Pannenberg demonstrated the possibility of breaking free from the relativistic limitations of the former's approach while remaining firmly rooted in history. It is not my concern to defend Pannenberg's particular interpretation of history at this point. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the merits of his approach, which couples an appeal to history with suggestions for the proper interpretation of that history.

This approach underlies the rise of theological postliberalism in recent years, especially in the United States. One of the most significant developments in theology since about 1980 has been a growing skepticism over the plausibility of a liberal worldview. Accompanying the retreat from liberalism have been a number of developments, perhaps most important of

[25] See J. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985).

[26] W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

which has been the repristination of more conservative viewpoints. One such development has been postliberalism, which has become especially associated with Yale Divinity School. Its central foundations are narrative approaches to theology, such as those developed by Hans Frei,[27] and to the schools of social interpretation that stress the importance of culture and language in the generation and interpretation of experience and thought.

Building upon the work of philosophers such as Alasdair Macintyre, postliberalism rejects both the traditional enlightenment appeal to a "universal rationality" and the liberal assumption of an immediate religious experience common to all humanity. Arguing that all thought and experience is historically and socially mediated, postliberalism bases its theological program upon a return to religious traditions whose values are inwardly appropriated. Postliberalism is thus antifoundational (in that it rejects the notion of a universal foundation of knowledge), communitarian (in that it appeals to the values, experiences and language of a community rather than prioritizing the individual), and historicist (in that it insists upon the importance of traditions and their associated historical communities in the shaping of experience and thought).[28]

The most significant statement of the postliberal agenda remains that of George Lindbeck. Rejecting "cognitive-propositional" approaches to doctrine as premodern and liberal "experiential-expressive" theories as failing to take account of both human experiential diversity and the mediating role of culture in human thought and experience, Lindbeck develops a "cultural-linguistic" approach that embodies the leading features of postliberalism.[29] This approach denies that there is a universal unmediated human experience that exists apart from human language and culture. Rather, it stresses that the heart of religion lies in living within a specific historical religious tradition and interiorizing its ideas and values. This tradition rests upon a historically-mediated set of ideas, for which the narrative is an especially suitable means of transmission.

While I personally have certain reservations concerning the historical and theological foundations of Lindbeck's approach,[30] I have no doubt that evangelicalism can find in postliberalism an important ally in the confrontation with the threat of intellectual and religious pluralism. Developing

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[27] For details see G. Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: The Quest for Generous Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 8 (1992) 103–128. Frei's most important work in this respect is *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). Important early statements of Frei's distinctive approach may be found in "Theological Reflections on the Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966) 263–306; "The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ," *Crossroads* 17/2 (1967) 69–96.

[28] The most important works relating to this development include: Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*; W. C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); R. E. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985). Among earlier works that have influenced these developments cf. esp. H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

[29] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 32–41.

[30] I develop these points in McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* 14–80.

this approach, evangelicals might wish to suggest that a degree of consensus might be achieved in the midst of the pluralist intellectual and religious ocean by the following means: (1) by insisting that Jesus Christ, as he is witnessed to in Scripture and the living memory of the community of faith, is the starting point and normative foundation of Christian theology; (2) by insisting that the events centering upon Jesus Christ are to be interpreted within the context of Scripture itself, interpreted within the living Christian tradition, rather than the cultural and intellectual values and norms of any other period or culture—that the Christ-event is to be interpreted in a Scriptural context within the living community of faith. The evangelical insistence upon the ultimate authority of Scripture, however this is interpreted,[31] thus provides a necessary, reliable and entirely appropriate anchor point for responsible theological reflection. It identifies the starting point for such reflection and provides a framework by which it may be interpreted. Such an approach will lead to a plurality of theologies, but it is an acceptable and radically limited plurality that reflects a range of options permissible for responsible Christian theology.[32] Further discussion of the resulting theologies can then take place on the basis of agreement concerning sources and norms.

V. ASKING THE TRUTH QUESTION

Pluralism discourages us from asking about truth. Political correctness suggests that the idea of truth can approach intellectual fascism on account of its authoritarian overtones. As Allan Bloom summarizes this outlook:

> The danger . . . is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.[33]

Yet we have already noted that pretensions to be "right" litter the pluralist agenda. Hick clearly believes that he is correct in his perception of the world's religions, whereas that of the 1960 Congress on World Mission is "ridiculous" and wrong. But the real challenge of pluralism lies in the position outlined by Bloom: that claims to be right constitute an intolerant intellectual fascism.

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[31] For a survey of the range of options currently available see K. R. Trembath, *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University, 1987).

[32] This has been the subject of much valuable discussion recently; cf. e.g. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1984); McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* 1–13.

[33] A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 25–26.

The danger of all this is clear. Beneath all the rhetoric about "openness" and "toleration" lies a profoundly disturbing possibility—that people may base their lives upon an illusion, upon a blatant lie, or that present patterns of oppression may continue and be justified upon the basis of beliefs or outlooks that are false. Even the most tolerant pluralist has difficulties with that aspect of Hinduism that justifies the inequalities of Indian society by its insistence upon a fixed social order. As Bloom remarks, the most tolerant of individuals finds difficulty in justifying the Hindu practice of forcibly burning alive a widow on her late husband's funeral pyre.[34]

Furthermore the attractiveness of a belief is all too often inversely proportional to its truth.[35] In the sixteenth century the radical writer and preacher Thomas Müntzer led a revolt of German peasants against their political masters. On the morning of the decisive encounter between the peasants and the armies of the German princes Müntzer promised that those who followed him would be unscathed by the weapons of their enemies. Encouraged by this attractive and meaningful belief the peasants went into battle, filled with hope.

The outcome was a catastrophe. Six thousand of their number were slaughtered in the ensuing battle, and six hundred were captured. Barely a handful escaped. Their belief in invulnerability was relevant. It was attractive. It was meaningful. It was also a crude and cruel lie, without any foundation in truth. The last hours of that pathetic group of trusting men rested on an utter illusion. It was only when the first salvoes cut some of their number to ribbons that they realized that they had been deceived.

To allow "relevance" or "openness" to be given greater weight than truth is, quite simply, a mark of intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility. The first and most fundamental of all questions must be: Is it true? Is it worthy of belief and trust? Truth is certainly no guarantee of relevance, but no one can build his personal life around a lie. A belief system, however consoling and reassuring, may prove to be false in itself or rest upon utterly spurious foundations.

If I were to insist that the American Declaration of Independence took place in 1789, despite all the evidence that unequivocally points to the year 1776, I could expect no commendations for maintaining my intellectual freedom or personal integrity, nor could I expect to receive tolerance from my fellow historians. The much-vaunted virtue of academic openness would be rendered ridiculous were it to allow me to be taken seriously. I would simply be obstinately and stubbornly wrong, incapable of responding to evidence that demanded a truthful decision. An obedient response to truth is a mark of intellectual integrity. It marks a willingness to hear what purports to be the truth, to judge it and, if it is found to be true, to accept it willingly. Truth demands to be accepted because it inherently deserves to be accepted and acted upon. Academic integrity and political re-

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[34] Ibid. 26.
[35] I take the following example from A. E. McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 11–21.

sponsibility alike demand a passionate commitment to discovering, telling and acting upon the truth.

And that is why it continues to be important to insist not just that truth matters but that Christianity is true. Stanley Hauerwas wrote that "the only reason for being a Christian . . . is because Christian convictions are true."[36] Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen tells the story of the person who asked him why he should go to church when he had no religious needs. "Because Christianity's true," was Allen's riposte.[37] Gordon Lewis' book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*[38] is important not simply on account of its documentation of recent developments in apologetics but because it firmly declares that truth claims are being made, that they are capable of being tested, and that as a matter of principle they ought to be tested. And if pluralism is resistant to having *its* truth claims tested, it can hardly expect to be taken seriously—save by those who for the culturally-conditioned moment share its prejudices. It will be a sad day when a claim to be telling the truth is met with the riposte that there is no truth to tell.

Let me recall an episode from another period of uncertainty about the future and viability of the gospel, when Christian confidence seemed low. At the height of the "New Theology" controversy in Britain in 1907, Peter Taylor Forsyth remarked that this attempt at radical theological restatement was like "a bad photograph: overexposed and underdeveloped." That summarizes my feeling about much liberal theological restatement in the face of the pluralist challenge: It has received too much attention in the media and in the Church, and it rests upon inadequate theological foundations.

In this article I have been exploring some more responsible and authentically Christian approaches to the challenge posed by the rise of pluralism. As will be clear, I have only had time to identify a few approaches, mapping out briefly what deserves to be discussed at far greater length. But my basic conviction is clear: Pluralism is inherently self-destructive and owes its appeal more to the rhetoric of political correctness than to its intellectual credentials. As I have argued throughout, it seems that the credibility of a pluralist ideology rests entirely upon a willing suspension of one's critical faculties. Pluralism has the temporary advantage that it corresponds to the spirit of our age and is thus appropriate to the committed liberal outlook of so much of American academia. But that is not a permanent feature of the world. That outlook, and the resulting cultural plausibility of a pluralist ideology, will be subject to historical erosion—and what will happen then?

I conclude with a wise comment by William Inge, formerly dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London: "He who marries the spirit of the age today will be a widower tomorrow." Tomorrow is not that far away, and responsible Christian theology, which I believe to be represented in the readership of this *Journal*, must speak today for that tomorrow.

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[36] S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 1.

[37] Allen, *Christian Belief* 1.

[38] G. R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (New York: University Press of America, 1990).