

PLURALITY, AMBIGUITY, AND DESPAIR IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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Social change is often reflected in the changing meanings of words. Several centuries ago Martin Luther defined faith as “a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times.”¹ Much more recently *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977) defined faith in terms of “firm belief” and “full certitude and confidence.” At the moment, however, faith seems to connote “preference” or “choice” much more than full certitude and confidence, and the use of the term, even by the Christian, seems to suggest more about the chooser than about that which is chosen. Apparently the logic of choice and/or preference, now implied by the word “faith,” has acquired a quiet and subtle shift of emphasis away from the object of faith (i.e. what it is that is believed) toward our choice to believe. Of course such a shift threatens the idea of Christian orthodoxy in quite a direct way, for the very term “orthodoxy” means to stress the enduring and unchanging quality of what is believed—that is, of the objective content of faith—and it literally loses its sense in the context of a shift toward the subjective. Nevertheless in the contemporary situation it seems we have (albeit reluctantly and perhaps even unwittingly) chosen what might be called the grammar of preference with respect to religion in general and Christian orthodoxy in particular.

The most commonly cited reason for adopting a grammar of preference with respect to religion, of course, is that we live in a pluralistic society—that is, a society in which there is literally a kind of competition between worldviews.² Such competition places us in a situation in which it is, at the very least, impolite and perhaps even impossible to speak dogmatically about religious belief. Indeed the very word “dogmatic” has become synonymous with the vices of intolerance and bigotry and is therefore commonly contrasted with the contemporary virtues of openmindedness, tolerance, “willingness to dialogue,” and so forth. Modern sociocultural pluralism, in other words, has rendered the logic of preference increasingly imperative and *ipso facto* has rendered the notion of orthodoxy increasingly untenable.

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¹ M. Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954 [1552]) xvii.

² P. L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969) 42.

In the following I want to briefly examine the phenomenon of modern sociocultural pluralism and its impact on Christian faith. In particular I want to look at how pluralism has been used to justify recent theological proposals commonly labeled “the theology of world religions” and/or “pluralistic theology.” Such proposals push the grammar of preference to its logical conclusion by suggesting that Christians cannot and indeed must not represent the Christian faith in such a way as to exclude or even threaten the validity and viability of other world religions. Instead Christians are being encouraged to enter into dialogue with members of other religious traditions such that the Christian faith may be enriched by—and perhaps even be decisively changed by—interaction and by the truths that must certainly be embedded in other traditions.

Of course for those of us still attached to the notion of orthodoxy the significance of combatting recent theological proposals is fairly obvious. But beyond simply suggesting that such proposals are mistaken from the perspective of orthodoxy by definition, I want to suggest that proposals favoring a pluralistic theology are also mistaken with respect to the sociology of pluralism—that is, with respect to the process of pluralization. For while modern sociocultural pluralism has undoubtedly given rise to pronounced ambiguity in certain spheres of life, this ambiguity has been strictly limited to concerns that have been deemed—*a priori* and for a number of interesting reasons—optional and private and therefore relatively unimportant. When it comes to things that really matter, on the other hand—that is, when it comes to matters of public social, economic and/or political import—modern society actually tends to operate quite dogmatically. Modern sociocultural pluralism, in other words, appears to promote openness and tolerance in certain spheres of life but not in others—and the difference between these appears to have to do with the relative importance we attach to them. Thus while tolerance and openness to dialogue may well be increasingly valued in religious discourse, one would hardly expect these virtues to be advocated in such matters as the consideration of civil rights and/or social justice. Suggestions that modern sociocultural pluralism necessitates the “opening” of orthodoxy, then, probably tell us more about the relative importance of Christian doctrine in public life than they do about the nature of the theological task today.³

In addition to arguing that recent theological proposals misunderstand the effects of sociocultural pluralism I also want to argue that the paradoxical coincidence of ambiguity in “private” religious affairs on the one hand and dogmatism in matters of “public” importance on the other is ultimately a symptom of what, following Søren Kierkegaard, I have chosen to

³ The position I am taking here is slightly different from that taken by L. Newbigin in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Newbigin is certainly correct to draw attention to the curious dichotomy between contemporary affirmations of pluralism with respect to religious matters and dogmatism with respect to factual public (i.e. scientific) knowledge. I would like to suggest, however, that contemporary dogmatism actually extends far beyond scientific knowledge per se and into any area that has been deemed, following Tillich, to be of “ultimate concern.”

call "despair." As I hope will become increasingly clear, this apparent paradox—a paradox very much in evidence in the advocacy of theological pluralism—betrays an inability to believe that God is really able to speak and act effectively in our world. Recent proposals also betray a bid for self-realization over and against God much more than they reflect a genuine openness to divine transcendence. But this is to jump perhaps too far ahead. Before considering the various theologies of world religions in detail it will be helpful to consider the phenomenon of pluralization in modern society from a sociological perspective. Recent sociological observations may well help to explain the paradoxical openness and closedness of modern thought.

I. PLURALITY AS A SOCIAL FACT

From the perspective of sociology, plurality is simply a fact of modernity, a fact that has become increasingly significant both institutionally and in terms of modern self-understanding. Indeed pluralization, the process of becoming plural, is a central element in a number of theories of modernization. Ferdinand Tonnies' thesis that the process of modernization entails a shift from community (*Gemeinschaft*) to society (*Gesellschaft*), for example, implies the pluralization of social roles and relationships. An emphasis on pluralization also figured prominently in the work of Emile Durkheim, an emphasis subsequently taken by Talcott Parsons in detailing the increased institutional complexity and differentiation of modern societies. Peter Berger and others actually define modernity in terms of a plurality of life worlds:

Through most of human history, individuals lived in life-worlds that were more or less unified. This is not to deny that through the division of labor and other processes of institutional segmentation there have always been important differences in the life-worlds of different groups within the same society. Nevertheless, compared with modern societies, most earlier ones evinced a high degree of integration. Whatever the differences between various sectors of social life, these would "hang together" in an order of integrating meaning that included them all.⁴

The implications the process of pluralization has for religion are profound. The complexity of modern society has made it increasingly difficult if not impossible to explain, in any comprehensive way, how all of the various pieces of the social order fit together, and this is something religion has traditionally claimed to be able to do. Put differently, modern society has become dis-integrated in the sense that, while its various component parts may be related to each other in a technical sense, each component part tends to have its own rationale and hence its own explanation and meaning system. To the extent that meaning systems are in conflict, then,

⁴ P. L. Berger, B. Berger and H. Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 64.

the plausibility or taken-for-grantedness of each is called into question. Hence Berger and others continue:

The pluralization of social life-worlds has a very important effect in the area of religion. Through most of empirically available human history, religion has played a vital role in providing the overarching canopy of symbols for the meaningful integration of society. . . . This age-old function of religion is seriously threatened by pluralization. Different sectors of social life now come to be governed by widely discrepant meanings and meaning-systems. Not only does it become increasingly difficult for religious traditions, and for the institutions that embody these, to integrate this plurality of social life-worlds in one overarching and comprehensive world view, but even more basically, the plausibility of religious definitions of reality is threatened from within, that is, within the subjective consciousness of the individual.⁵

Hence the simple fact of plurality in modern society goes a long way toward explaining why the modern age has been called an age of skepticism. Religious faith in our modern context—at least as such faith has traditionally been understood—has become much harder to come by.⁶ Furthermore, to the extent that religious faith is still an option for us it is an option that must be self-consciously chosen over and against conflicting and competing alternatives. It is no wonder, then, that observers like Berger have argued that heresy—in the sense of self-conscious choice—has become an imperative in the contemporary situation.⁷

Several kinds of observations have been made with respect to the history of modern plurality. In terms of the history of ideas, plurality has always been a natural (though perhaps unintended) consequence of periods of intellectual ferment and discovery as, for example, at the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. Interestingly, in addition to intellectual discoveries such periods have often either depended on or have given rise to geographical discoveries that by now have had the effect of transforming our planet into a kind of global village of multicultural proximity. Less obviously and somewhat more ironically, however, the modern phenomenon of pluralization may actually have its roots within the Judeo-Christian tradition itself. It has been suggested, for example, that OT religion is not monotheistic so as much as it is monolatrous, extolling the worship of the God of Israel over and above the various other gods of the surrounding nations that constantly compete for Israel's attention. NT teaching, furthermore, suggests that the decision to follow Jesus must always be considered against a backdrop of otherwise attractive options and loyalties. David Martin has gone so far as to suggest that because the Christian community is necessarily a community of choice its very existence is pluralizing with respect to the larger social order. He calls this the "Christian dialectic."⁸

⁵ Ibid. 79–80.

⁶ Ibid. 81.

⁷ P. L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).

⁸ D. A. Martin, *The Dilemmas of Contemporary Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 1.

With the development of the idea of Christendom, however, the pluralizing potential of the Christian dialectic was, in a sense, driven underground and tended to surface only in sectarian expressions that were subsequently either destroyed or eventually absorbed into the larger Christian society. It was not until the idea of Christendom was effectively shattered by the Protestant Reformation that this dialectic again began to manifest itself as a potentially pluralizing force. Indeed, given the rejection of the authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium, the emphasis on individual conscience, and the advent of radical sectarianism, the Reformation appears (albeit unintentionally) to have initiated a pluralizing phase in the Church's history that has continued to fragment it right down to the present day. Of course the critical-rational ethos of the Enlightenment needs to be mentioned in this connection as well. With its relentless emphasis on the methodical pursuit of knowledge and its automatically critical stance over and against tradition and any given intellectual status quo, the Enlightenment ethos has fostered and continues to foster intellectual restlessness and plurality.

But the ideational roots of modern sociocultural pluralism should not obscure the fact that the process of pluralization has been exacerbated or carried (to use an epidemiological term) by a number of modern institutions as well. Berger has gone so far as to suggest, for example, that "one may say, with only some exaggeration, that economic data on industrial productivity or capital expansion can predict the religious crisis of credibility in a particular society more easily than data derived from the 'history of ideas' of that society."⁹ Along this line, modern economic systems have had a great deal to do with the pluralization of modern societies. As both Marx and Weber observed, early capitalist development required the relative mobility of capital, of resources and, more importantly, of labor. Today the components of industrial production, including labor, are transported around the planet on a scale and at a rate that stagger the imagination. It is not difficult to see how this mobility—indeed, fluidity—might contribute to the pluralization of modern societies.

Also with respect to the modern economy it has been observed that the rationalization of modern economic activity—that is, the subjection of economic activity to price, profit, efficiency, and other abstract and calculable criteria—has acted to pluralize modern social life to the extent that it increasingly relativizes and marginalizes all noneconomic ways of thinking. Put differently, a traditionally religious outlook now often finds itself in conflict and competition not simply with other religions but also with the requirements of modern economic activity. Indeed this conflict between a rationalized, this-worldly spirit and any sort of stance that remains open to transcendence divides contemporary society and culture quite sharply, so much so that one is tempted to describe the modern situation in terms of duality instead of plurality.

⁹ P. L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) 151.

Of course the list of institutional or structural carriers of pluralization in modern society must also include the modern city, which is pluralizing almost by definition. The bureaucratic delimitation of areas of jurisdiction and expertise required now for the administration of almost all public- and private-sector enterprises exerts a pluralizing influence on modern society as well. Within these administrative systems performance does not require, and may even be hindered by, an integrated understanding of the entire organization. As a result of this we are typically surrounded, even in our own workplace, by people whose activities and vocabularies we do not entirely comprehend. Modern technology has also served to pluralize our life choices, as it were, by providing us with previously undreamt-of control over our environment. In addition mass media have opened up an entire world to modern consumers of information. As Daniel Lerner observed a number of years ago,¹⁰ in virtually all modernizing societies urbanization leads to increased literacy, literacy increases exposure to mass media, and exposure to mass media, as it exposes people to a bewildering array of information and choice, inherently pluralizes and ultimately secularizes modern self-understanding. Needless to say modern education, and especially modern higher education, tends to have similar effects.¹¹

Political structures and institutions have served to carry pluralization in modern societies as well. The political ideology of pluralism, for example, which may be defined as the conscious advocacy of plurality, has been a central element of modern liberal democracies in the sense that it legitimates economic, political and social competition between individuals and groups under the auspices of the liberal state. The liberal-democratic tradition of the so-called wall of separation between Church and state may be cited in this connection as well. The pluralizing impact of such a convention must not be underestimated. As Walter Lippman observed:

The separation of church and state involves more than a mere logical difficulty for the churchman. It involves a deep psychological difficulty for the members of the congregation. As communicants they expected to believe without reservation that their church is the only true means of salvation. . . . But as citizens they are expected to maintain a neutral indifference to the claims of all the sects, and to resist encroachments by any sect upon the religious practices of the others.¹²

In sum, from a sociological perspective we could say that plurality and pluralization are built into a number of critical modern institutions. While the Renaissance, Reformation, Age of Discovery, Enlightenment, and so forth may well have opened the western mind to the possibility of social, cultural, and even religious diversity, the realization of such diversity in modern society seems actually to have depended more on the workings and

¹⁰ D. Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

¹¹ Cf. e.g. J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

¹² W. Lippman, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 75.

interactions of otherwise mundane political, economic and technological structures. And pluralization has subsequently accompanied these structures virtually everywhere they have been exported in the modern world.

II. PLURALITY AND MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

As indicated above, the relationship between sociostructural realities and individual consciousness is a reciprocal one, and modern plurality is reflected in modern consciousness in some interesting ways. Berger and others provide a particularly apt description of this, labeling it the "urbanization of consciousness." They suggest, among other things, that modern consciousness is uniquely complex and segmented.¹³ Modern pluralized consciousness is also summarized in the term individualism, which suggests that the forces of disintegration have been such that society now consists of a mass of isolated individuals interacting in an almost atomic fashion. It has also been suggested that sociostructural pluralization has had the effect of fostering excessive introspection and reflection on the part of modern individuals. As the pluralized social order has become more and more opaque, and as it has ceased to make sense in any kind of holistic and integrated way, so it seems that modern individuals have been driven increasingly inward for meaning and stability. In addition, to the extent that individuals must now participate in the pluralized social order by way of a multiplicity of roles and relationships, so they are forced to spend a great deal of time changing roles and moving back and forth between widely discrepant life worlds. Lerner coined the term "psychic mobility" to describe uniquely this modern self-consciousness:

Whereas the isolated communities of traditional society functioned well on the basis of a highly constrictive personality, the interdependent sectors of modern society require widespread participation. This in turn requires an expansive and adaptive self-system, ready to incorporate new roles and to identify personal values with public issues. This is why modernization of any society has involved the great characterological transformation we call psychic mobility. . . . The expansion of psychic mobility means that more people now command greater skill in imagining themselves as strange persons in strange situations, places and times than did people in any previous historical epoch. In our time, indeed, the spread of empathy around the world is accelerating. The earlier increase of physical experience through transportation has been multiplied by the spread of *mediated* experience through mass communication. . . . Radio, film and television climax the evolution set into motion by Gutenberg. The mass media opened to the large masses of mankind the infinite *vicarious* universe.¹⁴

Interestingly the "spread of empathy" is very much in evidence in recent calls for a theology of world religions. Yet, as Lerner suggests, psychic mobility is vicarious and hence is always somewhat artificial and contrived.

¹³ Berger, Berger and Kellner, *Homeless* 67.

¹⁴ Lerner, *Passing* 51-53.

At the risk of jumping ahead we might simply raise the question here as to whether religion can ever actually be experienced vicariously.

But what is perhaps the most basic reflection of plurality in modern consciousness is described in terms of a kind of bifurcation of the self into public and private identities. While space does not permit a detailed discussion of the reasons for this peculiar split here, the institutions of the public workplace—dominated as they are by increasingly narrow and rationalized criteria—are not able to provide for the full range of human aspirations. They have become overinstitutionalized in the sense that they are highly complex and impersonal. For this reason the fulfillment of many deeply human desires must be sought elsewhere, at home as it were, in private. The so-called private sphere of life, then, which is the sphere of family and of various private associations, has come to be experienced by modern persons as crucial for the discovery of personal meaning and identity.¹⁵ As Anton Zijderfeld has observed:

Contemporary society exhibits a disparity between the individual and the institutional structures of his society. The latter have a tendency to grow independent and to exist for their own sake. The individual, on the other hand, seems to take the opposite road, to withdraw from the public sphere into his private world and grow increasingly autonomous, often in a rather subjectivistic way. . . . Modern society shows a *discrepancy between the subjective autonomy of the individual and the objective autonomy of the social institutions*.¹⁶

Of course as it speaks to a whole host of human aspirations that cannot be satisfied in the public sphere, religion has for the most part been relegated to the private sphere of subjective autonomy. And yet, ironically, the confidence and certainty sought in religious faith are precisely what the subjective autonomy and privateness of this sphere prevent modern individuals from finding there. On the other hand, to the extent that religion is considered to be of public and not simply of private relevance it becomes subject to the objective autonomy—that is, to the techniques and efficiencies—of the larger public institutions of economy and society. This peculiar predicament has significant implications for theology today.

In sum, the structural and institutional plurality of modern society has given rise to highly introspective individuals who tend to find the certitude and confidence of faith very difficult to come by. On the one hand they have been well prepared both by education and the marketplace to be suspicious of all traditional understandings, but on the other hand they long for the objective certainty that traditional religion seems once to have provided. Similarly while these modern individuals have been exposed to and know more about other peoples and cultures than perhaps any group of persons who have ever lived, this knowledge remains largely abstract and actually renders the construction of personal identity increasingly problematic. Such individuals are adaptable and expert at shifting back

¹⁵ P. L. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity* (New York: Basic, 1977) 133.

¹⁶ A. C. Zijderfeld, *The Abstract Society: A Cultural Analysis of Our Time* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 128.

and forth between a variety of life worlds, and as such they are uniquely open to conversions of various kinds. But such conversions are often so short-lived that one can only describe them, following Lerner, as vicarious. "We have reached the stage in pluralization," Os Guinness notes, "where choice is not just a state of affairs, it is a state of mind. Choice has become a value in itself, even a priority. To be modern is to be addicted to choice and change. Change becomes the very essence of life."¹⁷

III. PLURALITY, CHURCH LIFE, AND THEOLOGY

Not surprisingly, sociocultural plurality and the concomitant urbanization of consciousness have significantly impacted modern Church life and theology. One of the most obvious reflections of this impact is the phenomenon of denominationalism. "Denominations," H. Richard Niebuhr argued, "are sociological groups whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes."¹⁸ Defining them somewhat more broadly, Berger has suggested that a denomination is simply "a church that has had to come to terms with the permanent presence and competition of other churches within its own territory."¹⁹ Thus while denominations may well have formed (and may still form) for theological reasons, once formed they quickly adjust to social realities and subsequently reflect less about theological matters than they do about the diversity of groups and interests in contemporary society. Up until relatively recently, of course, denominational diversity in North America tended to fall within the broad confines of Judeo-Christian tradition, and this mitigated the psychic stress of having to come to terms with competition. More recently, however, non-Christian religions and traditions have sought refuge under the denominational heading as well, and this has made the "ordeal of civility," as it has been called, quite a bit more difficult.²⁰ Along this line the psychological obstacles associated with tolerance in the contemporary situation undoubtedly exacerbate the ambiguity, uncertainty and diffidence that characterize modern pluralized consciousness.

Somewhat more specifically it has been observed that in responding to the social reality of pluralism the various denominations have adopted something very much like marketing strategies for attracting and keeping their customers. As Berger has noted,

the crucial sociological and social-psychological characteristic of the pluralistic situation is that religion can no longer be imposed but must be marketed. It is impossible, almost *a priori*, to market a commodity to a population of uncoerced consumers without taking their wishes concerning the commodity

¹⁷ O. Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 96.

¹⁸ H. R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1929) 25.

¹⁹ Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 137.

²⁰ See J. M. Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

into consideration. To be sure, the religious institutions can still count on traditional ties holding back certain groups of the population from too drastic liberty in religious choice. . . . All the same, the basic necessity of taking on a soliciting stance *vis-a-vis* a public means that consumer controls over the product being marketed are introduced.²¹

Since religion has been relegated to the private sphere of personal fulfillment and identity, furthermore, it is not terribly surprising that many churches have become almost entirely preoccupied with the administration of personal and family therapy. And while it is often suggested that this individualistic and subjectivistic focus is only meant to draw new members into the church's orbit so that they can subsequently be initiated into the objective obedience of faith, one wonders how many churches ever get around to this second step. "The findings are in and the message is clear," Reginald Bibby comments. "Religion . . . is mirroring culture. A specialized society is met with specialized religion. Consumer-minded individuals are provided with a smorgasbord of fragment choices. Culture leads; religion follows."²²

At the level of academic theology, the process of sociocultural pluralization has occasioned a degree of unease and embarrassment concerning the traditional theological boundaries to faith. Indeed a number of theologians have recently argued that, precisely because we now know so much more about the diversity and variety of our world and because of the fact of sociocultural plurality, it has become imperative that we expand the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy so as to include in principle members of other non-Christian traditions and religions. As Roman Catholic theologian Paul Knitter notes: "The new perception of religious pluralism is pushing our cultural consciousness toward the simple but profound insight that there is no one and only way."²³

Now although Knitter's comments represent something of an extreme case, the process of pluralization has been such that increasing pressure has been brought to bear on modern theologians to expand the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Along this line, both Catholic and Protestant theologians have sought for the most part to expand the boundaries by expanding the notion of general revelation—that is, that God has revealed and continues to reveal himself in a creation that includes human culture. "Apologetic theology must show," Paul Tillich commented, "that the trends which are immanent in all religions and cultures move toward the Christian answer."²⁴ On the Catholic side Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christianity" points in a similar direction.²⁵ Yet a number of other theo-

²¹ Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 145.

²² R. W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987) 233.

²³ P. F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986) 5.

²⁴ P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 1.15.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. K. Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 12.161-178.

gians have suggested that Christian inclusivism, as it has been called, which ultimately still holds God's revelation in Christ to be decisive and final, has not gone far enough and has not really come to grips with the implications of contemporary sociocultural pluralism. John Hick argues, for example, that "once it is granted that salvation is in fact taking place not only within the Christian but also within the other great traditions, it seems arbitrary and unrealistic to go on insisting that the Christ-event is the sole and exclusive source of human salvation."²⁶ Hick goes on to recommend a movement toward true theological pluralism in which all of the "great traditions" are assumed to be of equal revelational weight.

True, the advocates of radical theological pluralism are quite sensitive to charges that their proposals must inevitably result in a kind of debilitating relativism and in a morally dubious (if not dangerous) ambiguity. But the solutions to the problem of relativity, pluralists contend, lie in a shift of attention away from theology per se and toward social-ethical praxis—that is, toward practical social and political activity. Hick, for example, suggests that we ought to evaluate the great religious traditions empirically from the standpoint of their social-ethical effectiveness in transforming "self-centredness to Reality-centredness,"²⁷ by which he appears to mean their ability to foster altruistic and cooperative behavior. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki has argued similarly that focusing on the question of justice may provide a key for determining what is of value in each religious tradition and what is not:

We must look to the heart of justice in each religion as that which renders life meaningful in light of a vision of what existence should be. Using justice as a norm means that the primary visions within each religion of what societal life should be in a "perfect" world is a source of judgement that can be used internally within each religion to judge its present societal forms of justice. Dialogue among the religions can likewise proceed from the development of mutual concerns for justice that can lead to concerted actions for justice in the world. Justice is a dynamic and transformative notion, capable of being used even to judge itself.²⁸

Social justice, in other words, may well provide a kind of ethico-practical bridge between the world's religious traditions. Along this line Knitter has argued for a "liberation theology of religions" in which pluralistic theology would be melded with politically-focused liberation theology.²⁹ Sociopolitical liberation is too big a task for a single (i.e. the Christian) religion, Knitter contends, and so stands to benefit from a theology of world religions. On the other hand, pluralistic theology's thorny problem of relativism could be

²⁶ J. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. J. Hick and P. Knitter; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁸ M. H. Suchocki, "In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective," *Myth* (ed. Hick and Knitter) 159.

²⁹ P. F. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," *Myth* (ed. Hick and Knitter) 178–200.

solved by way of liberation theology's emphasis on the hermeneutical and epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed. Knitter writes:

Because of its hermeneutical priority and potency, therefore, the preferential option for the oppressed . . . serves as an effective condition for the possibility of dialogue—that which makes it possible for different religions to speak to and understand each other. If the religions of the world, in other words, can recognize poverty and oppression as a common problem, if they can share a common commitment (expressed in different forms) to remove such evils, they will have the basis for reaching across their incommensurabilities and differences in order to hear and understand each other and possibly be transformed in the process.³⁰

Gordon Kaufman has gone so far as to suggest that the great challenge of theology today is to construct a new religious paradigm that will promote human cooperation in the face of the threat of nuclear holocaust.³¹ Such a project must be premised, he feels, on our frank recognition of the social-constructedness of all religious traditions: "From our modern historical vantage point, looking back at the many great and diverse cultural and religious traditions that have appeared in human history, all of these diverse conceptions and pictures seem best understood as the product of human imaginative creativity in the face of the great mystery that life is to us all."³² Hence against a backdrop of a host of pressing problems that are in principle up to us to solve, the task of theology is to meld the various religious traditions, meanings and symbols so that they may be used to motivate people to engage in cooperative and peaceful behavior. Theology's failure to do this may well result in the race's failure to survive.

IV. A FEW CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

Although quite a number of things could be said about modern denominationalism and about the marketing of the faith to subjectively autonomous consumers, the following comments will be restricted to the so-called pluralistic theology of religions. As mentioned above, these sorts of theological proposals offer important clues as to the real significance of socio-cultural pluralization for theology today.

In his assessment of nineteenth-century Protestant theology Karl Barth commented that while it had many strengths its signal weakness lay in the extent to which it allowed certain characteristically modern assumptions to become decisive and primary, a gambit that left nineteenth-century theology in a precarious and ultimately untenable position as the assumptions were called into question in the twentieth century.³³ The same criticism

³⁰ *Ibid.* 185–186.

³¹ G. D. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," *Myth* (ed. Hick and Knitter) 3–15.

³² *Ibid.* 8.

³³ K. Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century," *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1960) 18–19.

might be leveled today at the various theologies of world religions, for they all begin by assuming that modern sociocultural pluralism must be decisive for all future theological reflection and that it must ultimately lead toward the elimination of Christian exclusivism. But it is far from clear why such must be the case. Sociocultural pluralism is not new to the Church, and the Church's survival into the present has depended in large measure on its having adopted precisely the opposite strategy—that is, insisting on the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ over and against all of the other merely human religious options. Along this line one is tempted to suggest, following Lerner, that the alleged necessity of theological pluralism has more to do with modern psychic mobility than with any kind of historical necessity.

Even more seriously, the advocacy of theological pluralism betrays a kind of Kantian bifurcation of reality into two spheres: a noumenal or religious sphere in which truth cannot be known with certainty, and a phenomenal or empirically available sphere that can be known and tested by way of praxis. This bifurcation, then, serves (for the most part implicitly) to justify collapsing orthodoxy into orthopraxy. As Knitter indicates:

The primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy assures Christians that if claims about the finality of Christ/Christianity are not presently possible, neither are they necessary. . . . Orthodoxy becomes a pressing concern only when it is necessary for orthopraxis—for carrying out the preferential option and promoting the kingdom. If orthodox clarity is not required for such purposes, it can wait.³⁴

But of course Knitter's position simply begs a number of questions like "What is to be done?" and "What does the promotion of God's kingdom entail?" They are serious theological questions that deserve theological answers. If they are not explicitly raised as theological questions and if they are not answered theologically this is only because the advocates of pluralistic theology have already tacitly surrendered theological orthodoxy to a kind of sociological and/or political orthodoxy—that is, usually to some variant of Marxist analysis. But, as anyone familiar with sociological and political orthodoxies is well aware, these are anything but tolerant and open to alternative viewpoints. As Peter Eicher has observed:

Here [in recent pluralist theories of knowledge] we see the fulfillment of a view which began in the Enlightenment in the context of the religious wars which threatened the existence of States: religion's dogmatic content is neutralized in the interests of the public life and action. All ideas of faith are optional in the pluralist State; therefore faith itself can only be 'verified' pragmatically, i.e., by its concrete action.³⁵

³⁴ Knitter, "Toward" 192.

³⁵ P. Eicher, "Pluralism and the Dignity of Theology," *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost* (ed. C. Geffre, G. Gutierrez and V. Elizondo; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Concilium, 1984) 8.

In addition we note that the separation of the religious from the practical—of orthodoxy from orthopraxy—corresponds nicely to the bifurcation of self into private and public components in modern pluralized consciousness. Along this line the attraction of orthopraxy and of the various theologies of liberation may well lie in their claim to have rescued theology from the subjective autonomy of the private sphere of life. Yet while such a diagnosis may well be correct to the extent that conservative orthodoxy has indeed become socially irrelevant, the choice of orthopraxy over orthodoxy only makes matters worse. For in an attempt to render theology socially and publicly relevant, these theologies submit much too quickly to the exigencies and objective autonomy of the secular sociopolitical world. Relevance in the public sphere, in other words, comes at a price, a price that entails the absorption of theology into social and political policy concerns. Once this has happened, however, and once theology has become merely a facet of sociopolitical praxis, it ceases to be religious strictly speaking and so loses its appeal as an authentic alternative to privatized faith.

More serious still, the proposals for a pluralistic theology betray a marked closedness to the possibility that God either has spoken or even that he can speak in the world in such a way as to be understood by human beings. Put differently, the possibility of revelation tends to be ruled out of these proposals *a priori*. Instead the attitude taken toward alleged revelations, Christian or otherwise, is one deriving from an autonomous human rationality that has been accorded a kind of normativity over and against a God who is, to use C. S. Lewis' suggestive phrase, "in the dock" for having created a world that has not measured up to human standards and expectations. The following comments, taken from Barth's assessment of the theology of Schleiermacher (the intellectual father of recent advocates of theological pluralism), aptly describe the place of revelation in the pluralistic theology of religions: "Purely wraithlike is the possibility that true religion might mean that God communicates himself as he is in and for himself; we do not even have the organs that are necessary to receive such communication. All revelation is simply 'God in relation to us,' that is, a modification of self-consciousness."³⁶

Barth's trenchant observations remind us that theological pluralism has, since the time of Schleiermacher, sought to collapse the object of theology into human subjectivity, a strategy in which theology has ultimately become anthropology and God has ultimately been subsumed under the heading of human self-consciousness. As one recent advocate of theological pluralism remarked rather tellingly: "Vis-a-vis the religions of the world, a Christian pluralistic attitude will affirm the Christian tenets, but without forgetting the limitations and contingency of the subjects who formulate them. In other words, it will never proclaim: 'The true belief is x.' It will always confess: 'I believe x to be true.'"³⁷ Now while these comments may

³⁶ K. Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 235.

³⁷ R. Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," *Myth* (ed. Hick and Knitter) 111.

well be taken as an indication of humility, it is at best a kind of mistaken humility that has the effect of rendering us invulnerable to revealed truth because we are now too modest to believe that we would know truth even if it were revealed to us. Movement in this direction is evident even in otherwise well-meaning proposals for theological inclusivism to the extent that these proposals drive a wedge between general and special revelation and shift the predominant emphasis to the former. For general revelation is mute and thus open to empirical investigation and interpretation, both of which are rather easily bent toward humanly determined ends.

The point of these observations is not to suggest that certain strands of modern theology have buckled under the pressures of the process of pluralization. After all, nothing would really be gained by making such a point since these theologies already legitimate their proposals on the basis of the fact of sociocultural pluralism. Instead the point is simply that, however else pluralization may have affected modern theology, it has not really rendered it—even in the case of the so-called pluralistic theologies—more open or tolerant. Instead the effect of sociocultural pluralism has been to relativize theology altogether over and against what is now deemed to be a more important public sphere of life. We note that this relativization is essentially built into the conditions for so-called interfaith dialogue, for no traditional claims may be taken so seriously that they are allowed to interfere with the civility of the dialogue itself. Put differently, pluralization has actually secularized modern theology much more than it has opened it up to the truths and insights of other religious traditions. This is because the public sphere of life, which has now become decisive, tends to be governed by largely secular orthodoxies. To the extent that theology has been able to establish its relevance within this public sphere it has only been able to do so, for the most part, by way of secularizing orthodoxy. At the level of the man on the street this has meant transforming theology and church life such that it conforms to the practical and pragmatic rationality of the marketplace. In intellectual circles this has meant—in recent decades, at least—reinterpreting orthodoxy along the lines of secular neo-Marxist theory. Either way, traditional orthodoxy becomes a kind of optional pursuit within which the rules of logic and language need no longer apply, not because they are not important to theology's subject matter—that is, to God's existence and character—but because the subject matter is itself no longer of real concern when compared to the exigencies of practical social, economic and political life.

This last point has brought us to what is ultimately the most serious criticism that must be leveled at the various pluralistic theologies of religion, which is that they betray a kind of refusal to believe that God is able to speak and act in the world. Kaufman's comments above are, I think, indicative of just this kind of refusal, for they represent a kind of desperate plea for a humanly constructed salvation in the face of the mystery of God's stubborn inactivity in the world. "God cannot help us," his remarks seem to suggest, "and therefore we must help ourselves." Søren Kierkegaard perceptively described this kind of refusal to believe that God is

able to speak and act in the world in terms of "despair." This is the dire condition in which we attempt to define our own existence without reference to or perhaps even over and against God. And yet Kierkegaard noted that our desperate attempts at self-realization are often hidden behind religious aspirations and traditional religious phraseology. Indeed, it is in the nature of despair to mask its existence as despair. The only indication we have that we are not in despair, Kierkegaard warned, is the extent to which we have been enabled to have faith in God's ability and willingness to give our existence definition. Despair, Kierkegaard argued, is sin, and the opposite of sin is not virtue, not even the virtues of "reality-centeredness," of justice, of the relief of political-economic oppression, or even of peaceful and cooperative behavior. Instead the opposite of sin is simply faith, faith that God has spoken and acted on our behalf in the person of Jesus Christ in whom our lives are now hidden. Of course this is not to say that faith may not give rise to the sorts of virtues just mentioned. It may well indeed do so. Instead the point is that apart from faith in Christ the pursuit of these virtues may ironically lead us away from and not toward God.

Thus are we led to suspect that the concern for tolerance, openness, and the willingness to dialogue in religious matters may actually mask despair in our contemporary situation. That the celebration of these virtues often functions only to undermine traditional theological orthodoxy in such a way that appeals may then be made to another kind of orthodoxy that is almost entirely devoid of transcendence—that is, devoid of a God who can speak and act effectively in the world—is a clear indication of this. The openness touted in the various theologies of world religions, it seems, is ultimately an openness only to human autonomy. It is no wonder, then, that these theologies give way so quickly to the exigencies and objective autonomy of contemporary public life.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

The implications sociocultural pluralism has for evangelical theology may be discussed in terms of purely sociological considerations and at the level of theological reflection. With respect to the former, the first observation—which it is perhaps needless to make—is that the contemporary situation precludes the possibility of any kind of realization of the ideal of Christendom. To the extent that our theological reflection depends on or harbors hopes for Christian social and cultural hegemony, then, we are likely to be disappointed. Following on from this renunciation of Christian hegemony we also need to take the logic of plausibility more seriously than we probably have thus far. In spite of the so-called rediscovery of the supernatural in recent decades, modern conditions continue to render the objective ground of the Christian faith increasingly implausible. Christian faith yields to subjectivism and/or despair quite quickly in the absence of a supportive and relatively unified community. Throughout its history the Christian community has been united by orthodoxy—that is, by the full

assurance that God has acted and has spoken in the world in Jesus Christ in such a way as to be both intelligible and communicable. And there is every reason to believe that, the modern values of tolerance and openness notwithstanding, this is still what draws most people into Christian churches. Suggestions that the Christian community is now in a position to dispense with orthodoxy in favor of orthopraxy, therefore, must be viewed with a great deal of suspicion. Such suggestions probably only reflect either that their advocates have converted to a different and more pragmatically oriented gospel altogether or that they have lost their sense of identity in Christ. Needless to say, attempting to rediscover this identity outside of the historic tradition of orthodoxy is problematic at best. As Berger noted recently: "The pluralistic character of our culture forces those who would 'update' Christianity into a state of permanent nervousness. The 'wisdom of the world,' which is the standard by which they would modify the religious tradition, varies from one social location to another; what is worse, it keeps changing, often rapidly so, even in the same locale."³⁸

In addition, recent observations concerning the bifurcation of self in modern societies are helpful to the extent that they suggest the kinds of difficulties we should expect to encounter in the public and private spheres of modern life. We should not be surprised, for example, to find that the public sphere of life does not yield easily to theological reflection. Thus when it comes to reintroducing theology into the workplace we can expect to have to work very hard indeed. We can also expect to be tempted to demonstrate the public relevance of theology by rendering it useful in the service of publicly defined goals and purposes. Succumbing to this temptation, however, only guarantees the uselessness of theology in challenging the objective autonomy of the public sphere. On the other hand, observations concerning the subjective autonomy of the private sphere suggest that the challenge we are likely to face inside of our churches lies in trying to convince individuals of the objective significance of faith—that is, that faith is not simply a wax nose that can be shaped and reshaped to meet the subjective requirements of personal preference. Along this line, we may need to be reminded that openness, tolerance, and willingness to dialogue may mask a kind of narcissism, not to mention the fact that our real concerns probably lie elsewhere. "Where your treasure is," Jesus might have said in the contemporary context, "there you will prefer certainty to ambiguity and truth to dialogue."

Of course at the level of theological reflection resistance to theological openness need not mean that we are closed to culture as such. After all, the Church's theological exclusivity simply reflects the uniqueness of Christ, and through faith in the only begotten Son of God the Church is actually set free to celebrate cultural diversity as a reflection of the diversity of creation (Gal 3:28). God is undoubtedly able to speak to us directly

³⁸ P. L. Berger, "Worldly Wisdom, Christian Foolishness," *First Things* (August/September 1990) 19.

in and through creational diversity—that is, through general or natural revelation. But what is to be gained by speaking of general revelation unless it ultimately serves to direct our attention toward God's special revelation in Christ? As Barth noted:

In a word, the covenant of grace which is from the beginning, the presupposition of the atonement, is not a discovery and conclusion of "natural theology." Apart from and without Jesus Christ we can say nothing at all about God and man and their relationship one with another. Least of all can we say that their relationship can be presupposed to be as that of a covenant of grace. Just because it is a covenant of grace, it cannot be discovered by man, nor can it be demonstrated by man. As the covenant of grace it is not amenable to any kind of human reflection or to any questions asked by man concerning the meaning and basis of the cosmos or history. Grace is inaccessible to us: how else could it be grace? Grace can only make itself accessible. Grace can never be recalled. To remember grace is itself the work of grace. The perception of grace is itself grace.³⁹

What is really the point, in other words, of conceptions like "anonymous Christianity"? For to the extent that we are curious about the fate of those who perish without having heard the gospel of Christ we must humbly rest content that God will be as gracious to them as he has been to us. And even if this does not completely satisfy our curiosity, we might want to think twice before we begin to dictate the terms and conditions whereby God must save the world. Such a stance is really despair disguised as concern for the world, and to the extent that this concern actually hinders the Church from making disciples of all nations it must be deemed to be demonic.

Of course all of this should not be taken to mean that God's grace leaves no trace in actual human existence or that the effects of faith are invisible in the world. On the contrary, while our exercise of faith is inevitably marred by sin—such that we are perpetually reminded of our desperate need for forgiveness in Jesus—so faith must, by God's grace, give rise to good works in the world. At the outset we cited Luther's definition of faith as "a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times." He then went on to write:

This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace; and thus it is impossible to

³⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection* (New York: Harper, 1962) 50–51. Of course Barth eventually repented of the outright rejection of natural theology, recognizing that such a rejection could (and in fact did) serve to set the stage for the radical secularity of the death-of-God movement (see K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1960]). But Barth's insistence that the term "grace" has no meaning if it does not refer to God's free act is precisely what needs to be said into our contemporary context, in which grace is so often reduced to something we are supposedly able to discover in the normal or natural course of events.

separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light fires.⁴⁰

Hence it is our faith in God's ability to speak and act in our world, indeed our faith that He has done so for our sakes in the person of Christ, that enables us to give ourselves to the world in love. Simply attempting to raise our own consciousness (and level of anxiety) to the problems of the human condition will never release this kind of self-sacrificing behavior, for it is not of faith.

Lastly, it may be worth recalling that all of the words that are most central to Christian faith—revelation, grace, hope, love, faith itself—are meant to direct our attention toward a living God who is eminently capable of speaking and acting in our world and who has done so not simply in and through human subjectivity and self-consciousness but also objectively over and against us and in such a way as to implicate our existence. This, as Kierkegaard observed, is the earnestness of existence:

When God lets himself be born and become man, this is not an idle caprice, some fancy he hits upon just to be doing something, perhaps to put an end to the boredom which has brashly been said must be involved in being God—it is not in order to have an adventure. No, when God does this, then this fact is the earnestness of existence. And, in turn, the earnestness in this earnestness is: that everyone shall have an opinion about it.⁴¹

Thus the Christian proclamation directs our attention toward what God has said and done on our behalf and suggests that these things are to be considered with the utmost seriousness. It is not the task of theology to render those things less difficult or offensive by suggesting that our existence is not, after all, implicated in God's words and actions. Indeed to the extent that the Church lets us off of this hook it becomes another agent of despair in the world, simply confirming modern suspicions that God really cannot be counted upon to do anything of any importance in our world. Far from fostering openness, tolerance, and cooperative social-ethical behavior, when theology surrenders on this point it merely intensifies the objectively autonomous grip of modern secularized existence. After all, when words like "grace" and "faith" cease to point the world's attention toward the living and acting God but instead simply point to human subjectivity, what do any of us have to hope for?

⁴⁰ Luther, *Commentary* xvii.

⁴¹ S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1980) 130.