

Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism

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ONE OF THE compelling features of contemporary Western culture is the increasingly pervasive influence of pluralism. That *pluralism* is difficult to define cannot discount its power. It has an immediate bearing on how Christians think of themselves; it penetrates to the core of what we mean by “mission”; it offers opportunities and casts up dangers as it contributes to the globalization of theology.

The subject has become extraordinarily complex, the books and articles legion. In what follows I shall not provide an overview of the debate or an exhaustive catalogue of the major players. Rather, I shall attempt to outline some of the salient features of contemporary culture that Christians need to think through, and then I shall sketch in some areas of Christian teaching that speak directly to these features.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

(1) *On most definitions, there is much more pluralism than ever before in the United States and in Western nations generally.*

Because this point turns in part on the way *pluralism* is popularly used, it is important to distinguish the following three tendencies:¹

1. Among the more important treatments are these: Thomas Robbins and Dick An-

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(a) *Pluralism* may refer to the growing diversity in Western culture.² In the United States, to go no further, there is a diversity of race, heritage, religion, and value systems far beyond anything the nation has experienced before. The United States is the largest Jewish, Irish, and Swedish nation in the world; it is the second largest black nation, and soon it will become the third largest Hispanic nation. Moreover, these large proportions reveal nothing about the enormous diversity generated by countless smaller ethnic and racial communities. Many of these are growing, owing in part to contemporary patterns of immigration and to a fresh emphasis on the preservation of ethnic and cultural distinctions.

Religiously, Roman Catholicism is slightly increasing its numbers, owing primarily to the influx of Hispanics. Even so, the most rapidly growing religious movement at the moment is Islam. The most careful estimates place the number of Muslims in this country somewhere around 1.4 million. Numerous studies document the rise of new age religion and the revival of paganism. Most projections foresee that by A.D. 2000, WASPs (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) will be in a minority.³ None of this was foreseen by the Founding Fathers; little of it was foreseen even forty years ago.

(b) *Pluralism* may refer, somewhat vaguely, to the value of toleration for this diversity. In this usage, when people speak of our “pluralistic society” they mean not only that our society is extraordinarily diverse but that by and large it is tolerant of the diversity, or should be.

This respect — even appeal — for pluralism crops up within many substructures of our society, not least where some would not apply it to the culture at large. For example, in a recent lecture at a meeting of the Association of Theological Schools (A.T.S.), the academic dean of a major evangelical seminary defended the virtues of pluralism in theological education. The kind of pluralism the dean had in mind dealt with the stratification of the age of faculty members in each department, the breadth of their methodologies, the virtue of complementary skills, and “cross-

thony, eds., *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1981); Ted Peters, “Pluralism as a Theological Problem,” *The Christian Century* 100 (28 Sept. 1983): 843-45.

2. David Tracy would prefer to use *plurality* for the phenomenon and *pluralism* for the perspective. He writes: “Plurality is a fact. Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact” (“Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations,” in *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, ed. William Schweiker and Per M. Anderson [New York: University Press of America, 1987], p. 2). But although a few have joined him in this usage, it is still far more common to find authors using *pluralism* in the first sense described above.

3. For some basic statistical data, see George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

pollination of schools, mentors, theologies and ethnic/cultural/or gender perspectives.”⁴ But had he been pressed, this dean would also have insisted on the *limits* of the virtues of *theological* pluralism. That he could cast his paper in this way suggests his sensitivity to the buzzwords of our age; that he did not feel obliged to articulate limits may suggest the same thing.

At a different level, many voices now appeal for a kind of ecumenicity of supernaturalist “Christians” — that is, a coalition of those who believe the ancient Christian creeds, against the prevailing naturalism of modernity.⁵ At many levels, such a course may prove salutary. On the other hand, to submerge centuries of faithfulness to an evangelical understanding of the gospel into an ecumenicity of Christian supernaturalism, all in the name of confronting the single specter of “modernism,” may prove short-sighted. It presupposes that there is only one condition to be confronted, while both Scripture and history warn us that the gospel must often be defended on more than one front.

As a movement, evangelicalism itself is now divided over the complex questions of pluralism and tolerance. As Douglas Sweeney astutely observes:

The strange schizophrenia of modern evangelicalism owes [much] to the increasing tension between historic evangelical ecumenism [i.e., evangelicals cooperating across denominational lines] and historic evangelical thought. Because theological modernism divided evangelicalism's ecumenical heritage, the neo-evangelicals were forced to decide between an exclusive fellowship within the harbor of historic evangelical doctrine, and historic evangelical piety on the sea of American pluralism. While the founders opted for the former, the story of the unraveling of neo-evangelical identity is the story of their scions setting out to sea.⁶

(c) But *pluralism* in many circles refers to a philosophical stance. This stance insists that tolerance is mandated on the ground that no current in the sea of diversity has the right to take precedence over other currents. In the religious sphere, no religion has the right to pronounce itself true and the others false. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism (in this third sense) itself.

4. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “‘Pluralism’ as a Criterion for Excellence in Faculty Development,” paper presented at an A.T.S. meeting on “Building Theological Faculties,” 2 March 1991, p. 3.

5. See, e.g., Andrew Walker, “We Believe,” *Christianity Today* 35 (29 April 1991): 25-27.

6. Sweeney, “The Essential Evangelicalism Dialectic: The Historiography of the Early Neo-Evangelical Movement and the Observer-Participant Dilemma,” *Church History* 60 (1991): 84.

I am referring now not only to philosophers and to theologians who offer sophisticated defenses of universalism but to the popular mind. If you ask university students if the person who holds that all ideas are equally valid is more or less open-minded than the person who assigns different values to different ideas, most would instantly respond “More.” The more sophisticated might distinguish “ideas of fact” (i.e., stemming from the so-called hard sciences) and “ideas of opinion” (stemming from everything else) — thus preserving a false but popular disjunction about which I shall say more in a moment — but would arrive at the same conclusion with respect to the latter category. The student who believes, for instance, that the Bible tells the truth is automatically considered narrow-minded.⁷

In other words, in the popular mind open-mindedness is no longer connected with a willingness to consider alternative views but with a dogmatic relativizing of all views. It no longer focuses on the virtues of rational discourse among persons of disparate beliefs, as a *means* to pursuing the truth, but on the *conclusions* of the discourse.

At a still more popular level, try to testify to what Christ has done in your life and you are likely to be asked, “What about all the people in the world who have never heard of Christ?” In some instances, of course, the question is only a smoke screen; in others it is a serious inquiry that demands a serious answer. But in every case it reflects massive built-in assumptions about the inadmissibility of any religion claiming a truth status above another religion.

(2) *At the same time, there are several startling limits to the pluralism that is now engulfing Western culture.*

The first limit is imposed by the entailment of the third definition of pluralism that we just examined. Those who are committed to the proposition that all views are equally valid have eliminated the possibility that one or more of those opinions has a special claim to being true or valid. They have foreclosed on open-mindedness in the same breath by which they extol the virtues of open-mindedness; they are dogmatic about pluralism in the third sense, and thereby banish pluralism in the second sense.

This has generated some astonishing anomalies. In the name of openness and pluralism numerous deeds of astonishing intolerance are sometimes perpetrated. Barbara Bush felt the pressure when she was invited to speak at Wellesley College. Substantial numbers of students opposed the

7. I use *truth* here in a strong sense, in which anything that unambiguously contradicts it must be false. If all “truth” is relative, believing the Bible speaks the “truth” is not problematic but merely one opinion among many.

invitation extended to her because she had chosen to live and work as a wife and mother rather than pursue a career external to the home and therefore more acceptable to the modern mood. At the University of Connecticut, a student can be expelled for derisive (“inappropriate”) laughter. At Stanford University countless students chanted, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture’s got to go.” At Duke University, one student displayed political correctness in action by proclaiming in class, “I wouldn’t touch Milton. I know what that guy was up to — he was a sexist through and through.” One wonders if the same student would refuse to study John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., because they were sexually immoral. Several accrediting associations have recently displayed much more interest in upholding the dogmatism of political correctness than in maintaining academic integrity.

The same pressures run amok in many scientific institutions. The competent and well-known science writer Forrest Mims was denied a column in *Scientific American* for no other offense than admitting to his prospective editor that he was a “non-believer in evolution.” It was not that he was writing in this area, or using his articles to articulate his understanding of biology, that got him fired; it was simply that he held a view the editors judged inadmissible. As Phillip Johnson puts it:

The Mims episode shows us that science is beset by religious fundamentalism — of two kinds. One group of fundamentalists — the Biblical creation-scientists — has been banished from mainstream science and education and has no significant influence. Another group has enormous clout in science and science education, and is prepared to use it to exclude people they consider unbelievers. The influential fundamentalists are called Darwinists.⁸

There are religious forms of political correctness as well. Four years ago, at a major seminary that often displays evangelical credentials, an acquaintance of mine with a European doctorate in New Testament studies was asked to serve as a visiting professor to lecture on the Pastoral Epistles. Sensitive to the fact that the seminary in question strongly favors the ordination of women while he does not, this young scholar decided, when he reached disputed passages such as 1 Timothy 2:8-15, to lay out as evenhandedly as possible a number of interpretations both within and outside the evangelical camp. When he came to his own view, which he labelled “traditional,” such animus erupted against him that some students

8. Johnson, “Unbelievers Unwelcome in the Science Lab,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Nov. 1990; cf. his book *Darwin on Trial* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1991).

complained to the administration. Some students not in his class threatened to withdraw from the seminary and ask for a tuition rebate, whereupon he was called on the carpet and criticized for listing this view as a possible interpretation, and was asked to apologize to the class for offending them. Posters started to appear around the campus announcing that he thought with his genitals. The administration then put a packet of about one hundred pages of information into every student's mailbox that defended the politically correct line.

Both the irony and the tragedy of this fierce intolerance stem from the fact that it is done in the name of tolerance. It is not "liberal education" in the best sense; it is not pluralism in the best sense. It is fundamentalistic dogmatism in the worst sense.

The second limit on pluralism is that in many ways America does not represent a lively pluralism where perspectives compete for credibility in the national discourse — a kind of tasty stew with some large lumps of meat and vegetables; rather, it represents a thin gruel with some indigestible gristle and bones. For instance, increasingly in education we aim for the lowest possible common denominator, the thin gruel. As Jewish talk-show host Dennis Prager puts it:

Liberals are always talking about pluralism, but that is not what they mean. . . . In public school, Jews don't meet Christians. Christians don't meet Hindus. Everybody meets nothing. That is, as I explain to Jews all the time, why their children so easily inter-marry. Jews don't marry Christians. Non-Jewish Jews marry non-Christian Christians. Jews for nothing marry Christians for nothing. They get along great because they both affirm nothing. They have everything in common — nothing. That's not pluralism.⁹

Then, almost by way of reaction, various groups compensate by becoming defensive. They circle the wagons and damn the outsiders. The thin gruel becomes laced with gristle. Small wonder, then, that Stanley S. Harakas can affirm that the prevailing worldview in America is not pluralistic (at least, not in the second sense I have identified) but atomistic and anti-religious.¹⁰

Third, a number of recent studies have shown that, on every front, media people are on the whole farther "left"¹¹ in their opinions than is the

9. Cited in *Christianity Today* 35 (27 May 1991): 40.

10. Harakas, "Educating for Moral Values in a Pluralistic Society," *Greek Orthodox Review* 29 (1984): 393-99.

11. Of course, the word *left* is slippery. I use it here as a catch-all for many spheres

population at large, and this can generate an impression of a greater degree of pluralism (in all three senses!) than is in fact the case. Indeed, Peter Berger identifies an entire "new class" — namely, the "knowledge industry." This new class is "devoted to the production and distribution of what may be called symbolic knowledge," and consists of "educators (from preschool to university), the 'communicators' (in the media, in public relations, and in a miscellany of propagandistic lobbies), the therapists of all descriptions (from child analysts to geriatric sex counselors), and, last but not least, substantial elements of the bureaucracy (those elements concerned with what may be called 'lifestyle engineering') and the legal profession."¹² This new knowledge class is "generally left of center" and "stands to gain from a shift of power from business to government."¹³ Religious leaders of the mainline denominations, Berger insists, have largely identified themselves with this class.

Whether or not this analysis is entirely correct, it is surely fair to conclude that the constant projection of one form or another of pluralism through the channels of education, media, entertainment, and many "people helper" groups contributes to an impression of advancing pluralism that may be slightly overrated. On the other hand, the same bombardment ensures that resistance in the populace at large is gradually eroded.

Fourth, assumptions about what "the good life" consists in have become more and more narcissistic and materialistic. In the depth of the Great Depression, President Roosevelt could say in a radio address, "Our difficulties, thank God, concern only material things."¹⁴ It is impossible to imagine a president in the 1990s speaking the same way. Despite the continuation of some forms of civil religion, no president would publicly articulate the view that spiritual values are more important to the nation than material ones — especially when the nation is gripped by ugly depression.

On other fronts, judicial decisions have all too frequently interpreted the "wall of separation" between church and state to enforce a "hands off" policy with respect to the establishment of religion, but not with respect to its free exercise. The nation as a whole is feeling the pressure of secularization, which signals not the abolition of religion but the squeezing of

of discourse — e.g., politics, religion, educational theory, ethical theory — and not simply economics.

12. Berger, "Different Gospels: The Social Sources of Apostasy," in *American Apostasy: The Triumph of "Other" Gospels*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 4.

13. Berger, "Different Gospels," p. 5.

14. Quoted by Senator Dan Coats in *Imprimus* 20, 9 (Sept. 1991): 1.

religion to the periphery of life and thought. As a nation we have become so individualistically self-centered¹⁵ that even during the “conservative” eighties we did not, as in the fifties, strive to build something better for our children’s tomorrow. Far from it: we borrowed from their future, demanding more security and benefits and refusing to countenance the taxes to support such demands. Belatedly, children were born into baby-boomer families that had discovered their biological clocks were ticking; but that did not mean they were more cherished. Careers and double incomes were far more important than family life. Children were parked in front of televisions for seven hours and thirty-six minutes a day; families that spent fifteen minutes talking or playing together were remarkable aberrations.

Increasingly, Christianity itself has been packaged as an agent that meets our needs, makes us feel fulfilled, and contributes to family stability. Only rarely is it presented as God’s gracious self-disclosure to reconcile rebels to himself; only rarely is God’s glory at the very center of the Western church’s thought. While evangelicals may be encouraged by the resurgence in numbers and institutions and seminaries across the last half-century, with only rare exceptions this resurgence has played itself out against the backdrop of a national decline in spiritual values. Words and concepts precious to the Founding Fathers, and still important fifty years ago — words such as *duty, honor, valor, courage, integrity, civility* — now sound almost corny. Narcissism and materialism have very largely triumphed, even among evangelicals. And insofar as this has occurred, so far also has there been a flattening of important distinctions and a decline in the best kinds of pluralism.

(3) *The focus of tolerance has changed.*

In a relatively free and open society, the best forms of tolerance are those that are open to and tolerant of people, even when there are strong disagreements with their ideas. This toleration for people, if not always for their ideas, engenders a measure of civility in national discourse while still fostering spirited debate over the relative merits of this or that opinion. Because of the rise of the third kind of pluralism, however, tolerance in many Western societies increasingly focuses on ideas, not people.

The result of adopting this new brand of tolerance is less discussion of the merits of competing ideas — and less civility. There is less discussion

15. See Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). And see esp. Francis Canavan, “Pluralism and the Limits of Neutrality,” in *Whose Values? The Battle for Morality in Pluralistic America*, ed. Carl Horn (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985), pp. 153-65, who probes the point at which “pluralism” degenerates into “individualism.”

because toleration of diverse ideas demands that we avoid criticizing the opinions of others; there is less civility because there is no inherent demand, in this new practice of tolerance, to be tolerant of people.

In the religious field, this means that few people will be offended by the multiplying new religions. No matter how wacky, no matter how flimsy their intellectual credentials, no matter how subjective and uncontrolled, no matter how blatantly self-centered, no matter how obviously their gods have been manufactured to foster human self-promotion, the media will treat them with fascination and even a degree of respect. But if any religion claims that in some measure other religions are wrong, a line has been crossed and resentment is immediately stirred up: pluralism (in the third sense) has been challenged. Exclusiveness is the one religious idea that cannot be tolerated. Correspondingly, *proselytism* is a dirty word.

What is sometimes forgotten is that this vision of tolerance is, at one level, akin to the view of religious tolerance in some remarkably intolerant countries. In some Muslim countries, for example, it is perfectly acceptable to *be* a Christian; but it may be illegal and is certainly dangerous to *become* a Christian.¹⁶ What is overlooked is that genuine religious freedom necessarily includes the right to convert and to encourage others to convert. At the heart of such freedom is the assumption that ideas matter and that they must be argued out in the marketplace, and that individuals have the right to change their minds and adopt new positions even if everyone around them is convinced that their ideas are preposterous. Of course, these rights are still maintained in the United States. By and large, however, they are not cherished, for the focus of tolerance has changed. Pluralism has managed to set in place certain “rules” for playing the game of religion — rules that transcend any single religion. These rules are judged to be axiomatic. They include the following: religiously based exclusive claims must be false; what is old or traditional in religion is suspect and should probably be superseded; “sin” is a concept steeped in intolerance. The list could easily be expanded.

(4) *The constitutional separation of church and state is changing its focus.*

Most historians affirm that the United States was considerably more homogeneous, religiously speaking, in its first decades than it is now. This is not to deny that the point has been overstated by some popular conservatives. After all, in many intellectual circles in the early years of the nation, Deism was more highly prized than orthodox Christianity. And conflicts

16. Of course, in such countries there are no corresponding penalties for conversion the other way. The same is true, of course, in Israel.

between denominations were more intense than they are today. Even so, the Federalist Papers show that limited government was widely understood to be possible only where society was largely constrained by a moral consensus. John Adams went so far as to say that the system of government being adopted was “wholly inadequate” if that consensus did not exist. Even James Madison’s remonstrance that religion flourishes best where there is no government interference did not take issue with this judgment. Madison, a Virginian, was referring to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which until that time had operated in large measure as a theocracy; he was opposed to the intertwining of some denomination(s) with government, very much the sort of thing that characterized not only the Bay Colony but also England. He was not wrestling with the degree of religious diversity we face today. Moreover, despite occasional statements to the contrary, the virtues of a system of checks and balances were extolled, not on the grounds that unrestrained pluralism is an inherently good thing, but on the grounds that human nature is corrupt and that bad people must not be given too much power. Since we cannot be sure of thwarting bad people with good people, it is far better to introduce a structure of checks and balances so that unfettered power never falls into the hands of one person or group without the possibility of nonviolent redress.

But none of the Founding Fathers envisaged a land where various forms of Christianity coexist with Mormonism, atheism, Buddhism, Islam, and much more — a total of about 1200 separate religious bodies. Almost inevitably, the growth in religious diversity has brought with it some restrictions on free exercise. For instance, in 1878 the Supreme Court, in *Reynolds v. United States*, upheld a federal law prohibiting polygamy against a Mormon challenge, on the ground that although the right to hold religious beliefs is absolute, the state has the right to limit the practice of religion in the interest of the public good. Probably few Christians would want to see that judgment overturned on the particular issue then being examined, even though casual extension of the principle would prove extremely troubling. Moreover, the remarkable growth of government, with its intrusion into more and more spheres of a citizen’s life, has contributed in no small way to the growing clash between church and state. The 1947 Supreme Court decision, written by Justice Hugo Black, that neither federal nor state governments can “pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions or prefer one religion over another” becomes a powerful separatist tool in a society where state funds and state laws touch almost everything we do.¹⁷

17. Mr. Justice Black asserted (in *Everson v. Board of Education*, 1947) that the “First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and

Although the Court has often upheld free exercise, the challenges it faces today are extraordinarily complex. When Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, liberal Protestant, evangelical, agnostic, Satanist, and atheistic children all meet together in the same classroom, it seems slightly simplistic to appeal to the intentions of the Founding Fathers to support judicial restraint. I do not want my children inculcated with the doctrines of the Qur’an; I understand why Muslim parents may not want their children taught Christian doctrines. What is perhaps more disturbing is that many schools therefore say nothing whatever about religion. Such silence is a totally irresponsible approach to the teaching of history, in which religion has often determined the shape of what took place. Worse, it establishes by default a kind of secular religion in which pluralism in the third sense is taught as a public virtue when in fact it is intellectual nihilism. The result, however unwitting, is a double standard by which an essentially secular “faith” is subsidized by the state, but no others are tolerated.¹⁸ Though one can readily appreciate the pressures that have brought this about, surely there is something scandalous, not to say odious, about legislative and judicial decisions that make it lawful to support with government funds “art” that submerges a cross in urine, but makes it unlawful to recite the Lord’s Prayer in a state-supported school.

It is not easy to see a way out of this dilemma. Nor is this essay the place to discuss, for instance, the advantages and the dangers of a voucher system in education, or, still less, the merits of the thesis that minimalist government and relative freedom cannot be sustained when moral consensus in the populace is lost. Certainly Christians need to give more thought to the shape of a desirable public policy in this complex, pluralistic society.¹⁹ Certainly we must vigorously expose the intellectual nihilism

impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach.” This “impregnable wall” Black justified not on the intent of the framers of the Constitution as expressed in the Constitutional Conventions or in the state ratifying conventions, but on the experiment with religious liberty in the State of Virginia. See Daniel P. Larsen, “Justice Hugh L. Black and the ‘Wall’ Between Church and State: Reasons Behind the *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) Decision” (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984).

18. These and related matters are ably discussed in James Davison Hunter and Os Guinness, eds., *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace: The Religious Liberty Clauses and the American Public Philosophy* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1991).

19. One of the few noteworthy efforts along these lines is Os Guinness’s essay, “Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens? Evangelicals, Religious Liberty and a Public Philosophy for the Public Square,” in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry and Kenneth S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 457-97; and the work on which it is partly based, *The Williamsburg Charter Survey on Religion and Public Life* (Washington, DC: The Williamsburg Charter Foundation, 1988).

inherent in all attempts to create a legal system with a meaningful distinction between good and evil, once God has been eliminated from the intellectual horizon.²⁰ Perhaps judicial decisions will be handed down that will reevaluate precisely what coercive force is in play when citizens articulate their religious convictions, whether in contexts that are touched by the almost ubiquitous hand of government or not.

One wonders at times exactly what factors unify the United States. Is it a commonly accepted scientific worldview? Is it blind faith in technology? Is it the shared vision of reality pumped out by television? Is it sports, comment on which occupies about twenty-five percent of most newspapers? Is it some combination of these? The point is that the nature of the nation's unity, or lack of it, decisively shapes the character of the espoused pluralism.

But the horizons of this essay are more limited. So far I have been concerned primarily to expose the nature of the challenges of contemporary pluralism. Since in the United States (though not in other Western nations) the evolving shape of judicial decisions compounds these challenges, they cannot be ignored. My purpose here, however, having surveyed the terrain, is not to discuss every aspect of pluralism but to reflect on a selection of Christian teachings that bear on the relations between pluralism and mission.

SOME CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGE

Each of the points in what follows could usefully be expanded into a chapter or a book. But while there would be virtue in detailed exposition of these points, there may be some value in providing a brief statement of some historical and biblical realities that Christians must recognize and even cherish as they seek to make their way through the thicket of complexities.

(1) *It is vital to remember that the challenges of pluralism are not new.* This historical reality is especially important in the light of assumptions that contemporary pluralism is so startlingly new that fair and honest treatment of it demands that we reshape traditional Christian theology.²¹ But pluralism (in all three senses) is not all that new.

However much ancient Israel or even the patriarchs took over com-

20. See esp. Phillip E. Johnson, "The Modernist Impasse in Law," pp. 180-94 in this volume.

21. See, e.g., many of the essays in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

mon religious rites and structures from the surrounding nations (circumcision, for instance, did not begin with Abraham), Yahweh's gracious self-disclosure tied those elements to his own exclusivistic claims and covenant. In pre-exilic times, Israel not only confronted the diversity of deities in the nations that surrounded her but also repeatedly wrestled with the same phenomena within her own ranks.²² Yahweh's predictable response to religious pluralism lay behind the advice of Balaam to Balak (Rev. 2:14; cf. Num. 25). The pathetic decline during the period of the judges testified not only to the lengthening spread of time from the original redemption from Egypt but also to the attractiveness of the surrounding religious claims. During the monarchy, the ups and downs of both the southern and the northern kingdoms turned in no small part on the response of the rulers to the blandishments of pluralism. Sometimes this pluralism was akin to the second variety defined above: it was an appeal for limitless tolerance. Sometimes (if for different reasons) it promoted the crude intolerance of the third variety: Elijah's dramatic challenge at Mount Carmel was itself a response to the imperialistic claims of Baal worship increasingly imposed by royal sanction (cf. 1 Kings 18).

Of course, it might be objected that the parallels are poor, not only because the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary pluralism are far removed from that found in ancient Israel, but even more because under the old covenant the locus of the covenant people of God was a nation, and that locus had to be distinguished from the locus of the remnant. But pluralism is no less a feature with which new covenant believers must contend. The precise shape of the pluralism the church confronted doubtless varied from place to place throughout the Roman Empire, but enough is known about particular sites to give us some idea of what early Christians faced.²³ The imperial cult became increasingly important, with cities vying for the privilege of becoming *neokoros* — that is, being granted permission to build a temple to honor and worship a particular Caesar. A city like

22. See esp. Richard S. Hess, "Yahweh and His Asherah? Epigraphic Evidence for Religious Pluralism in Old Testament Times," in *One God One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), pp. 5-33.

23. See, among others, Bruce W. Winter, "Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism — 1 Corinthians 8-10," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (1990): 210-15; David W. J. Gill, "Behind the Classical Façade: Local Religions of the Roman Empire," in *One God One Lord*, pp. 72-87; Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians: Powers and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Thorsten Moritz, "'Summing-up All Things': Religious Pluralism and Universalism in Ephesians," in *One God One Lord*, pp. 88-111; and Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament — Supplement Series* 11 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986).

Corinth not only had temples in honor of traditional Greek deities such as Apollo and Neptune; it also boasted a sanctuary of the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis.²⁴ The many mystery cults entered their own mystical appeals. The goddess Artemis, cherished not only at Ephesus but in other parts as well (e.g., in Patras in northern Peloponnesus), demanded sacrifices in which large numbers of birds and animals were burned to death, the people enraptured by the spectacle and excited by the shrieks. Such sacrifices provided large quantities of meat. The healing gods, the fertility cults, the forms of religion bordering on pantheism — all made their appeals. Despite the fact that some classicists tend to purge the Greco-Roman tradition of all that might be judged ignoble, David Gill and others have graphically shown that at the popular level the “early church was addressing people who worshipped rocks, believed plants could be deities, had sacred animals, accepted ritual castration and prostitution. In addition there were the cults that we normally associate with the Roman empire: Jupiter and the other Capitoline deities, as well as the cult of the Emperor himself.”²⁵

This enormous religious potpourri was pluralistic — that is, it was not a conglomeration of mutually exclusive religious groups, each damning all the others. Rather, the opinion of the overwhelming majority was that the competing religions had more or less merit to them. True, many religious adherents judged that their favored brand was best; but probably most saw no problem in participating in many religions. Indeed, the cultural and religious diversity within the Empire, enhanced by the imperial decisions to arrange “god-swaps” between the Roman pantheon and the gods favored by newly subjugated peoples, ensured that most religions made few exclusive claims. Jews were viewed as an intransigent exception. Not only could they not show what their God was like, but they were prepared to die to defend their peculiar views. The Empire therefore made a grudging exception in their case, and it extended that exception to Christians as well, at least for as long as the imperial powers thought of Christianity as a sect within Judaism. Certainly the pluralism of the Roman Empire was not driven by the engines of naturalism (though some thinkers, such as Lucretius, were philosophical naturalists). Even so, the religious world that nascent Christianity confronted was profoundly pluralistic, and from this fact two observations must be made.

First, the responses of the New Testament writers to the pluralism of their day can be applied with relative directness to the analogous pluralism of our day. Thus, against the claims of other intermediaries, Colossians

insists not only on the supremacy of Christ but also on the exclusiveness of his sufficiency. While others recognize many “lords,” many (pagan) baptisms, a wide variety of “hopes” (i.e., diverse visions of the *summum bonum*), Christians recognize one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, and one God (Eph. 4:4-6). While some Greek philosophers opined that there was “one god,” this projected deity was almost always portrayed in pantheistic terms (which is one of the prime reasons why many Greek writers could alternate between “god” and “gods” without any apparent difference in meaning). They could speak of “one god” but could not confess that “God is One.” Paul insists that the one God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of creation and of the old covenant, who has supremely disclosed himself in his Son (Rom. 1; 1 Cor. 8). One cannot read Revelation 2–3 without discerning the titanic struggle the early church faced from the multifaceted pressures of pluralism. Indeed, it is surely safe to conclude that, by and large, the New Testament writers did not readily distinguish the pluralism of the day from the idolatry of the day: the destruction of the one was the destruction of the other.²⁶

For the moment it is enough to recognize that in the current unraveling of Western culture we find two opposing hermeneutical effects. At one level our culture is departing from the heritage of Judeo-Christian values that so long sustained it, and so we are removing ourselves from the worldview of New Testament writers. At another level we are returning, through no virtue of our own, to something analogous to the pluralistic world the earliest Christians had to confront, and so in this sense the New Testament can be applied to us and our culture more directly than was possible fifty years ago. The fundamental difference, of course, is that the modern rush toward pluralism owes a great deal to the church’s weaknesses and compromises during the past century and a half, while the church in the first century carried no such burden. Even so, we shall be less morbid and despairing if we read the Scriptures today and recognize that the challenges of pluralism are not new.

Second, the locus of the new covenant community was no longer a nation (as in the old covenant community) but a trans-national fellowship seeking to live out the new life imparted by the Spirit in a world that could not be expected to share its values. Moreover, this world, politically speaking, was not a democracy in which ordinary citizens could have much direct say in the organization and direction of the Empire. The question to

24. According to Pausanias 2.4.7.

25. Gill, “Behind the Classical Façade,” p. 87.

26. Many texts cry out for detailed exegesis, some of which I hope to undertake in a later publication, and a little of which is summarized below. Some texts that are often cited in support of a less exclusivistic stance are also briefly mentioned.

be asked, then, is this: How did the early church conceive of itself and of the outcome of the mission it undertook? In other words, what were its ecclesiology and eschatology?

Contemporary answers to this question are complex and hotly contested. I should like to address them in another venue; I shall venture a few words about them later in this essay.

(2) *Recognized or not, the doctrine of God lies at the heart of contemporary debates over pluralism.* If God is a certain kind of being, then religious pluralism in the third sense is possible, perhaps even necessary; if God is another kind of being, then religious pluralism in the third sense is not only impossible but deeply rebellious, sinful. And between these two poles one can imagine many other theologies.

Suppose God is an undefinable being who has not particularly disclosed himself (herself? itself? themselves?) in any religion, but rather is such that all religions reflect him (her? it? them?) equally and imperfectly. In this view, one cannot even say that one religion preserves more truth about God than another. Each religion is no more than one appropriate response to this undefinable God. One ends up with the thoroughgoing pluralism of, say, John Hick.²⁷ Never mind that it is extremely difficult to believe that every religion is equally valid and valuable,²⁸ from animism to Satanism to Zen Buddhism to Shi'ite Islam to the eclecticism of the Rev. Moon to medieval Roman Catholicism to the evangelicalism of the Great Awakening. On the face of things it appears as if Hick and his colleagues have adopted thoroughgoing pluralism as the ultimate good, the one non-negotiable, and have then written up a view of God that might be compatible with such a vision. From any Christian perspective, of course, such a procedure is normally called idolatry.

Suppose God is a being whose sole focus is justice. This God, we might say, is the hypostasis of justice. Then those who pursue justice are his servants, and those who are unjust are his enemies. We end up with a God who is particularly congenial to the various liberation theologies. Never mind that we have not asked whether our notions of justice have defined and domesticated this God, or whether this God in his very character, ways, and laws forms and reforms all human concepts of justice; never mind that justice in the public arena cannot easily be separated from righteousness in the private world, even though not all of those who are

27. Of Hick's many works, see esp. *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973); *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); and *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). See also Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977); and Hick and Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

28. Hick does allow certain pragmatic criteria to operate (briefly mentioned below) — but not so as to vitiate his thoroughgoing pluralism.

passionate about the former are equally concerned for the latter. On the face of it, this God is concerned only with horizontal relationships; or, better expressed, horizontal relationships constitute the only valid demonstration of real connection with this God. The cross, the resurrection, and the *parousia* become appendages to our thought about this Deity, optional extras that need taming so that they will support the central vision.

Suppose God cannot be differentiated from what we commonly think of as the created order. Suppose pantheism is right: God is not a personal, transcendent being but is somehow coextensive with the universe or is its animating principle. If such pantheism is shaped one way, Buddhism becomes a live option; if shaped another way, the same could be said for some branches of Hinduism. At the popular level, Shirley Maclaine's exuberant "I am God!" becomes vaguely coherent, even if not very precise. Historic Christianity must simply be dismissed, as must all forms of monotheism that postulate the existence of a personal/transcendent Creator who existed before the universe began and who will one day judge us all. Never mind that the pantheist's God encourages — indeed, mandates — self-focus and self-fulfillment (whether of an ascetic or a hedonistic variety) at utter variance with the gospel (cf. Mark 8:34-35). Never mind that pantheism is intrinsically incapable of supporting a stable moral structure with roots beyond ourselves. On the face of it, this pantheistic brand of monotheism repeats the ancient temptation to confuse the Creator and the creation (Gen. 3:5; Rom. 1:18-25) — the foundation of all idolatry.

Suppose God is personal and in certain respects finite. Suppose that, though he may antedate time, he cannot now invariably see his way clearly through it, let alone control events in it. Whether because of some intrinsic necessity or because he has granted absolute freedom to human beings, he can neither ensure nor infallibly predict the outcome of human contingent decisions. This is the current God of Clark Pinnock;²⁹ it is also a God, it seems fair to say, who bears a troubling resemblance to the God of the process theologians (which is not to say, of course, that Pinnock agrees with the process theologians in every particular: for instance, unlike them, he holds to an *ex nihilo* creation by God).³⁰ Never mind that this God's sovereignty is so severely

29. See esp. Pinnock's essay in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 141ff. It must not be thought that Pinnock's position reflects an Arminian position. Neither Arminius nor Wesley would recognize Pinnock's God.

30. One thinks of such seminal works as Alfred N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926); Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); Ewer H. Cousins, *Process Theology* (New York: Newman, 1971); and David R. Griffin, *God*.

limited that any traditional understanding of his providence must also be jettisoned. Never mind that, while this understanding of God can be squared with many biblical texts depicting God as a personal, interrelating being, it cannot be squared with countless other biblical texts that do not hesitate to ascribe to God the most unqualified and unrelenting sovereignty.³¹ On the face of it, this God squares nicely with only part of the biblical evidence, evidence that is then constructed into a grid to eliminate other biblical evidence. The cost is not only a substantial amount of evidence but also biblically mandated mystery: this God has been domesticated.

From a Christian perspective, many of these and other disparate views of God preserve some important elements of the truth. It is important, for example, to insist that God is not entirely definable; that he is passionately concerned for justice; that he is personal and interacts with his creatures in time. What is most deeply objectionable about so many of these visions of God is that they are reductionistic. Their defenders fasten on some corner of the truth and turn it into the whole, or at the very least use their corner to establish a grid that eliminates other equally important elements.

I think it can be shown that the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible is transcendent, immanent, triune, utterly sovereign, personal, holy, loving, just, and gracious. It is possible to set up a polarization such that his stern justice swamps his love and his forbearance, or the reverse; it is possible so to stress his sovereignty that we fall into mechanistic fatalism, or so to emphasize his personal relationships that we sacrifice his sovereignty. A substantial part of responsible biblical theology is learning how to tie complementary truths together. Indeed, it is arguable that compatibilism (the view that God's sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible, even if we cannot exhaustively show how this is the case) is simply an assumption of many biblical writers, an assumption that surfaces in countless texts (e.g., Gen. 50:19-20; Isa. 10:5-11; Acts 4:27-28; Rom. 9-11). Indeed, it is the post-Enlightenment drive toward human autonomy, and its elevation of reason to the level of utterly independent arbiter, that has implicitly denied biblical compatibilism and consequently constructed visions of God that progressively diminish him.

Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976). Among the more useful responses are Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); John S. Feinberg, "Process Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990): 291-334; and the response by Rodrigo D. Tano in the same issue (pp. 335-40).

31. I have discussed some of the more important passages in my book *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), and in *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), chaps. 11 and 12.

But the general point to be made here is that the doctrine of God one espouses largely controls countless other areas of life and thought. It will exercise a profound impact on one's view of people and their powers, the nature of sin, the nature of the gospel, and the nature of spirituality.

How then shall we know what God is like?

(3) *Responsible discussion of pluralism cannot avoid the question of revelation.* At least some of the disparity among the visions of God just listed turns on mutually exclusive views of revelation. For example, Hick's thoroughgoing pluralism must insist that God has not revealed himself more completely in one religion than in another. Hick will not allow, for instance, the modified pluralism that insists that God has revealed himself in some measure in all religions, but most completely in Jesus Christ and the Christian Scriptures. Such modified pluralism, he argues, is finally nothing more than a sophisticated exclusivism. And of course he is correct! Inevitably that means that he must handle many Christian truth-claims, not to mention claims to exclusivism (e.g., Acts 4:12), as expendable items. The resulting Christianity is a far cry from the kind of Christianity reflected in the Bible. At what point has Christianity sacrificed its own internal integrity on the altar of Hick's pluralism?

Of course, my second and third points belong together. The kind of God Hick envisages largely governs what status Hick assigns to anything that claims to be revelation from God. Conversely, Hick's understanding of revelation, applied to the Bible, means that he cannot correct his vision of God by the revelation that God has in fact provided. What Hick does not anywhere address (so far as I know) is how he knows that God is the sort of being he postulates. Apart from the felt need to meet the demands of thoroughgoing pluralism — a criterion arbitrarily adopted because it is on the contemporary agenda — how does Hick know that God, if he exists, is of a nature to meet this felt need? He cannot claim revelation of a sort different from the revelation-claims in other religions, for to do so would destroy the pluralism he espouses. And if, *mirabile dictu*, he were to claim some sort of revelation, how could he, on his premises, establish any sort of criteria by which to assess the value of these revelation-claims over against the revelation-claims of other religions? But if he neither claims revelation nor offers criteria to validate such revelation, on what basis does he advance his position? So far as I can see, he does so only on the basis of what seems to him most reasonable *once he has already committed himself without reserve to pluralism as the summum bonum*.

The Christian's vision of God, of course, is similarly tied to his or her understanding of revelation. We might begin with the revelatory events to which the Bible bears witness: the burning bush, Sinai, the resurrection

of Jesus, and much more. We might think of Jesus, the ultimate revelation (Heb. 1:1-4), the Word of God incarnate; we might think of the Scriptures themselves. Two of these forms of revelation, of course, are mediated through the third, the Scriptures. In each case, if we have high regard for the value of the revelatory claim, our picture of God is built up. For instance, if we begin with Scripture and start reading the opening lines of the Bible, we start to think of God as Creator; we learn that he is a talking God, a God who speaks; we learn that human beings are made in continuity with the rest of creation, yet distinct from the creation in that we alone are made in God's image. We learn of our accountability to God, of God's displeasure at our rebellion, of his forbearance despite our rebellion. And so we could go on, constructing our vision of God from Scripture.

Alternatively, if a believer begins with a more or less traditional Christian understanding of God, then, just as Hick's view of God shapes what he will allow in revelation, so the believer's vision of God will shape what he or she will allow in revelation. If God is a personal yet transcendent being who governs all things yet can break into his regular pattern of upholding all things to perform what we call a "miracle," we can find nothing intrinsically irrational in belief in miracles. If God has made human beings in his image (however disputed the precise meaning of this term may be), both to know God and to be known by him, there is nothing intrinsically strange in the notion of such a God accommodating himself to human speech in order to communicate with the people he has made. In other words, for both Hick and the believer, one's vision of God and one's understanding of revelation are deeply intertwined.

There is not space here to discuss the many proposals that have been put forward for evaluating such mutually exclusive visions of God, reality, and revelation — that is, for deciding which vision, if any, is superior, or is the truth by which competing visions must be judged. One can adopt, for instance, the straightforward fideism of Lesslie Newbigin,³² the modified fideism of Paul Helm,³³ an assortment of functionalist criteria,³⁴ or the modified coherence theory of Harold Netland³⁵ — to name just a few

32. See Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

33. See Helm, "Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 303-20, 411.

34. See, e.g., John Hick, "On Grading Religions," *Religious Studies* 17 (1982), reprinted in Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 67-87; and Paul F. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 181ff.

35. See Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), esp. pp. 180-95.

of the options. But if these extraordinarily difficult epistemological arguments cannot be probed here, at least two things must be said.

First, to allow for the existence of revelation from a personal/transcendent God, revelation that can be variously located in events, words, and even in the person of the incarnate Son, is to open up space for some important advantages. However difficult it may be to construct a religious epistemology that will prove universally satisfying in order to defend such a stance, one must not overlook the fact that once the stance is adopted (on whatever grounds) it provides some sort of ground on which to stand, various kinds of criteria by which to evaluate. Those who adopt thoroughgoing pluralism must finally insist that there are no criteria: there is no place on which to stand. Gordon Kaufman insists that "there really is no such universally human position available to us."³⁶ The most insightful exponents of this position understand the entailments. Thus Langdon Gilkey writes, "But [this position] has its own deep risks, and one of them is this specter of relativity, this loss of any place to stand, this elimination of the very heart of the religious as ultimate concern."³⁷ D. Z. Phillips is simply being consistent, then, when on these premises he is not prepared to condemn child sacrifice in some remote tribe, simply because he does not properly appreciate what such a practice might mean to that tribe.³⁸ Indeed, to be perfectly consistent, such a stance does not even have the right to condemn those who reject pluralism and espouse exclusivism, for to do so implies that there is a sure standard of evaluation after all. If there is no place on which to stand, we must finally abolish all distinctions between good and evil that are more than pragmatic or utilitarian. One gradually sinks either into the slough of intellectual nihilism or, more likely, into the entanglements of massive intellectual inconsistency. By contrast, the Christian, however much he or she may quarrel with others over the precise meaning and application of the revelation, cannot reasonably doubt the validity of the opposition between truth and error, between right and wrong, between good and evil — and that insight accords much better with the way people actually live their lives than with the alternatives presented by thoroughgoing pluralism.

Second, Christians foreclose on one important element in the revelation they have received when they reduce the epistemological problem to

36. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 5.

37. Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 44.

38. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 237.

exclusively intellectual dimensions. That these intellectual dimensions are extremely important no one should deny; that the problem of religious epistemology has exclusively intellectual dimensions the Christian *must* deny. The alternative is to play the game only by the rules of those who deny the Christian revelation in the first place; it is to buy into the worldview that predominates in the West, the worldview that presupposes that human beings are autonomous, that human reasoning processes (as opposed to the purely mechanical relations of logic) are both reliable and morally neutral, that God, if he exists, must present his credentials to us in such a fashion that we remain the arbiters.

Christians insist that God cannot be captured, measured, weighed, manipulated, or domesticated. He transcends space and time; we are locked in space and time. We have no vantage point from which to take our determining measurements. That is one of two primary reasons why revelation is necessary. But it is the second reason that is almost never acknowledged in the wider discussion, and that is nevertheless more important. The Bible insists that we are hopelessly self-centered. In God's universe, where he alone ought to be acknowledged as both the source and the end of all his creatures, not least those made in his image, our deep self-centeredness is rebellion; it is sin. This sinfulness has so deeply warped our personalities that, although none of us is as evil as we might be, there is no part of our personality that is unaffected. Our choices, our judgments, our reasoning, our hopes, our affections — all are warped by this corrosive rebellion.

From a biblical perspective, that is why God's gracious revelation, whether general or specific,³⁹ is so often not seen for what it is. The light comes into the world, but people prefer the darkness to light, because their deeds are evil (John 3:19-20). According to Paul in Romans 1, God's existence and power are disclosed even in the creation, but we are so twisted that we evaluate the evidence differently and end up worshiping created things rather than the Creator. When God speaks, there will always be some who say it thundered (John 12:28-29). If we understand the message of the cross, it is because "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:10) — which suggests that although God reveals himself on the stage of history in the cross and in other redemptive events, he must also reveal himself by his Spirit to individuals or they will still not take in what he has done. Thus "the spiritual man" — that is, the person who has the Spirit of God — "makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any

39. There is not space here to discuss the relevance of the distinction to the subject of pluralism. For a brief treatment, see Bruce A. Demarest, "General and Specific Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism," in *One God One Lord*, pp. 135-52.

man's judgment" (1 Cor. 2:15). The idea is not that the person with the Spirit enjoys a perfect grasp of quarks, fusion, and molecular biology, but that his or her understanding covers the sweep of human experience, including both the knowledge of the profane person and the knowledge of God. By contrast, profane persons are not in a position to stand in judgment of the person with the Spirit (however much they may protest to the contrary), since the dimension given by the Spirit of God is a closed book as far as they are concerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

This description of what takes place must not be confused with those forms of mysticism that encourage human beings to try to merge with Deity, or experience the Deity directly, with little or no consideration given to the larger questions of sin, guilt, accountability toward God, judgment, and forgiveness. The Spirit in the new covenant is tied to the cross of Jesus. Nor does this description of Christian conversion and experience provide any reasonable warrant for arrogance toward those who have not similarly known the enlightening work of the Spirit, for in the final analysis there is nothing in the believer that has attracted this work of grace. The Christian is never more than one poor beggar telling other poor beggars where there is bread. What is clear, I think, is that this account of what makes a Christian a Christian turns on an adequate understanding of the work of the Spirit and, antecedently, of the moral corruptions that ensure that human beings will simply not find God on their own.

In other words, one element of the Christian vision openly insists that part of what we claim as the basis for our knowledge of God is *not* in the public domain. We acknowledge that God has disclosed himself in powerful ways in the universe he has created and *in history* (and thus in the public domain), and supremely in his Son Jesus Christ, whom he raised from the dead — an act that takes place *in history*, the results of which were attested by hundreds of witnesses. But all human beings are so self-centered — that is, on this issue so profoundly tied to the rightness of their own opinions, to the sanctity of their right to judge, to their insistence that even religion, even God himself, be made to conform to their preferences and expectations — that apart from the work of the Spirit we will prove so blind that we will not see what God has graciously disclosed. We are, in short, dead in transgressions and sins. We are like arrogant amateurs staring at the paintings in the Louvre and offering cheap and scathing criticism of the talent that surrounds us: in this museum it is not the paintings that are being judged. So also with respect to all our learned evaluations of God, our reconstructions of his nature, our refusal to accept what he has disclosed of himself, our insistence that he meet the high standards established by our moral sensibilities (not least if they are shaped by the great god Plu-

ralism): in reality, in this universe it is not God who is being judged. We simply condemn ourselves, for our odious self-centeredness and therefore our deep unbelief are culpable stances, however sophisticated they may be.

This, or something like it, is an essential component in any biblically faithful Christian vision. What we proclaim as God's truth is in one sense in the public domain: God has graciously disclosed himself in words and deeds, and supremely in his Son. But that very revelation leads us to believe that a further self-disclosure of God by his Spirit is necessary if our culpable blindness is to be overcome. Doubtless the Spirit often uses means, not least the means of well-argued, well-presented gospel truth. But it is not the naked truth itself, conceived exclusively in propositions and their relationships, that suffices: in that case becoming a Christian would depend more on one's I.Q. than on faith. The reality is more humbling. By God's grace we begin to see how alienated from him we are. We ask for mercy, we learn to trust him, and that very trust entails a turning aside from the self-confidence and self-centeredness that marked our lives before; in short, it entails repentance. In other words, we are saved by grace, through faith — and even that faith is finally not of ourselves; it is the gift of God.

Many Christians have engaged with unbelievers in protracted debates over the ways in which truth, not least religious truth, can be known. Some of these debates have been fruitful. For pedagogical and other reasons it may sometimes be wise to address some of the questions of religious epistemology from the perspectives of those who deny the Christian givens. But it is unwise to remain there too long; it may become a surreptitious denial of the Christian revelation, an implicit claim that we can simply argue people into the kingdom. In fact, one wonders if the classic debates between, say, evidential and presuppositional apologetics, between empiricism and fideism, would look vastly different if they were forced to butt up against a well-articulated analysis of the entailments of the fall and of biblical presentations of God's rich bounty in providing general, specific, and *personal* revelation to meet our moral and spiritual blindness.

(4) *In recent discussion, questions of revelation and truth have been sidestepped by appealing to hermeneutical realities, and this practice has become one of the most difficult features in the challenge of pluralism.*

So great has been the change in our understanding of what "hermeneutics" treats that it is sometimes hard to believe that a bare generation ago all conservative seminaries understood the subject to be the art and science by which people (the "knowers") could accurately interpret the Bible (the "known"). Indeed, two or three generations ago all Western seminaries and theological colleges adopted a similar stance.

Today almost no one does. Contemporary hermeneutics begins with

the finiteness, the limited perspective, of the reader. What we ask of the text and what we are prepared to accept from the text are bound up less with the text than with us. The text does not so much speak objective things as things some particular reader perceives — things that are quite different from what some other reader perceives, and possibly quite different from what the same reader perceives on another occasion or in a few months' time. In some versions of this new hermeneutic, no meaning resides in the text; all meaning resides in the reader/interpreter of the text. Perhaps more commonly, all "interpretations" or "readings" of a text are understood to be a set of culturally conditioned projections, a coherent symbol-system that is only one of many possible symbol-systems.⁴⁰

The older questions about the truthfulness of the text are thus neatly avoided. In postmodernism, pluralism in any case sees truth as systematic rather than absolute, but the new hermeneutic ensures that the "system" is infinitely flexible. Because of the difficulty inherent in any finite creature or culture knowing anything truly, questions about the truthfulness of the text (in an objective or absolute sense) are simply dismissed as irrelevant, out of date, and incredibly naive. Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis are correct when they charge that Hick believes that "religious belief . . . is . . . determined exclusively by large-scale cultural variables or small-scale psychological ones, and in any event by historical accident and not by a conscious attempt to apprehend and incarnate a true world-view. . . . [T]he apparently conflicting truth-claims which form an important part of the major religious world-views are not really in conflict because they are not really truth-claims."⁴¹

From this perspective one may meaningfully speak of a liberation theology hermeneutic, or a feminist hermeneutic, or a sub-Saharan black African hermeneutic, or a North Atlantic WASP hermeneutic. At no point, however, does this perspective afford us any vantage point from which to assess these diverse hermeneutical stances and their results. The only useful criteria are purely pragmatic.

It is important to recognize that this approach to interpretation dominates not only biblical study but almost all of the humanities. Law, economics, literature, history, sociology, political science, anthropology, and much more — all are struggling with the uncontrolled relativism that invades each discipline where this new hermeneutic has intruded.

40. Consider the title of a recent and important book by Charles Mabee, *Reading Sacred Texts through American Eyes: Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Critique*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics, 7 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1991).

41. Griffiths and Lewis, "On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People — A Reply to Professor Hick," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 76, 78.

The problem is compounded by the dichotomy still commonly drawn by the lowly undergraduate and by the person on the street — the dichotomy between the “facts” of science and the “opinions” of all other disciplines. This dichotomy has seemed so absolute and so unfair to many Christian observers that they have invested not a little energy in breaking it down. Science itself, they say, depends on paradigms, models, inferences — and exactly the same thing is true of biblical religion. Their aim in arguing this way is to bolster the credibility of Christianity’s truth-claims, or at least get them onto the agenda for discussion, by showing that in many ways religion and science deploy similar techniques in the formation and modification of “doctrine.”⁴²

But the thoroughgoing pluralists are unmoved. If the work of the “hard” sciences is parasitic on paradigms that can shift with time,⁴³ however complex those shifts might be,⁴⁴ then the degree of subjectivity inherent in these phenomena only confirms the pluralists’ point. Thus Paul Knitter insists that today “truth is no longer defined according to the Aristotelian notion of science: ‘certain knowledge through causes.’ Rather, ‘modern science is not true; it is only on the way towards truth.’ . . . On the personal level, truth is no longer seen as the pursuit of certainty but as the pursuit of understanding — ever greater understanding. This means that all ‘true understanding’ will be open to change and revision.”⁴⁵ It comes as no surprise that he criticizes the law of noncontradiction. Truth should be seen as relational: “what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to other expressions of truth and to grow through these relationships.”⁴⁶

We must not delude ourselves into thinking that this outlook on the world belongs exclusively to the intelligentsia. When presented with the statement “There is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct,” twenty-eight percent

of the American populace agree strongly, while a further thirty-nine percent agree somewhat — a total of sixty-seven percent, over against only twenty-nine percent who disagree somewhat or disagree strongly (five percent indicated “don’t know”).⁴⁷ Even if we allow that the test statement is a bit loose (the second half might be thought by some to allow for discrepancy at the merely linguistic level), the results demonstrate the scale of the problem that Christian witness must confront.

How are we to think our way through the new hermeneutic? At the risk of oversimplification, one can discern two positions at opposite ends of the spectrum of hermeneutical options.

At one end of the hermeneutical spectrum stands the position ably represented by David Tracy.⁴⁸ To the pluralism of the present religious context, he responds with a *hermeneutical* pluralism. The truth-claims of various religions, and of various traditions within each religion, do not drive him to radical deconstructionism. He argues that one of the faults of post-Kantian modernity is precisely the drive to elevate human reason above the entangling constraints of tradition. This, he says, cannot be done: *every* act of understanding is *necessarily* an interpretation. There are no “brute” facts. Even the language we use is colored by culture; it is part of our culture and therefore part of our tradition. Tracy’s advocacy of hermeneutical pluralism thus makes a virtue of what he perceives to be a necessity. Multiple interpretations of even the Christian heritage, let alone of world religions, are inevitable; Tracy declares them desirable, and he attempts to delineate what responsible, moral, and authentic hermeneutical options should look like.

The work of Tracy and his followers is in some respects a welcome relief from modernism, with its perpetual assumption of the independence and reliability of human reasoning. What is disappointing is that Tracy’s focus is so constantly and narrowly hermeneutical that he never deeply addresses the possibility of revelation that is simultaneously true and culturally encoded. He has not, so far as I am aware, wrestled with a traditional

42. So, e.g., several chapters of Lesslie Newbigin’s thoughtful book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). See also the generally excellent work of Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976).

43. The idea became much more widely spread with the publication of Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

44. See the important qualifications introduced in Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn’s Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

45. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 32.

46. Knitter, *No Other Name?* p. 219.

47. George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe* (Ventura: Regal, 1991), pp. 83-85.

48. Since 1968 Tracy has written eight books and many articles. For the purposes of this article, his most important books are these: *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975); *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); (with John Cobb) *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism* (New York: Seabury, 1983); *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); and *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). The most important (sympathetic) evaluation of Tracy’s work is found in Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike, eds., *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

(and biblical) presentation of revelation articulated to meet postcritical and postmodern objections. No less seriously, although he thinks he has avoided the pitfalls of deconstructionism by advocating hermeneutical pluralism, it is difficult to see how he can avoid an equivalent intellectual nihilism. To talk about responsible, moral, and authentic hermeneutical options sounds reassuring, but in Tracy's thought all three adjectives are necessarily tied exclusively to individual or cultural subjectivity. His concern that we intelligently practice a "hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval" so that we learn to criticize our own tradition, and thus avoid merely being locked in it, presupposes a set of criteria by which we pick and choose. But by his own thesis, the choice of such criteria cannot be other than interpretive acts, reflecting a different set of human, cultural pressures and traditions (including reactions against them). Despite the high-flown language of Tracy's moral concerns, I do not see how he avoids the radically arbitrary.⁴⁹

The other end of the hermeneutical spectrum might be represented by William J. Larkin.⁵⁰ Larkin ably chronicles the change from modernism to postmodernism and powerfully depicts the epistemological quagmire into which we have flung ourselves. He argues that Christians must recognize that we possess in Scripture a transcendent stance that is *above* or *outside* culture, and we must use that stance to shape our questions, to form our perceptions of reality, and to establish our methods.

Before attempting to evaluate Larkin's work, it will be useful to reflect on another point along the spectrum. This stance has few theoretical proponents but many practitioners. It is perhaps best represented by Charles H. Kraft.⁵¹ Despite many anthropological insights of great value in his work, his approach to Scripture is perhaps what is most startling in his work. He treats the Bible as a casebook, in which different narratives or passages might reasonably be applied to one particular culture but not to another. Thus if Christianity begins to exert influence in a polygamous African culture, the appropriate "case" might be Abraham or David (his example). When pressed to ask if there is anything at all in the Bible that is normative and unyielding and applicable in every culture, Kraft responds that there are some basic Christian nonnegotiables that transcend culture: "Jesus is Lord," for instance, and a number of other foundational confessions.

49. In fairness to Tracy, he tries to avoid this pitfall by deemphasizing the individual and by stressing the importance of the community and its traditions. But this decision itself, it appears, is arbitrary. Communities and traditions can embrace barbaric cruelty.

50. See esp. Larkin's book *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

51. See Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980).

As I have discussed Kraft's work at length elsewhere,⁵² I shall not repeat myself here. In brief, however, it appears as if Kraft's reliance on contemporary hermeneutics has simultaneously gone too far and not far enough. It has gone too far in that by treating the Bible as a casebook he does not ask how the pieces fit together. Indeed, he necessarily assumes that they do not. Basic questions must then be asked about what the Bible is and how we are to read it (see below). But he does not go far enough in that he fails to recognize that even basic statements such as "Jesus is Lord" are in certain respects culturally conditioned. The statement, for a start, is in English, and all language is culturally constrained. "Jesus" is not an entirely unambiguous proper noun: are we referring to the Jesus of the Mormons, the Jesus of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jesus of liberal Protestantism, the Jesus of orthodox Christianity? One could raise similar questions about "is" and "Lord." Translate the expression into Thai and utter it in a Buddhist temple in Thailand, and it will be taken to mean that this Jesus, whoever he is, is inferior to Gautama the Buddha, of whom nothing can be predicated — the highest state of exaltation.

I am not saying that the truth of what orthodox Christians mean when they confess "Jesus is Lord" cannot be expressed in Thai. Rather, I am saying that not only because of differing linguistic conventions but even more because of divergent worldviews the expression of this truth to a Thai-speaking Buddhist requires some care, and it may demand the construction of a biblical worldview to ensure that the confession is rightly understood.⁵³

But this example enables us to see that even on an orthodox understanding of the Bible as divine, authoritative revelation, it is not for that reason entirely outside culture. The Bible was written in human languages. Frequently it specifically adopts or presupposes the human conventions of some society. It customarily addresses concrete historical situations about which our knowledge is fragmentary. But it will not do to conclude that the authority of the Bible is thereby hopelessly compromised. In historic Protestantism it was common to speak of the doctrine of accommodation — the manner in which God accommodated himself to human language and culture in order to communicate with human beings in categories they could take in. In one sense, the ultimate "accommodation" is the incarnation: that is one reason why theologians have often drawn attention to the parallels between the Word written and the Word incarnate (though there

52. See my essay "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 213-57, esp. 242ff.

53. Kraft himself would deny that there is such a thing as a "biblical worldview."

are also profound differences). What is needed today is an updating of the doctrine of accommodation to address contemporary problems without jettisoning the revelation that God has graciously given.

It is perhaps at this point that Larkin has opened himself up to some criticism. I am not saying that he would necessarily disagree with the points just articulated. Rather, it is his lack of discussion of such matters that will draw fire and perhaps lead, in some circles, to an unnecessarily hostile readership. Of course, many reject his work entirely, since they have long since abandoned any place in their thought for authoritative revelation, especially propositional revelation. But some find fault with Larkin for not exploring in greater detail the manner in which the Bible is simultaneously authoritative — God's Word written (and thus in certain respects beyond or outside any one cultural framework) — and a word accommodated to several concrete historical cultures.

Once again, it is impossible to plow new furrows here. But Christians will want to argue, surely, that it is the transcendent/personal God who guarantees the truthfulness of what he says, even if he casts what he says in human speech; that all of his revelation coheres, precisely because it is his; that human attempts to read and understand that revelation, though they are doomed to fall short of perfect understanding, are not doomed to utter subjectivity or even solipsism. Various hermeneutical models have been put forth: instead of a hermeneutical circle, one may conjure up a hermeneutical spiral in which readers cycle closer and closer into the meaning of the text. Or one may approach such meaning asymptotically (a useful mathematical model), fuse the horizon of one's understanding with the horizon of understanding presupposed by the author (as revealed in the text), or, less technically, admit that while we might not understand perfectly there is no necessary impediment to understanding truly. After all, unless contemporary pluralists think they are merely playing cynical word games, they expect to be (more or less) understood by their readers when they argue for their positions. Cannot they allot the same courtesy to, say, Paul, while recognizing that the task of understanding what he has written must cross additional barriers of time, language, and culture?

There are one or two benefits that have come from this revolution in hermeneutics, but I shall reserve them for my concluding reflections.

(5) *An adequate response to pluralism (in the third sense) must work outward from a profound and deepening grasp of the Bible's entire story line.*⁵⁴

54. I use the term *story line* not to cast doubt on the truthfulness of the Bible's witness as to what took place in history, but because alternative expressions — *plot*, *salvation-history*, *history*, *narrative* — cast up their own connotations of doubtful usefulness for my purposes.

There was a time when Christian witness in this country rested primarily on calling people back to what they already knew and on living a life in conformity with that call. Even where the basics of the gospel had to be rearticulated, such proclamation took place against the backdrop of a populace that was basically familiar with the Bible's story and theology.

No longer. Even Christian witness to the church can no longer assume very much. How much less may we legitimately assume when we announce the good news to the unchurched?

What this means is that we must begin farther back. Christian witness becomes more and more a matter of confronting a bewildering variety of worldviews with the Bible's story and with the gospel as its crowning point. We cannot afford to advance piecemeal. If we try, we shall lose ground piecemeal. Worse, we shall not even be understood.

There is not space here to sketch in the Bible's story and show the importance of each turning point to the challenge of pluralism. One or two points were suggested above when we reflected on disparate visions of God and on the nature of human evil. But there are many other points.

We may begin with the creation and fall. The Bible insists that human beings are important (because they were made in God's image) but rebellious. The contemporary mood declares that we are unimportant but not evil; we are the chance conglomerations of atoms and molecules, the statistically unlikely product of the primordial ooze. These competing visions cannot be assigned to debates over origins and left there as if they are irrelevant to other subjects. Unless the biblical perspective on this matter of origins is accepted, the nature of our dilemma will not be perceived, and therefore the gospel that purports to address the human dilemma will not be understood. Our fundamental problem is not loneliness, alienation from other human beings, lack of fulfillment, materialism, poverty, corrupt government, or ecological malfeasance. All of these things are deep problems; they constitute part of the human dilemma; they must be addressed. Thank God, Christians are among many others who seek to address them. But the root problem behind all problems is rebellion against God. The most desperately needed solution is reconciliation to God.

Suppose someone were to say that this is nothing but privatized religion — that the Bible itself preserves the gospel according to Amos, a message of social reform. How should we evaluate this counterclaim? It is of course far too easy to assume a veneer of religious respectability. But reconciliation to God, according to the Scriptures, is never so glib. Whether according to Amos or Paul, the concern to do what is right is motivated and empowered by a right relation with the personal/transcendent.

dent God who is passionately concerned about justice. But both Amos and Paul are part of the Bible's story line. One cannot take a bit of Amos and eschew Paul because we find the former a little more congenial to our current tastes. And when we ask how Amos, say, is treated in later revelation (see, e.g., Acts 15), we find links to the righteous kingdom that the resurrected Jesus was inaugurating. The prophets as a whole treat social injustice as part and parcel of the rebellion against God. They are not so foolish as to think that social justice can be achieved apart from reconciliation to God. In other words, an appropriate evaluation of the counterclaim is possible only by reexamining Amos and related themes within the Bible's story line.

We might turn to the giving of the law. God discloses himself as the God who makes demands, who defines what is right and wrong for his people. But because we are reading each part of the Bible in the light of the whole, we cannot help but reflect on how Leviticus is related to the Epistle to the Hebrews. We think through what was being taught by the various sacrificial systems mandated under the old covenant, and we think through their fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ Jesus himself. We learn what the conditions of reconciliation to God entail. We begin to understand the place of Christ Jesus within God's redemptive purposes and plan.

So far I have said nothing about the Abrahamic covenant, the Wisdom literature, or the Gospels. I have not here reflected very much on the nature of the church: her responsibility to live in this world, but not be of it; her mandates, responsibilities, and privileges; and her relations with the wider world. Moreover, we might follow the Bible's story line to its end and reflect on biblical eschatology. There we learn of God's great forbearance now and of the certainty of the judgment to come. We must face death and afterlife, and we must live in the prospect of a complete accounting before a sovereign and infallible God. We learn to live in the light of a new heaven and a new earth to which some are admitted and from which some are shut out. We discover the ways in which the church is to serve even now as an outpost of the new heaven and the new earth.

All of these elements, and more besides, constitute the Bible's story line. Together they establish what the gospel is, that from which we are saved, the nature of the One to whom we must give an account, the relative importance of this world and the next so far as the focus of our hopes and investments is concerned, the desperate plight in which we find ourselves as we reject the grace of God, the wonders of God's grace along with the ineffable brilliance of his holiness, and much more.

Now if this entire vision is set over against the competing visions of the pluralists (in the third sense), we immediately discover that the issues

dividing Christian from pluralist are not merely epistemological, or christological, or reducible to any simple set of points. An entire vision of reality is at stake. Moreover, the pluralist, seeking to give an account of the world, must explain the Christian, and will doubtless conclude that the Christian is too tightly bound by tradition, naive in the area of epistemology, intolerant of other views, and so forth. The Christian response, while striving to address the pluralist's agenda in a responsible fashion, must also articulate how the pluralist will be perceived in the Christian's worldview. The pluralist is an idolator, worshiping the created world more than the Creator. He or she so relativizes God's truth that God's own Son becomes an incidental on the religious landscape, and his sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection become insignificant and unbelievable respectively. Pluralists are inconsistent in that they want to be understood univocally while insisting that ancient authors, let alone God himself, cannot be. They may have many religious experiences, but none of them deals with the heart of the human problem, the sin that is so deeply a part of our nature. In short, we must deal with massively clashing worldviews, and part of our responsibility is to explain competing worldviews from our vantage point. We cannot possibly engage at that level unless we ourselves have thoroughly grasped the biblical story line and its entailed theology.

In exactly the same way, the various forms of universalism cannot be responsibly addressed from a Christian perspective unless they are placed within the context of the Bible's story line. One thinks of the absolute universalism of Hans Urs von Balthasar⁵⁵ or of Peggy Starkey,⁵⁶ in which expressions such as "all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:21) or "reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:20) or "new humanity" (Eph. 2:15, NRSV) are lifted out of their contexts and given enormous and independent weight, while exclusivistic texts are whittled away. One also thinks of the qualified universalism of Neal Punt,⁵⁷ of the post-Vatican II strugglings with pluralism and the theory of the anonymous Christian,⁵⁸ of assorted evangelical attempts to assign saving virtue to what is traditionally called "general revelation."⁵⁹ One also thinks of recent attempts to treat the old covenant

55. See, e.g., Balthasar's *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987).

56. Starkey, "Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *International Review of Mission* 71 (1982).

57. Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

58. Perhaps the best recent treatment of this difficult subject is that of David Wright, "The Watershed of Vatican II: Catholic Attitudes Towards Other Religions," in *One God One Lord*, pp. 153-71.

59. One thinks, for instance, of the quite different attempts of Peter Cotterell, *Mission*

and the new covenant as alternative routes to salvation⁶⁰ (even though Paul is reported to have said, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" [Acts 20:21]). In each case, the issue is the same: the nature of the "good news," and its relation to the Bible's story line.

Christian efforts to expound that story line, that biblical theology, and apply it to modern settings must be undertaken with both humility and boldness: with humility because an essential part of our beliefs is that we too were "dead in [our] transgressions and sins" and "like the rest . . . objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:1, 3), and if we have been reconciled to God, it says much about his great grace, and nothing about our wisdom or goodness; and with boldness because, with Paul, we hold that we are debtors to all, and we cannot envisage that that truth which has been graciously given, both in the public arena of history and in the private watch of transformed experience — truth given by the self-disclosing, personal/transcendent, Trinitarian God of Christian monotheism — is of merely idiosyncratic relevance.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Although much of this essay has focused on the challenges cast up by pluralism (in the third sense), I have hinted now and then that there are also some advantages. In a few concluding lines I would like briefly to highlight some of them.

First, even though many of the reasons why we have fallen into this state are bad, if we listen attentively to the New Testament we will discover that thoughtful application of the gospel to us and to our society now becomes more immediate and powerful, precisely because our society is

and *Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 1990), and of Clark H. Pinnock, "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990). A preliminary response is found in Demarest, "General and Specific Revelations." See also Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987).

60. See, e.g., Norbert Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1991); Michael Shermis and Arthur E. Zannoni, eds., *Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist, 1991); and Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting our Stories Straight* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). For an evangelical variation on Jewish-Christian dialogue, see esp. Marc H. Tannenbaum, Marvin R. Wilson, and A. James Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation on Scripture, Theology, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978); A. James Rudin and Marvin R. Wilson, *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); and Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

approaching the pluralism of the Roman Empire in the first century. This point has already been made.

Second, another face of pluralism (in all three senses) is "globalization." The phenomenal communications abilities we possess today, and the increasingly complex ways in which nations and peoples make an impact on other nations and peoples, ensure that more and more people think of the world as a "global village." Recognition of this reality can help the church to think globally — as in any case we ought to. We have moved, in missionary circles, from colonialism to anti-colonialism to globalization.⁶¹ To take but one example: we can no longer think of the Western nations as missionary-sending nations and of all other nations as missionary-receiving nations. As more and more so-called Third-World nations send out missionaries, missiologists estimate that the number of such people will exceed 162,000 by the year 2000 — far more than all those sent out by churches in the West. Christian outreach is becoming a truly international enterprise, and that is for the good. Among the desirable effects will be the reduction of the triumphalism and condescension that has often crippled Western Christianity.

Third, in the light of the forces of globalization, there is at least some prospect of a cross-fertilization of biblical theology from culture to culture. There are substantial lessons to be learned from the new hermeneutic. This is not to allow the absolute relativizing of all of the Bible's truth-claims. Rather, as, for example, the sub-Saharan black African church develops leaders, so also will it produce people who articulate biblical theology within an African context. If the Bible is the "given," such theologies will overlap at countless points with the theologies of the West where the Bible is held in similar reverence — theologies with which we are more familiar. But they are also likely to diverge at some points. For instance, they will be far more sensitive to corporate metaphors and realities, since as a culture (or group of cultures) they are far less prone to raw individualism. They are also likely to be more sensitive to the biblical descriptions of the spirit world. Genuine exchanges and mutual correction among leaders who hold a high view of Scripture but who work and labor in highly diverse contexts should prove enriching to the entire church of God.

Finally, if we keep our heads and do not capsize the bark in the churning sea of pluralism, the experience may actually help us to understand the truth of the gospel more clearly. It is a commonplace of historical theology that sophisticated denial of some area of Christian truth is often

61. See Paul Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism," *Missiology* 19 (1991): 263-81.

the means by which the church achieves greater precision and understanding in that area of truth. Precisely because pluralism has generated so many forms of rejection of the gospel, there is at least the opportunity to think through many basic issues with a degree of clarity that might not otherwise be possible. This is especially true in the areas of evangelism and mission.

Whether we actually move in this direction, of course, or sell our biblical heritage for a mess of pluralist pottage, is something that remains to be seen. May God have mercy on us.