The Challenges of Contemporary Pluralism[1]

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Defining Pluralism

"Pluralism" is a surprisingly tricky word in modern discussion. For some, it has only positive connotations; for others, only negative. Some use it in combination with various spheres: cultural pluralism, ideological pluralism, intellectual pluralism, religious pluralism, and so forth. For our purposes it will be useful to consider not the spheres in which pluralism is found, but three kinds of phenomena to which the word commonly refers: empirical pluralism, cherished pluralism, and philosophical or hermeneutical pluralism.

A. Empirical Pluralism

Empirical pluralism sums up the growing diversity in our culture. Observable and largely measurable, it is what David Tracy prefers to call "plurality." "Plurality," he writes, "is a fact."

"Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact."[2] But although a few scholars have followed him in this usage, most still use "pluralism," in one of its uses, to refer to the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religion in many Western and some other nations. Paul Martinson prefers the rubric "factual pluralism";[3] in any case, the rubric is less important than the phenomenon.

Consider, for example, the remarkable ethnic diversity in America. 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. Compiling equally remarkable statistics in almost every other plane of American culture is an easy matter.

It is possible to overstate the novelty of this diversity. Jon Butler vigorously argues, for his own ideological purposes, that American life and culture were extraordinarily diverse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and correspondingly depreciates the degree of diversity reflected in the nation today.[4] Richard Pointer's recent study of colonial New York reinforces the trend among modern historians to find substantial pluralism in this country at its birth.[5] But although such work is a useful foil for those who picture colonial America as culturally monolithic, or who exaggerate modern empirical pluralism, it must be insisted that the range of contemporary diversity is, on any scale, vastly greater than has ever been experienced in the Republic before.

In the religious arena, the statistics are fascinating and sometimes differ from poll to poll.[6] Statistics for the larger denominations have floated a little, but not much. Protestants declined from about 67 percent to 57 percent between the years 1952 and 1987. Roman Catholicism is now increasing in numbers, owing in part to the influx of Hispanics, but the number of Roman Catholic clergy is declining disastrously, which at least suggests that both the internal strength of Catholicism in this country and its influence on the nation are

on the wane. Most demographers insist that if present trends continue, WASPs (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) will be in a minority (about 47 percent) by the year A.D. 2000.[7]

But some statistics do not tell the whole story. They have to be augmented by other observations. Frequently large-scale studies on what America believes focus little attention on the small but multiplying and growing movements on the fringes. There are substantial numbers of Hindus and Buddhists who have emigrated to the West, and who are now slowly winning converts. The familiar cults are holding their own; some of them, like the Mormons, are growing fairly rapidly. Numerous studies document the rise of New Age religions and the revitalization of various forms of neo-paganism. Not long ago witches' covens were virtually unknown; now they advertise in the newspapers. Current immigration patterns are bringing in more and more people with little heritage in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and this fact doubles the impact of the number of people within the country who for various reasons have lost or abandoned the tradition. None of this was foreseen by the Founding Fathers; little of it was foreseen forty years ago.

Even when the standard polls provide useful and interesting data,[8] a depth dimension is often missing. One of the best-known devices, the Princeton Religious Index, used by the Gallup organization, serves as a benchmark based on seven religious beliefs and practices: belief in God, religious preference, attendance at worship, confidence in the church, confidence in the clergy, the importance of religion, and religion's ability to answer current problems. In 1994, this index for the U.S. stands at 656 (on a scale with a maximum of 1000)— a little higher than the late 1980s, considerably lower than 1960. The percentage of those who say they attend worship services at least once a month has been remarkably stable for the last century. But such figures do not make sufficient allowance for several other factors. Some studies have suggested that the percentage of those who *say* they attend worship once a week or once a month may be double the percentage of those who do what they say. More importantly, the pressures of secularization ensure that formal religious observance may happily coexist with the marginalization of religion.

One hundred years ago, the *New York Times* had the sermons of Spurgeon telegraphed across the Atlantic so they could be printed in the Monday morning edition. Today the *New York Times* is more interested in chronicling the devices some neighborhoods are using to keep churches out or at least small— petitions, manipulated zoning laws, even litigation (March 24, 1994). Moreover, if the studies of Wuthnow are correct,[9] individualism and personal choice in religion have largely displaced loyalty to denominational structures and to inherited doctrinal bastions. This makes it easier for individuals to be syncretistic, or, worse, confusedly pluralistic— i.e., people without strong doctrinal commitments may take on highly diverse and even incompatible ideas and fuse them in some way (syncretism), or they may take on highly diverse and even contradictory ideas without fusing them, simply letting them stand, unaware that the elementary demands of consistency are being violated.

In short, the rise in empirical pluralism can scarcely be denied. Experts may debate the significance of this or that com-

ponent,[10] but the trends are so unmistakable that they should not be ignored.[11]

Moreover, although most of the statistics just provided, along with many of the arguments in this book, have the United States in view, empirical pluralism is characteristic of most countries in the Western world. In Canada, regular attendance at public worship is only a fraction of what it is in the U.S., but the percentage of Canadians who say they hold religious, and specifically Christian, beliefs is not too far out of step with figures south of the 49th parallel: 67 percent of Canadians believe Jesus rose from the dead, 78 percent claim some sort of affiliation with a Christian denomination, 53 percent of adults reject the theory of evolution, 9 percent say God is "just an old superstition."[12] But again, the real advances in empirical pluralism in Canada are detected as much in other measurements as in the religion statistics: substantial immigration (from Haiti, the Indian subcontinent, the Pacific Rim, especially Hong Kong), changing levels of tolerance, rising biblical illiteracy, changing tolerances in the moral arena, the presence of minarets and Buddhist temples. Like Canadians, Australians score fairly high on personal belief in God, and very low in any ability to articulate the gospel or to become actively involved with a local church. It, too, has witnessed a flood of immigrants.

Many European countries are experiencing their own forms of empirical pluralism, forms that are sometimes much like those of their American counterparts, and sometimes very different (e.g., "guest workers" in France and Germany). A major study (nicely summarized in the *Christian Science Monitor* of November 22, 1991) demonstrates, not unexpectedly, the American bias both toward liberal individualism and toward some form of religious expression, over against a number of European countries.

In many countries, the growing empirical diversity of religions and ideologies is tied in part to fresh immigration patterns (often from their former colonies), and to a general decline in the hold of Judeo-Christian biases in outlook and values. As usual, the significance of almost every datum is disputed. For example, in his recent book Robin Gill argues that the perception in England that the churches are empty is not to be laid at the door of "secularization" and other cultural factors. The blame, rather, lies with church leaders who ignored the declining numbers at the turn of the century, and continued to build more buildings than were needed.[13] But even if he has uncovered some remarkable ecclesiastical bumbling, most observers think his analysis extraordinarily reductionistic, and his proposals for reversing the decline— essentially variations of good management techniques— extraordinarily optimistic. The pluralisms that now characterize England go far deeper than how many church buildings are empty, and turn on more than the mosque in Regents Park or the prevalence of Urdu in Leicester or the fact that the Cockney lilt is now less common in Metropolitan London than the West Indian lilt, though all of these realities are important indices. What is gaining is diversity; what is declining is relative cultural homogeneity. In short, in almost all Western nations (and some others), there is a marked rise in empirical pluralism.

This is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Those who prefer that culture be variegated, racially mixed, religiously pluriform, and culturally diverse, will judge these developments

good. The developments themselves may achieve some real good if they serve to break down cultural prejudice, racial arrogance, and religious bigotry. Christians may find the diversity an ideal setting for thoughtful articulation of the faith and for renewed evangelism. Alternatively, those who prefer the stability of recognized cultural norms may find the new pluralities not only discomfiting but vaguely threatening. And it would be naive to fail to acknowledge that these new realities may actually serve to fan the flames of hostility and tribalism. In order to maintain stability, governments may be tempted to arrogate more and more authority to themselves (since there are fewer and fewer shared values and norms). The end of this is hard to foresee, but it probably augurs little good. Christians may be tempted so to bemoan the dilution of centuries of Western culture that they perceive only threat and no opportunity.

But however the rise of empirical pluralism is perceived, the brute reality cannot seriously be doubted. This is empirical pluralism.

B. Cherished Pluralism

By "cherished pluralism" I mean to add an additional ingredient to empirical pluralism— approval. While some writers and thinkers (though certainly not all) on the New Right view empirical pluralism as a threat to stability, order, good government, and perhaps also to biblical Christianity, it is important to remember that many citizens want to retain the diversity. In other words, for them empirical pluralism is not only a raw datum, it is a good thing. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, "It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished."[14]

> [This pluralism] holds that variety and diversity are a positive good, and the denial of variety and diversity is bad. In its extreme form, pluralism opposes syncretism, i.e., the combining of various traditions. Rather, it so affirms the integrity of a given approach to life that any attempt to change it is considered a moral violation.[15]

Os Guinness defines pluralization as "the process by which the number of options in the private sphere of modern society rapidly multiplies at all levels, especially at the level of world view, faiths, and ideologies."[16] This state of affairs can be so widely accepted as normal that it is saluted and approved. He comments:

> We have reached the stage in pluralization where choice is not just a state of affairs, it is a state of mind. Choice has become a value in itself, even a priority. To be modern is to be addicted to choice and change. Change becomes the very essence of life.[17]

In other words, the reality, empirical pluralism, has become "a value in itself, even a priority": it is cherished.

That this is not a universally held value is precisely what generates "culture wars," to use Hunter's expression.[18] Even if he sometimes exaggerates the differences that divide groups in our culture, and too easily deploys purple prose,[19] Hunter is right to point out that in the face of diversity some groups circle the wagons and fight off every other group. The battles are not just religious, of course. Yet Hunter rightly says that the culture wars are profoundly religious: they concern fundamentally opposing conceptions of

authority, morality, truth, the good, revelation, and so forth.

By and large, the media and the intellectuals of the West cherish pluralism. On the long haul, this has its effects both in society and in the church-- effects to be explored in later chapters.

C. Philosophical or Hermeneutical Pluralism

This is, by far, the most serious development. Philosophical pluralism has generated many approaches[20] in support of one stance: namely, that any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is necessarily wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior.

This state of affairs is not the fruit of sophomoric relativism, or of the urgent need to redefine one's morals to justify one's sleeping arrangements. It is tied to some of the most complex intellectual developments in Western thought in the last twenty-five years. In particular it is bound up with the *new hermeneutic* and with its stepchild, *deconstruction*. The outlook that it spawns is often labeled postmodernism. I shall probe all three in the next two chapters. At the moment, a few clarifying explanations will suffice.

At one time "hermeneutics" was understood to be the art and science of biblical interpretation. The term was gradually extended to almost all kinds of interpretive acts, regardless of the object. At the same time, developments in Western intellectual thought kept emphasizing just how subjective all interpretation is. Eventually the expression "new hermeneutic" was coined to emphasize the break from the older approach; this label has in turn been displaced by "radical hermeneutics." Old-fashioned hermeneutics belongs to the "modern" era in which science, scholarship, and serious study were thought capable of resolving most problems, of answering most questions, of understanding all of reality. Radical hermeneutics, by contrast, recognizes the subjectivity of interpretation, and how much of it is shaped by the cultures and subcultures to which the interpreter belongs.

But if old-fashioned hermeneutics belongs to the "modern" era, and we have now passed to radical hermeneutics, then we must be in the "postmodern" era. The roots of modernity lie in the Renaissance, and in the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The world was understood to be a rational place; truth was there to be discovered. As naturalism took hold, God was either marginalized (in the deist understanding) or abandoned (the atheist perspective). Progress was seen to be almost inevitable; entire worldviews, including both Marxism and capitalism, were judged to be historically verifiable and believed to be developing according to a sort of natural law.

But postmodernity is less certain that there is any objective truth to be discovered. If all interpretation is culturally conditioned, reason itself may be nothing more than a tool of domination.[21] A Marxist or a capitalist historiography is merely one possible interpretation of the past. But if one cannot talk about the objective truth of the matter, then the interpretations are merely personal or at best culturally conditioned options. No interpretation can be dismissed, and no interpretation can be allowed the status of objective truth. To dismiss an interpretation presupposes you have some criterion to allow you to do so-- and if an interpretation is merely

one among many possible interpretations, it is pointless to argue for its unique worth or against the equal validity (or nonvalidity!) of another's interpretation. On the other hand, if you claim the criterion is the truth itself, you betray an old-fashioned bigotry, your enslavement to an eclipsed modernity. You have failed to recognize the subjectivity of all interpretations, the significance of the "turn to the subject."[22] The limits of the tendency are being recognized in some quarters, but a rationale for abandoning them seems, for many, hard to come by.[23]

David Tracy holds that all thinkers who embrace certain "emancipatory values" are "incontestably heirs of the modern era," as he is himself.[24] These "emancipatory values" include the democratic ideals of liberty and equality, a frank acknowledgment that the modern scientific revolution is "not just one more important event in Western culture" but "the watershed event that makes even the Reformation and Renaissance seem like family quarrels,"[25] ethical concern over the realities of "social location" (gender, race, class), and the world of nature and our place in it as the product of some evolutionary scheme. Not everyone defines "modernity" in quite this way, but this will do for the moment. Tracy's point, however, is that the "turn to the subject" has shown that modernity itself, far from being the last word, must be viewed as only one more tradition. To recognize this point does not mean that the modernists abandon the "emancipatory values" that constitute them modernists; it means, rather, that they become *post*modernists—i.e., they retain personal commitment to most of the values of modernity, while recognizing that modernity itself is an interpretative framework as fraught with subjectivism as all other frameworks.

Any postmodern thinker who believes that she or he can now leave this ambiguous modern scene and begin anew in innocence is self-deluding. There is no innocent tradition (including modernity and certainly including modern liberal Christianity). There is no single innocent reading of any tradition, including this postmodern reading of the positive and negative realities, the profound ambiguities, of modernity.[26]

Of the many distinctions that have been attempted between modernism and postmodernism, perhaps this is the most common: modernism still believed in the objectivity of knowledge, and that the human mind can uncover such knowledge. In its most optimistic form, modernism held that ultimately knowledge would revolutionize the world, squeeze God to the periphery or perhaps abandon him to his own devices, and build an edifice of glorious knowledge to the great God Science. But this stance has largely been abandoned in the postmodernism that characterizes most Western universities. Deconstructionists have been most vociferous in denouncing the modernist vision. They hold that language and meaning are socially constructed, which is tantamount to saying arbitrarily constructed. Its meaning is grounded neither in "reality" nor in texts *per se*. Texts will invariably be interpreted against the backdrop of the interpreter's social "home" and the historical conditioning of the language itself. Granted this interpretive independence from the text, it is entirely appropriate and right for the interpreter to take bits and pieces of the text out of the frameworks in which they are apparently embedded ("deconstruct" the text), and refit them into the framework ("locatedness") of the interpreter, thereby generating fresh insight,

not least that which relativizes and criticizes the text itself.

The new hermeneutic reaches back several decades; radical hermeneutics and deconstruction are a little younger; this analysis of the move from modernity to postmodernity is only a couple of decades old. Yet together they have exerted vast influence in every field of Western intellectual thought, touching virtually every intellectual endeavor.[27] If here and there a few thinkers suggest that during the past three or four years postmodernism became a spent force, several things must be said in reply. First, no other worldview has come along to displace it; second, its influence on certain disciplines is still on the ascendancy (as we shall see); and third, the sheer diversity of Western culture tends to nourish a kind of *de facto* postmodernity. In short, rumors of postmodernity's demise are greatly exaggerated.

Philosophical pluralism is the approach to cultural diversity that is supported by— and supports— postmodernity. Obviously, it transcends mere empirical data; it outstrips assumptions that cultural diversity is to be embraced and cherished. One of the principal arguments of this book is that *confessional Christianity cannot wholly embrace either modernity or postmodernity, yet it must learn certain lessons from both; it must vigorously oppose many features of philosophical pluralism, without retreating to modernism.*

The Impact of Philosophical Pluralism

Radical hermeneutics and deconstruction are complex and difficult subjects. It is tempting to think that at least some of their challenge owes not a little to a certain kind of intellectual arrogance that deploys technical language and sophisticated argumentation to keep the masses at bay, excluded from the fine tone and subtle spinning of the intellectual elite.[28] Whether or not this is too harsh an assessment, it is important to recognize something of the impact that philosophical pluralism has already made on our culture. Some of these points will be taken up at length in later chapters. At the moment it is necessary only to perceive something of what is at stake.

First, in one form or another these ways of looking at reality have made an impact on virtually all the humanities, and on not a few philosophers of science as well. Not only in English 101 are students introduced to Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish, but in sociology, history, philosophy, law, education, anthropology, and even occasionally in philosophy of science. In every instance the net effect is predictable: while rightly decrying the hubris that thinks human beings can understand anything perfectly, that talks glibly about absolute truth without recognizing that all human knowledge is in some ways culture-bound, these movements unite in depreciating objective truth itself. Theory has thus buttressed both the empirical and the cherished pluralisms of the age, generating a philosophical basis for relativism. Moreover, unlike the old-fashioned liberalism, which took two or three generations to work its way down from the seminaries and the universities to the ordinary person in the pew, this brand of liberalism has made its way down to the person in the street in about half a generation.[29]

The result is what Stephen Carter calls a "culture of disbelief."[30] Carter has courageously and insightfully chronicled how we have moved beyond mere civil religion (to use the expression that Robert Bellah made popular by his famous 1970 essay)[31] to the place where modern politics and law trivialize all values, all religious devotion. This stance is now in the air we breathe.

The extent to which it has invaded the church is troubling. Not less troubling, for the preacher of the gospel, is the extent to which it is everywhere assumed, especially by middle and upper classes, by the media and print elite, by almost all who set the agenda for the nation.

In this environment, it is not surprising that pollsters turn up all sorts of contradictory evidence. Thus while 74 percent of Americans strongly agree that "there is only one true God, who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today," fully 64 percent strongly agree or agree somewhat with the assertion that "there is no such thing as absolute truth."[32]

In the moral realm, there is very little consensus left in Western countries over the proper basis of moral behavior. And because of the power of the media, for millions of men and women the only venue where moral questions are discussed and weighed is the talk show, where more often than not the primary aim is to entertain, even shock, not to think. When Geraldo and Oprah become the arbiters of public morality, when the opinion of the latest media personality is sought on everything from abortion to transvestites, when banality is mistaken for profundity because uttered by a movie star or a basketball player, it is not surprising that there is less thought than hype. Oprah shapes more of the nation's grasp of right and wrong than most of the pulpits in the land. Personal and social ethics have been removed from the realms of truth and of structures of thought; they have not only been relativized, but they have been democratized and trivialized. As a guest on a talk show dealing with pornography put it, "The great thing about our society is that you can have your opinion and I can have mine."

Even at the academic level, ethicists completely committed to pluralism are diligently attempting to create a consensus morality based on certain societal commitments: on the recognition that human beings are persons who demand mutual respect, for instance,[33] or on the assumption that reason is sufficient to evaluate the relative merits of concrete elements of competing moral systems, but insufficient to evaluate the moral systems themselves (since that would be a violation of philosophical pluralism).[34] Of course, all such attempts covertly re-introduce objective values; the question is whether the attempt is successful. Certainly none enjoys wide credibility.

Consider the impact of philosophical pluralism on the study of history. There are, of course, many competing schools of historiography, and pluralism is repulsed by some of them. As recently as 1983, Schlossberg was criticizing historians for interpreting what happened in the past as almost inevitable, the canons of inevitability determined by some philosophical stance.[35] The classic example, of course—nowadays a great deal less believable than a mere decade ago— is Marxist historiography, but there are many others. Each school of historiography was in danger of divinizing its own interpretation of the past, almost all of them entirely naturalistic. But today pluralism has taught at least some of them that each interpretation of the past is entirely subjective: none of them can claim any supreme tie to the "truth." Indeed, the pursuit of historical "truth" in any objective sense is a chimera.

Nowhere is this more easily seen than in the comparison of two editions of one famous book. In 1940 Mortimer J. Adler published his justly famous work, *How to Read a Book*.[36] In it he does not devote a

specific section to the reading of history, but he includes such comments as these: " . . . one must be not only a responsive but a responsible listener. You are responsive to the extent that you follow what has been said and note the intention which prompts it" (240). Or again:

> I think that knowledge can be communicated and that discussion can result in learning. If knowledge, not opinion, is at stake, then either disagreements are apparent only— to be removed by coming to terms and a meeting of minds; or, if they are real, then the genuine issues can always be resolved— in the long run, of course— by appeals to fact and reason... This maxim then requires [the reader] to distinguish between knowledge and opinion, and to regard an issue concerning knowledge as one which can be resolved (248-9).

In dealing with historical works it is important, Adler says, to compare historian with historian, in order to "discover the interpretation a writer places on the facts" (278)— a distinction no philosophical pluralist will allow. "You may even get interested enough to look into the original documents from which the historian gathered evidence" (279).

Granted, some of these formulations are, by current standards, hermeneutically naive. Certainly they bristle with the assumptions of modernism. But the really shocking change comes when we compare the 1972 edition, jointly written with Charles Van Doren. Now an entire chapter is devoted to the reading of history. Many useful things are said. But we are also told that a historical fact "is one of the most elusive things in the world."[37] If we must place history, "the *story* of the past" (italics theirs), somewhere on the spectrum between science and fiction, "then it is usually admitted that history is *closer* to fiction than to science."[38]

In short, philosophical pluralism has made an enormous impact on an astonishingly wide spectrum of disciplines. Some of this impact will be sketched out in later chapters of this book.

Second, philosophical pluralism has enjoyed remarkable success in engendering new forms of religious pluralism. I am referring now not merely to the multiplication of religions (a subset of empirical pluralism), but to one form or another of the view that all religions are really saying the same thing, or that all achieve salvation (however that is construed) with equal power and efficiency. The roots of this stance stretch back through Hegel to Feuerbach but their influence has been catapulted ahead on the springs of contemporary intellectual developments.

It is worth pausing to place the impact of philosophical pluralism on religion within a historical framework. Recent developments in Western Christendom are racing in more than one direction. In a masterful essay, Leonard Sweet traces the course from the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, especially in mainline Protestant churches.[39] The last stage, he contends, is characterized by a pair of reactions against modernism. On the one hand there is "antimodernism," i.e., various evangelical, fundamentalist, and charismatic resurgence movements, both outside and within the mainline denomination. On the other hand there is "postmodernism" under various guises (though is less than clear that Sweet has a good grasp of the latter). The loss of objective truth and the extreme subjectivity bound up with most forms of postmodernism have called forth, in the religious arena, a variety of responses. These are most commonly reduced to three:[40]

1. *Radical religious pluralism*: Under the direct impact of philosophical pluralism, this stance holds that no religion can advance any legitimate claim to superiority over any other religion. Wherever any religion (save the religion of pluralism) in any detail holds itself right or superior, and therefore holds that others are correspondingly wrong or inferior, it is necessarily mistaken. Of course, the challenge from philosophical pluralism is not restricted to the experience of Christians, even though in most Western countries confessional Christianity is philosophical pluralism's primary religious opponent. Philosophical pluralism threatens any pretension of superiority, let alone exclusiveness, in all of the world religions that come in contact with it[41] — as indeed they will if they have adherents in the West.

2. *Inclusivism*: This stance, while affirming the truth of fundamental Christian claims, nevertheless insists that God has revealed himself, even in saving ways, in other religions. Inclusivists normally contend that God's definitive act of self-disclosure is in Jesus Christ, and that he is in some way central to God's plan of salvation for the human race, but that salvation itself is available in other religions.

3. *Exclusivism*: This position teaches that the central claims of biblically faithful Christianity are true. Correspondingly, where the teachings of other religions conflict with these claims, they must necessarily be false. This stance brings with it certain views of who Jesus is, what the Bible is, and how salvation is achieved. Normally it is also held that salvation cannot be attained through the structures or claims of other religions. It does not hold that every other religion is wrong in every respect. Nor does it claim that all who claim to be Christians are saved, or right in every respect. It does insist that where other religions are contradicted by the gracious self-disclosure of Christ, they must necessarily be wrong. Until the modern period, this was virtually the unanimous view of Christians. Christians who still hold to this view sometimes now cast it as a direct negation of both modernism and postmodernism; adherents of postmodernism are inclined to dismiss this stance as a reflection of bigoted fundamentalism, and in part a reaction to the sheer fluidity and uncertainty of our age.

There are, of course, other analyses. Even in the simple one I have just outlined, there are many possible points along the spectrum from exclusivism to consistent religious pluralism.[42]

Since it is radical religious pluralism that is the focus of this book, along with the intellectual movements that sustain it, it may help to provide a few examples. Probably the best known exponent of consistent religious pluralism is John Hick. Hick's many articles and books condemn the Christian "monopoly of saving truth," insisting that any sense of superiority is guilty of generating "the paradox of a God of universal love who has ordained that only the Christian minority of the human race can be saved."[43] As for other religions, Hick writes:

> Around the different ways of conceiving, experiencing and responding to the Real there have grown up the various religious traditions of the world with their myths and symbols, their philosophies and theologies, their liturgies and arts, their ethics and life-styles. Within all of them basically the same salvific process is taking place, namely, the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality

> centredness. Each of the great traditions thus constitutes a valid context of salvation/liberation; each may be able to gain a larger understanding of the Real by attending to the reports and conceptualities of the others.[44]

Langdon Gilkey attributes the rise of this radical religious pluralism to a "shift in the balance between what were called the requirements of faith and those of love." This has been accompanied by another shift: from an assumption of Western cultural superiority, we have moved to an assumption of rough cultural parities, and this "shift in cultural consciousness has in turn had a vast effect on our theological consciousness," moving us toward a consciousness of theological and religious parity.[45] Don Cupitt's recent book in defense of absolute relativism insists that all values are mortal and therefore transient, that even tragedy is cultural, and that there is nothing in the universe to assure us that life must make sense. What we therefore need is a "religion of the fleeting moment and the slipping-away meaning."[46] In defense of religious pluralism, von Balthasar argues that truth is "symphonic," reminding us that etymologically symphony means "standing together."[47] To support this position, von Balthasar resorts to the most breathtaking array of misinterpreted biblical texts torn from their context that I have ever seen.

In defense of radical religious pluralism, Harvey Cox finds support even in the failed predictions of bygone atheists.[48] Thus, if some of the eighteenth century French *philosophes* predicted that religion, like all superstition, was fated for prompt extinction (Cox quotes Voltaire's well-known line: "Not until the last priest is hanged with the entrails of the last king will mankind finally be free"), and have obviously erred in their prognostications, nevertheless they were correct, Cox avers, "to foresee the disappearance of religion as an extension of that way of knowing the external world we now call magic or superstition."[49] In other words, religion cannot supply any answers to questions that can be answered in an empirical way, but can provide answers to questions of human meaning and purpose. If Lenin predicted that his own brand of naturalistic Marxist thought would ultimately replace religion as a metaphysical worldview, his predictions seem less threatening today. But, Cox insists, insofar as Lenin was saying that religion must be understood not in isolation, but as tied to all of life, he was right— a clever reinterpretation that makes it unclear whether or not Cox espouses philosophical naturalism. Cox attempts a similar justification of Freud and Jung. All of this leans in support of a universal, secular meaning of religion. Even Bonhoeffer's famous aphorism— that to be a Christian is, in the final analysis, to be fully human— is appealed to, almost as if what Bonhoeffer meant was that to be human is to be Christian, or at least religious, whereas of course what he was really saying was the reverse: to be Christian is what makes us truly human.

Taking the long view, the pervasiveness of radical religious pluralism is astonishing.[50] Religious pluralists capture no denomination completely, but they dominate the discussion in many, and exercise important influence in many more. Even in Roman Catholicism, thought by many to be a bastion of conservativism on these points, some form of inclusiveness predominates in the North Atlantic wings, and this not infrequently veers off toward radical pluralism.[51] In the arena of aca-

demic theology and religious studies, which after all shapes the next generation of clergy, it is sometimes difficult to find someone of stature who will stand up and call this perspective into question. In academic biblical studies, postmodernism links with the "new" literary criticism to create endless "fresh" readings, many of them clever and parts of them insightful, even if, taken as a whole, their insight is more and more removed from reasoned and defensible anchorage in the text.[52]

Reading many of the documents of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, one is struck by two features. First, the sheer diversity of mutually contradictory religions is fascinating, yet each is under pressure to avoid the one taboo: to say anyone else is mistaken. Second, the documents on which the delegates could agree are strong on global ecology (raised to a higher status by linking it with a call to truthfulness and tolerance and labeling the result "global ethic") and one or two other "in" concerns, but in fact the documents contain so little of anything distinctively religious that any decent atheist could happily sign on.[53] Indeed, that is the final plea: "Therefore we commit ourselves to a common global ethic, to better mutual understanding, as well as to socially-beneficial, peace-fostering, and Earth-Friendly ways of life. *We invite all men and women, whether religious or not, to do the same* [italics theirs]."[54]

For those who espouse radical religious pluralism, there is no longer *any* heresy, except perhaps the view that there are heresies. Other ages have disagreed over just what constitutes a heresy, but the category itself was inviolate. For the first time in history, large numbers of people deny that theological corruption is possible. For these people, even to ask if there are any theological boundaries, let alone where they lie (in two senses!), is to flirt with sacrilege.

It is vitally important to recognize that philosophical pluralism exerted a dramatic "softening" influence on many people who would disavow radical religious pluralism. It is hard, for instance, to deny the influence of pluralism on evangelical preachers who increasingly reconstruct the "gospel" along the lines of felt needs, knowing that such a presentation will be far better appreciated than one that articulates truth with hard edges (i.e., that insists that certain contrary things are false), or that warns of the wrath to come. How far can such reconstruction go before what is preached is no longer the gospel in any historical or biblical sense?

Or consider two recent books. One was written by a confessional Lutheran, Carl Braaten, who with unflinching courage repeatedly affirms the exclusive sufficiency of Christ, the need for God's grace, the uniqueness of Christian revelation. The book is littered with strong judgments like this: "When Raimundo Panikkar writes that Christ has other names—Rama, Krishna, Isvara, Purusha, Tathagata, and the like— we must disagree mightily."[55] Yet despite his courage in defending this line of argument, Braaten ends up proposing a model that "pictures Jesus Christ as the revelation of the eschatological fulfillment of the religions. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not destroy but fulfills the religions."[56] In other words, the assumption is that God has revealed himself in some sense in all religions, and the eschatological fulfillment of all such revelation is Jesus Christ. But there are several slippery steps in the argument. That there is "revelation" in *some* sense in all religions few Christian thinkers (except some in the Barthian tra-

dition) would want to deny. Some would speak of the revelation implicit in the *imago Dei*; others would speak, quite dogmatically at that, of general revelation that can be found in non-Christian religions; still others of the residual revelation not destroyed by the overlay of false religion. But Braaten moves from this weak sense of revelation to a much stronger sense, in which these revelations are "fulfilled" in Jesus Christ much as the old covenant is "fulfilled" in Jesus Christ. But in the Bible, the fulfillment of the old covenant in Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt. 5:17-20) is the fulfillment of what systematicians have called special revelation, and "fulfillment" itself means not the satisfaction of religious and personal aspirations, but the arrival of the eschatological event to which the old covenant Scriptures pointed in promise and type. Although the Bible as a whole can sometimes speak of the gospel and of Jesus as bringing to fruition the *aspirations* of pagans who surround the covenant community, it does not speak of the gospel or of Christ as fulfilling their *religion*. Nor would the adherents of such religions see themselves in such light; indeed, they would be insulted at the suggestion.[57]

In the other book, Daniel Taylor rightly challenges what he calls "the myth of certainty."[58] The kind of pursuit of certainty and affirmation of it that pretends to omniscience to the point of idolatry. I shall have more to say about such idolatry later in this book. But so relentless is Taylor's disavowal of such Christians that they are caricatured and stereotyped: when people defend their worldview or some system of thought, they are simply defending their own fragile self-identity. Over against such people are the "reflective" Christians (by which Taylor refers to himself and to those who agree with him). This simple, not to say simplistic, antithesis is teased out throughout the book. At the end of the day, Taylor is forced to retreat to the simplest fideism, unchecked by any appeal to history or revelation or "fit." Some form of fideism, I shall shortly argue, is inevitable; Taylor's form is a long way removed from the argument of Paul in 1 Corinthians, with his insistence on historical facts attested by ample numbers of eyewitnesses; or of Luke, with his affirmation of "many convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3). Taylor is surely right to raise a gentle protest against the invincible arrogance of those who have never struggled. But where he comes out is, I suspect, much more indebted to philosophical pluralism than he himself recognizes. I doubt that it is a stable position.

In short, philosophical pluralism has triumphantly engineered the modern form of religious pluralism. By and large, this is not something with which contemporary Christians have come to terms.

Third, under the impact of radical hermeneutics and of deconstruction, the nature of tolerance has changed.[59] 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 robust toleration for people, if not always for their ideas, engenders a measure of civility in public discourse while still fostering spirited debate over the relative merits of this or that idea. Today, however, tolerance in many Western societies increasingly focuses on ideas, not on 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 because toleration of diverse ideas demands that we avoid criticizing the opinions of others; in addi-

tion, there is almost no discussion where the ideas at issue are of the religious sort that claim to be valid for everyone everywhere: that sort of notion is right outside the modern "plausibility structure" (to use Peter Berger's term), and has to be trashed. There is less civility because there is no inherent demand, in this new practice of tolerance, to be tolerant of people, and it is especially difficult to be tolerant of those people whose views are so far outside the accepted "plausibility structures" that they think your brand of tolerance is muddleheaded.

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. One cannot fail to observe a crushing irony: the gospel of relativistic tolerance is perhaps the most "evangelistic" movement in Western culture at the moment, demanding assent and brooking no rivals.

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. 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 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 largely maintained in the United States and the Western democracies. By and large, however, they are not cherished, for the focus of tolerance has changed. Philosophical pluralism has managed to set in place certain "rules" for playing the game of religion— rules that transcend any single religion.

I do not for a moment mean that everyone plays by these rules. In fact, it is becoming clear that this third form of pluralism, philosophical pluralism, tends to militate, in time, against the first two. Instead of a rich diversity of claims arguing it out in the marketplace (i.e., empirical pluralism), in what Neuhaus calls "the naked public square,"[60] and instead of this diversity being cherished as the best way to ensure freedom and to pursue truth (cherished pluralism), the pressures from philosophical pluralism tend to squash any strong opinion that makes exclusive truth claims— all, that is, except the dogmatic opinion that all dogmatic opinions are to be ruled out, the dogmatic opinion that we must dismiss any assertion that some opinions are false. By way of reaction, various groups respond by becoming defensive. They circle the wagons and shout slogans. Small wonder, then, that Stanley S. Harakas can affirm that the prevailing worldview in America is not pluralistic (at least, not in the first and second

senses, as I have labeled them), but atomistic and antireligious.[61]

When philosophical pluralism is allied, in the popular mood, with the notion of progress, so that those who disagree are often pictured as quaint vestiges of a bygone era, the pressure to conform is enormous, since the notion of "progress" has been a watchword of Western culture for at least two centuries. Recently, the idea of progress has come under vigorous and long-deserved attack.[62] Moreover, in university circles deconstruction itself is just beginning to be "deconstructed." But as far as I can make out, philosophical pluralism is still the dominant ideology, and it is proving to be enormously intolerant.

Several recent books betray the severity of the challenge. In each case the critics of "fundamentalism" tend to find the worst exemplars, and lump together under this rubric all who hold that objective truth and morality do exist— including those of us who think it is vitally important that people be allowed to disagree with or rebel against objective truth and morality. Because all "fundamentalists" are lumped together, they are all dismissed together antipluralistic and even antidemocratic.

Consider, for example, the introductory essay in the third volume of the justly famous Fundamentalism Project, being published by the University of Chicago Press. Marty and Appleby write:

> If fundamentalism is defined and understood by the utterances and actions of its most radical proponents, then one may conclude that fundamentalism is essentially antidemocratic, anti-accommodationist, and antipluralist and that it violates, *as a matter of principle*, the standards of human rights defended, if not always perfectly upheld, by Western democracies. By this reading of fundamentalism, the battle lines are drawn clearly between fundamentalist and nonfundamentalist, mutual understanding is unlikely or impossible, and public policy studies like the present one are inevitably devoted to the defense of principles and lifestyles under assault by the forces of resurgent religious radicalism.[63]

Or here is Boone, with the same lack of sophistication in her analysis:

> Try as they might to be humble, to avoid pitfalls of intellectual pride— largely because the Bible tells them to, perhaps— fundamentalists are dogmatic and doctrinalistic because their doctrine of the text forces them to be. They are reading an inerrant text; what they read, and therefore what they *interpret*, must be inerrant.[64]

The result is that tolerance is no longer a virtue; political correctness is in:

> In the past, PC [=political correctness] generally centered on issues that were quite substantive. The Victorians were prudish about sex because they were enthusiastic about bourgeois morality. In the fifties, many Americans were intolerant of any notion that seemed remotely "pink" (socialistic) because they assumed communism to be a major threat to their economic and political freedom. Today's PC, however, is intolerant not of substance but of intolerance itself. Thus, although the politically correct would have a great deal of difficulty agreeing on what constitutes goodness and truth, they have no trouble at all agreeing that intolerance itself is wrong. Why? Because no one deserves to be offended.[65]

Recently at an East Coast university, the most frequent term chosen in a word association exercise by non-Christians to describe a Christian was "intolerant." Doubtless some of this perception derives from insensitive Christians. But some of it derives from sig-

nificant changes in what "open-minded" means. It no longer means that you may or may not have strong views yet remain committed to listening honestly to countervailing arguments. Rather, it means you are dogmatically committed to the view that all convictions that any view whatsoever is wrong are improper and narrow-minded. In other words, open-mindedness has come to be identified not with the means of rational discourse, but with certain conclusions. The irony is that Christians are a barely tolerated minority on most university campuses. In society at large there is growing documentation supporting the ominous rise in "a fragrance of oppression."[66] As Clark puts it, "Postmodern apologetic practice must face both the perspectivism that erases all truth and the political correctness that arbitrarily reinstates it."[67]

Fourth, the rising diversity in Western culture (empirical pluralism) and the concomitant loss of cultural consensus, coupled with the rising intolerance generated by philosophical pluralism, has produced what *Time* magazine calls "A Nation of Finger Pointers."[68] One of America's most astute observers describes the result: we have generated a "culture of complaint."[69] Eventually his book, amusing as it is, becomes tiresome: the author's only solution is that people should try harder to tolerate each other and get along. In other words, his work turns out to be a colorful preachment in support of cherished pluralism, with occasional hints of philosophical pluralism thrown in.

Fifth, the rise of radical hermeneutics and of deconstruction has sapped the faith of many undergraduates and introduced a raft of new challenges to those interested in evangelizing them. Thus, Miss Christian goes off to the local state university, full of zeal and the knowledge of a few fundamental truths. There she will not find lecturers who will devote much time to overturning her truths. Rather, she will find many lecturers convincing her that the meaning in her religion, as in all religion, is merely communal bias, and therefore relative, subjective. No religion can make valid claims of a transcendent nature. Truth, whatever it is, does not reside in an object or idea or statement or affirmation about reality, historical or otherwise, that can be known by finite human beings; rather, it consists of fallible, faulty opinions held by finite knowers who themselves look at things that certain way only because they belong to a certain section of society. Miss Christian is told, a trifle condescendingly, that if her religion helps her, she should be grateful, but that no intelligent person this side of Derrida, Foucault, and Fish, could possibly believe that her beliefs have a transcendent claim on everybody everywhere. Thus, without overtly denying her faith, Miss Christian discovers that its vitality has been sapped. It has been relativized, trivialized, marginalized. Without ever having had a single one of its major tenets overturned by historical or other argument, the whole edifice of Christian truth has been detached from the objective status it once held. Miss Christian drifts off, and it may take years before she thinks seriously about Jesus again—if she ever does.

For similar reasons, evangelism among university students has changed a great deal since I was an undergraduate. If a Christian offered testimony thirty years ago, it was possible to get into a strong debate, sometimes even a heated one, over the validity of the truth claims that were being advanced. Part of intelligent Christian witness on a secular campus was, for

example, to muster the arguments for the historical resurrection of Jesus, to display the veracity and coherence of the Scriptures, and to demonstrate the awesome wisdom and love in God's plan of redemption. You can, of course, do all these things today, but the first question is likely to be: "Yes, that's fine for you, but what about all the Hindus?" In other words, granted the empirical pluralism of our age, why should your particular brand of religion be thought better than anyone else's? And granted the philosophical pluralism of our age, your expression of belief, though very interesting and valuable for you and even, at times, compelling, is no more than the subjective product of your religious community. It is your depiction of religious experience, decisively shaped by who you are; it is reality for you, but it is not culture-transcending reality. Nothing is.

In the same way, a friend may listen to your testimony, and then smile quietly and say, "I'm so glad that your faith helps you. As for me, I don't really need it, and frankly I find it impossible to believe what you do. I enjoy your friendship, but please don't push your religion down my throat. We've each got to find our own way, and your way isn't mine."

Where do you begin?

The Impact of Correlatives of Pluralism

By "correlatives of pluralism" I am referring to a variety of societal trends that are partly causes and partly effects of pluralism. For example, the third one I shall mention, rising biblical illiteracy, contributes to pluralism in that there is a declining percentage of citizens who are so well read, biblically speaking, that they can recognize, let alone withstand, the negative features of pluralism's onslaught. They soon become part of the problem. On the other hand, the more philosophical pluralism triumphs in the land, the less incentive there is to read the Bible. In that sense pluralism contributes to biblical illiteracy. Most of what I shall introduce as the "correlatives of pluralism," as I have called them, have this kind of dual relation with one form or another of pluralism. My concern here is not to give a rich account of them, still less to analyze their relationships with pluralism, but to identify them briefly, as part and parcel of the broader challenge of pluralism, as part and parcel of movements that tend toward the gagging of God. A few of them will be more fully explored later in this book.

A. Secularization

Most social scientists do not think of secularization as one of the societal trends that tend toward the abolition of religion, but as one of those that tend toward the *marginalization* of religion. "By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols."[70] In other words, religious institutions and symbols may survive and even flourish, but their influence in the culture at large is progressively diminished. As Wells puts it, "It is axiomatic that secularism strips life of the divine, but it is important to see that it does so by relocating the divine in that part of life which is private."[71]

The subtlety of this definition is crucial if we are to answer revisionist critics who assure us, as Nielsen does, that "secularity seems to be declining in influence."[72] One recent book has uncovered some important demographic sources that enable the authors to reconstruct probable "religious adherence" rates from 1776 on.

The authors insist that the religious adherence rate doubled between the Revolution and the Civil War, from 17 percent to 34 percent, that it climbed to more than 50 percent by 1906, and to 62 percent by 1980. Along the way they debunk the importance of the Awakenings, and insist, against most strategists and ecumenists, that the most important factor in retaining or gaining a large "market share" is preserving a distinctive religious identity.[73] Despite its interesting statistics, the work is flawed by remarkable reductionism. But in any case, it is inadequate as an index to secularization as defined here unless the "religious adherence" quotient measured the degree to which religion shaped the national discussion. Polls have repeatedly shown that a large percentage of Americans (and other Westerners) still assent to such fundamental Christian beliefs as the existence of God, the importance of moral order, the deity of Christ, and the authority of the Bible, "but these beliefs appear to be stranded on the beaches of private consciousness. Certainly they are not appealed to in any debate over the shape of our corporate life."[74] One thinks of the oft-repeated summary coined by Guinness: "privately engaging, publicly irrelevant." In other words, sophisticated studies in the processes of secularization do not focus only on such brute statistics as the number of those who attend church services now and then, but also on the way religious commitment bears, or does not bear, on all of human life. What such studies show is that millions of Americans are religious in certain ways but that that fact has little bearing on anything they really judge important in their life.

Another way to get at this subject is to evaluate the national discourse. A century and a half ago it was impossible to engage for long in political or historical study without bringing up the subject of providence. It was important for thinking people to try to understand what God himself was saying in history, whether he was speaking the language of blessing or of judgment. Today, there is not a history department in the land that would approve a Ph.D. dissertation that tried to infer anything at all about providence.[75] Fewer than six decades ago, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at the height of the Great Depression, could tell his fellow Americans, in one of his radio fireside chats, "Our difficulties, thank God, concern only material things."[76] It is impossible to imagine any of the last half-dozen presidents saying anything similar.[77] The national discourse is taken up with economics, politics, entertainment figures, sports, disasters, occasionally international affairs, and crime— but nothing about God, very little about religion (except to snicker at its most painfully embarrassing hypocrites and failures), not even very much about such concepts as truth, courtesy, civility, honor, duty, moral courage— all of which sound vaguely quaint and old-fashioned in our ears. And when a religious topic, such as conversion, is treated at the academic level, the treatment is likely to be entirely constrained by social science categories committed to philosophical naturalism and utterly averse to "mysticism." The question of God's existence or reality in conversion is carefully bracketed out, prompting the reviewer of one recent book along these lines[78] to complain rather ruefully, "What difference would it make to social science if… the origin of the sense of god was God?"[79] The powers of secularization stalk the land.

The bearing of all this on the preacher of the gospel is obvious. We must not only declare the whole counsel of God, but do so in an environment where the subject is perceived to be vaguely or even explicitly irrelevant. In fact, if you seem too passionate about it, you too may appear to be vaguely irrelevant. To bridge this gap, many preachers succumb to the temptation to become entertainers (for entertainment is one of the categories people *do* understand), or to the temptation to transmute the gospel into something that helps us in our perceived inadequacies (for endless self-focus certainly dominates the national discourse). Other preachers, more robust, dig in and condemn, and gather a group of like-minded conservatives around them, but make little impact on the land. What shall we do?

But if the effects of secularization have been severe in the pulpit and in the pew, in higher education they have been incalculable. This may owe something to the decline in the study of classical texts and in the respect for tradition that once marked the academy,[80] but it owes far more to what Marsden and Longfield and their colleagues, in an insightful analysis, identify as the measured marginalization of Christianity in the academy.[81] From a time when organized Christianity, or at least its ideals, exercised a leading role in the founding, development, and maintenance of the principal schools of higher learning, we have arrived at a point at which virtually all forms of Christianity are commonly ignored or even despised in the academy, and especially those forms that insist that there are objective truths and standards.[82]

Modern secularization is an extraordinary phenomenon. Almost every civilization in the history of the world has been undergirded by some sort of religious/philosophical outlook. Major exceptions, such as the Marxist nations, displaced the supernatural, but strongly imposed other values—"religious" in the sense that the individual was not his or her own measure, but was called upon to sacrifice everything for an almost transcendental value, certainly an ultimate value, namely, the inevitable triumph of socialism. From today's vantage, we can easily see how ephemeral that "religion" was, but at least it was moderately self-consistent. Western secularized society, by contrast, has no unifying commitment to a single "other" or "transcendent" value. By this I am not overlooking the obvious fact that much of Western culture espouses *de facto* naturalism (as did atheistic forms of Marxism). I mean, rather, to emphasize that there is no agreed-upon philosophy or outlook or value system or historical interpretation that binds the majority of the nation together, other than pluralism itself. If from a Christian perspective Marxism was an idol that needed to be overthrown, Western secularized society, for all its marginalized religion, is replete with myriads of individual idols, as each person thinks and does what is "right" in his or her own eyes, unwittingly conforming to the fragmented dictates of this secularizing age of pluralism.[83] How long such a culture can survive is still an unanswered question.

B. New Age Theosophy

So many books and articles have appeared in recent years describing one facet or another of the New Age movement that I need not describe it afresh.[84] The branches of this highly heterogeneous movement have certain features in common. Most visions of "god" in the movement are pantheistic; some are tied to ecology or to the more radical strains of feminism.[85] The aim

is not to be reconciled to a transcendent God, who has made us and against whom we have rebelled, but to grow in self-awareness and self-fulfillment, to become self-actualized, to grow to our full potential, until we are rather more at one with the god/universe than we otherwise would be.[86] The focus, in short, is self; evil is reinterpreted and thus emasculated; and any notion of judgment imposed by a personal/transcendent God whose wrath has been and will be displayed, is utterly repugnant. Thus "spirituality," a popular notion that enjoys full scope even in the *New York Times Book Review*, is divorced from any biblically faithful worldview. Needless to say, there is no need for a mediator, let alone a suffering priest who takes our sin on himself.

There are at least two important implications for the preacher of the gospel. The first is that a person who is largely biblically illiterate but who has absorbed substantial doses of New Age theosophy will hear us to be saying things we do not really mean. If we talk about God, Spirit, new birth, power, abundant life, peace, joy, love, family life, conscience, faith, trust, and a host of other topics, they will all be nicely slotted into a New Age framework. Even words like "sin" will be read as "bad things" or perhaps "bad karma"—but not at all as something whose badness derives from its offensiveness to the God who has made us and to whom we must give an account. The entire structure of thought of such a person guarantees that he or she will hear us quite differently from what we intend to say, what we think we are saying. "Sin" is a snicker word—that is, it conveys nothing of odium, but makes people snicker. Millions of men and women fornicate without the slightest qualms of conscience.

The second implication is that many ostensible believers inside our churches—some of whom are genuine believers and some of whom are not— have inevitably picked up some of the surrounding chatter and, being poorly grounded in Scripture and theology, have incorporated into their understanding of Christianity some frankly incompatible elements. Remarkably smarmy notions of "spirituality" abound; very few ask, for instance, what a "spiritual" life looks like *according to the New Testament documents*.[87] In this framework there is going on, as Tinker puts it, a battle for the mind,[88] even though many have not perceived the nature of the fight.

C. Rising Biblical Illiteracy

In 1950 the Gallup organization asked the question, "Did you receive any religious instruction in your youth?" Only 6 percent of Americans answered negatively. When the same question was put to people in 1989, the figure had risen to 38 percent.

Many of us are so cocooned in our confessional churches, or we live in such relatively conservative parts of the country, that we really do not have any idea how serious this challenge has become. Two years ago I gave a series of evangelistic talks to a small group of scientists near Chicago, all with earned doctorates. From previous experience, I went in expecting that two-thirds of them would not even know that the Bible has two Testaments. I discovered that my estimate was a trifle low. Some churches that draw significant numbers of university students take time, whenever they have a special service geared specifically to the outsider, to explain what prayer is, before public prayer is offered: many of those who attend have never prayed, or witnessed prayer. A few

months ago I was on a television set for a couple of days, working on two or three religious programs sponsored by The Learning Channel and *U. S. News and World Report*. I shared my faith, in some detail, with three people; I probably chatted with thirty others. I found only two who knew the Bible had two Testaments— and these two people had found out only during the previous few weeks, while working on the programs at hand.

In many parts of the country, we cannot assume any biblical knowledge on the part of our hearers at all: the most elementary biblical narratives are completely unknown. Furthermore, the situation is getting worse, now that the Bible is all but excluded from our schools, is not systematically taught in most of our churches, and has been further sidelined with the demise of family devotions.

The rising impact of biblical illiteracy was brought home to me a couple of years ago in a rather vivid way. My son then attended grade 4 in a public school which, by most standards, is excellent. For their Christmas concert that year— or, more accurately, their Season's concert— there was not a single song that had anything whatsoever to do with Christmas or Hanukkah. By "anything whatsoever" I include not only explicitly religious pieces, but also songs of the "Jingle Bells" variety. I have never heard, in ten songs, so many eminently forgettable lines of well-sung poetry. It was all entirely harmless. But it was also a sign that the culture of disbelief is striking again. When I was a child, all of us sang Christmas carols at school, at home, and at church. It would have been hard to find a child who could not recite the words, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see / Hail, the incarnate Deity." Today the schools are becoming silent; there is little singing at home, for it has largely been displaced by VCRs; and in the church, there is less and less congregational participation that ensures that people learn truths through song. In a fifth grade class of thirty students, not far from our home, the teacher asked if anyone knew who Moses was. Only one child could say *anything* about him. On another occasion in the same class, the word "sin" came up, and one child asked what the word meant. In some adult circles, if a biblical narrative is recognized at all, it is because they have seen an epic film— Charlton Heston playing Moses, perhaps. Didn't Moses have something to do with the Ten Commandments?

We are thus ensuring that an entire generation will be even theoretically ignorant of the most elementary structures of the Judeo-Christian heritage on which our civilization has been nurtured. Worse (from the perspective of the preaching of the gospel), they will not have the "hooks" on which to hang the appeals to the gospel that have been our staple. I recognize, of course, that with the rising empirical pluralism in the land, adjustments in the public school education system are inevitable, and in some instances desirable. But massive silence regarding all things religious, a silence fostered by our culture of disbelief, is not the best option. 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.[89]

Or, more accurately, that's not the first kind of pluralism, i.e., empirical pluralism, but it is most certainly the kind of culture postmodern philosophical pluralism wants to build.

D. Vague But Emphatic Appeals to the Cosmic Christ

The person who is usually credited with the expression "cosmic Christ," as it has come to be deployed in international theological circles, is Professor Joseph Sittler, then of the Chicago Divinity School, in his 1961 address to the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi.[90] Building on Colossians 1:15-20, where the word "all" is used six times, Sittler assigned the "all" maximum reach, insisting that God's redemption is "cosmic in scope," and that the Christ envisaged there is the "cosmic Christ." From this lead, a number of writers have used the same expression in progressively complex ways. For example, Panikkar defends the view that "Christ" is found not only in the historical Jesus, but also in certain strands of Hindu thought.[91] One can find not dissimilar notions in Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, M. M. Thomas, and many others.

More conservative exegetes have often pointed out that to base such views on the Bible it is necessary to pick and choose the texts of the Bible, and then interpret them outside their context. This is, of course, a form of deconstruction. No less disastrously, "Christ" is so divorced from the historical Jesus that the term can be given almost any content one wishes— though certainly no New Testament writer had any such disjunction in mind. Thus what texts are interpreted to say is *intentionally* distanced from authorial intent.

Whatever the problems inherent in such views, they are widespread in mainline denominations. Where our witness touches men and women from such backgrounds, or includes students enrolled in religious studies programs in many universities, it is imperative that we address the distortion of the biblical portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ.

E. The Sheer Pragmatism of the Baby Busters

The number of books and papers differentiating between "baby boomers" (people born between roughly 1945 and 1960) and "baby busters" (people born between 1960 and 1975) is now legion.[92] It is said that baby busters do not want to be lectured; they expect to be entertained. They prefer videos to books; many of them have not learned to think in a linear fashion; they put more store than they recognize in mere impressions. As a result, they can live with all sorts of logical inconsistencies and be totally unaware of them. (How many times have I tried to explain to a university-age young person who has made some profession of faith that it is fundamentally inconsistent to claim to know and love the God of the Bible, while cohabiting with someone? They can *see* they are doing what the Bible forbids, but when you press them to articulate the contradiction they scuttle into inconsistency without embarrassment.) They are cynical, not idealistic. They vehemently deny the existence of absolutes: that is their one absolute. Many have never *experienced* principled morality in the home. They have been brought up without a coherent vision or value system, and they have embraced pragmatism with a vengeance. Many of them are furious

with the preceding generation (that's me and my generation) for being so crassly materialistic as to ruin the economy and dump a tax load onto their shoulders. On the other hand, they are no less materialistic themselves, and will vote for any candidate who promises to deliver more goodies while lowering taxes— precisely the same greedy stupidity that afflicted the generation they condemn. Pluralism is so much their creed that even when the strongest arguments are arrayed to explain, on biblical presuppositions, why morally "good" people should be rejected by the Christian God and assigned to hell, their emotions so rule their heads that very frequently no amount of argumentation is adequate. On the other hand, they tend to be interested in "spirituality" (very hazily defined), and on the whole tend to see themselves as occupying a fairly high place in the spiritual pecking order.

It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how people with such positions as these will have an enormous impact on the way the gospel is perceived, if it is preached in strictly traditional categories. The solution of some is to design what are in effect baby buster churches, or at least baby buster church services.[93] The problem, of course, is that unless the various components in the culture of baby busters is analyzed biblically and theologically, we will not know what elements we must confront and reform, what elements are morally neutral, and what elements should be commended and strengthened. But unless we engage in such reflection, we will either remain insensitive to the changing face of American culture (and thus serve only those churches that are found in very conservative parts of the country, or those churches with an aging population), or we will capsize to merely pragmatic considerations ourselves, and build so-called churches with a lot of happy baby busters and very few genuine converts pursuing the knowledge of God and growth in genuine holiness and service.

F. The Hegemony of Pop Culture

I do not want to succumb to the elitism that makes sharp distinctions between popular and high culture.[94] Nor can I quite bring myself to believe that the medium of television is so bad, intrinsically speaking, that even if all the programs were Christian, the medium itself is beyond redemption: so McLuhan, Ellul, and many others.[95] Granted, a great deal of what appears on television is rubbish; granted, this medium, deployed in an undisciplined way, can take over families, squash conversation, fertilize couch potatoes, discourage serious reading and thought, and pamper the desire to be entertained; granted, much that evangelicalism has attempted to do on television is theologically (not to say aesthetically) pathetic;[96] granted, a culture addicted to the visual presentation of data presents peculiar challenges to the proclamation of a God who is not only invisible, but who insists that the desire for visual security and certainty is one of the hallmarks of idolatry. Still, I think that one of the most fundamental problems is want of discipline. Homes that severely restrict viewing hours, insist on family reading, encourage debate on good books, talk about the quality and the morality of television programs they do see, rarely or never allow children to watch television without an adult being present (in other words, refusing to let the TV become an unpaid nanny), and generally develop a host of other interests, are not likely to be greatly contaminated by the medium,

while still enjoying its numerous benefits. But what will produce such families, if not godly parents and the power of the Holy Spirit in and through biblical preaching, teaching, example, and witness?

The sad fact is that unless families have a tremendously strong moral base, they will not perceive the dangers in the popular culture; or, if they perceive them, they will not have the stamina to oppose them. There is little point in preachers disgorging all the sad statistics about how many hours of television the average American watches per week, or how many murders a child has witnessed on television by the age of six, or how a teenager has failed to think linearly because of the twenty thousand hours of flickering images he or she has watched, unless the preacher, by the grace of God, is establishing a radically different lifestyle, and serving as a vehicle of grace to enable the people in his congregation to pursue it with determination, joy, and a sense of adventurous, God-pleasing freedom.

Meanwhile, the harsh reality is that most Americans, including most of those in our churches, have been so shaped by the popular culture that no thoughtful preacher can afford to ignore the impact. The combination of music and visual presentation, often highly suggestive, is no longer novel. Casual sexual liaisons are everywhere, not least in many of our churches, often with little shame. "Get even" is a common dramatic theme. Strength is commonly confused with lawless brutality. Most advertising titillates our sin of covetousness. This is the air we breathe; this is our culture.

G. Rugged Individualism Veering Toward Narcissism

It is a commonplace in the literature that the United States, Australia, and to some extent Canada espouse individualism more strongly than most Western countries.[97] By contrast, although the Bible leaves ample scope for individuals, both precept and underlying assumptions make much more of corporate values than does our culture: the value of family and the importance of the covenant people of God as a body, are constantly reinforced.[98]

In one context, individualism breeds courage, an entrepreneurial spirit, individual heroism, self-denial, deferred gratification, and thrift. It may accent values such as duty, honor, and industry. But if for whatever reasons the cultural values change, individualism can easily become a factor that reinforces narcissism, self-indulgence, instant gratification, self-promotion, and greed. This change has been tracked and analyzed in a number of ways. Robert Bellah and his associates have shown that an older generation of Americans saw emotions as properly subject to larger values: commitment, duty, reason, honor. But this vision of things has largely been replaced by what they call the therapeutic model. Feelings and emotions assume extraordinary importance; individualistic self-fulfillment becomes the prime good. And often this self-fulfillment will be achieved, it is thought, by self-expression. What was formerly considered to be cheerful self-discipline and self-control is now dismissed with contempt as dangerous repression. Even marriage, formerly seen as in principle inviolate, is now merely a means to the end of self-actualization and self-fulfillment, to be readily discarded if emotional "needs" are not met. The habits of the heart have changed.[99] Granted that these developments have helped some people escape genuine repression,

it takes a willful blindness not to see that far more societal damage has been caused than societal good.

Perhaps no one has put this more trenchantly than Lasch:

> In their emotional shallowness, their fear of intimacy, their hypochondria, their pseudo-self-insight, their promiscuous pansexuality, their dread of old age and death, the new narcissists bear the stamp of a culture that has lost interest in the future. Their outlook on life— as revealed in the new consciousness movements and therapeutic culture; in pseudo-confessional autobiography and fiction; in the replacement of Horatio Alger by the happy hooker as the symbol of success; in the theater of the absurd and the absurdist theater of everyday life; in the degradation of sport; in the collapse of authority; in the escalating war between men and women— is the world view of the resigned.[100]

The analysis of Yankelovich is scarcely different.[101] He thinks the change toward instant self-focus and self-gratification (in 1981 he thought this outlook controlled about 80 percent of the American populace) is so revolutionary that it is nothing less than a "world turned upside down." Many have noted that the conservatism of the 1980s was rather different from the conservatism of the Eisenhower 1950s. The adults of the latter decade had endured the Great Depression and World War II. Despite the menace of the cold war, they were determined to build families and communities, to leave something for their children. This too, of course, can be another form of selfishness, but the lingering assumptions of the inherited Judeo-Christian culture kept at least some of that selfishness in check. Such bonds were much loosened by the 1980s. Self-absorbed and lusting after personal fulfillment, the conservatism of that decade could happily live beyond its means and leave its debts for the children.[102] Some of its couples could engender long-delayed children they once thought of as encumbrances, but only by placing them fourth or fifth on their scale of priorities, after career, house, and two cars.

Individualism once allied with a societal assumption of objective truth and eternal verities could generate at least some men and women of courage, honor, vision; individualism allied with philosophical pluralism and the scarcely qualified relativism of postmodernity generates "a world without heroes."[103] The proponents of modernism and postmodernism alike "castrate, and bid the gelding be fruitful" (in the witticism of C. S. Lewis).

Inevitably, individualism has made an impact on the way religion is conceived. The spread of privatized spirituality, developed apart from a disciplined and disciplining church, doubtless fosters desires for personal connection with the transcendent, but, at the risk of an oxymoron, it is a personally defined transcendence. Privatized spirituality is not conspicuously able to foster care for others.[104] God, if S/He exists, must satisfy the prime criterion: S/He must meet my needs, as I define them. It is hard to resist the conclusion that this God is less the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ than a Christianized species of the genie in Aladdin's lamp. Having abandoned authoritative revelation and ecclesiastical tradition alike, many in this generation find it easy to adopt all sorts of absurd beliefs, provided only that they serve personal interests: this is the age when huge sums are paid to psychic counselors, when even *Time* lists crystal healing as a possible medical remedy, when an American president seeks

guidance from astrologers.

Phillip Hammond goes so far as to argue that the emphasis on personal autonomy during the past two decades has brought about the "third disestablishment" of religion in America.[105] The first disestablishment was legal, embodied in the First Amendment; but although it had profound influence, it scarcely diminished the enormous influence of organized religion on the public sector. The second disestablishment (by "disestablishment" Hammond means "a qualitative change in the relationship between church and culture"[106]) had occurred by the end of World War I, in a progressive erosion of direct Christian influence, such that until about 1960 the relationship of Christian churches to the cultural core was more custodial than directorial. The third disestablishment, on which Hammond focuses his attention, springs from the emphasis on personal autonomy and its effect on the religious sphere. Personal autonomy has become an ideology that is suspicious of ecclesiastical loyalty and doctrine alike. The new generation does not readily think in terms of service to the church or to God, but in terms of what it can get out of it; they shop around for churches until they find a product they like. The churches themselves feel the pressure to respond to the "consumers" by taking polls to find out what they want.

It is hard to avoid the suspicion that even the contemporary penchant for discovering new victims is tied to modern species of individualism. We have entered an era of multiplying litigation, in which punitive compensatory damages are ardently sought, less out of a passion for dispassionate justice than out of passionate greed, out of vengeful pettiness that feeds on newly discovered forms of "victimization." *They* haven't been fair to *me*. Under the impact of philosophical pluralism, the new individualism believes that no ideology or value is intrinsically superior to any other, and therefore that no single *individual's* heritage is in any respect inferior. To think otherwise is to display cultural bias. There are not a few ironies, as Sowell reminds us:

> Any group whose past has not provided them with as many heroes, cultural contributions, or other glories as some other group's past now has a grievance against those who write history. Apparently a past to your liking has become an entitlement. It is not even considered necessary to demonstrate any reality before claiming that a group's "under-representation" in history books shows "exclusion" or "bias." Many of those who argue this way also loudly proclaim the many injustices suffered by the various under-represented groups. Yet, somehow, these pervasive injustices are not regarded as having inhibited the achievements of those who suffered them. Such is the self-contradictory vision of multiculturalists.[107]

H. Freudian Fraud

As scientism (as opposed to science) has sought to reduce human nature and conduct to matter, energy, time, and chance; as the social sciences have sometimes skewed data to arrive at conclusions that will undermine morality,[108] so the influence of Freud, whatever good it has produced, has been pervasive and often malign. Criticisms have gradually mounted, and have recently become extensive and well-documented.[109] Freud's influence extends well beyond those who would identify their brand of psychoanalysis as essentially Freudian. Directly or indirectly, it has fostered our therapeutic culture, in which the substitution of medical and quasi-scientific terminology for moral, ethical, and religious categories,

to the enormous benefit of therapists and support groups, has bulldozed moral responsibility into the nearest landfill, and invented new "ailments du jour."[110] Once again, this is not to say that no positive advances have been made: such a conclusion would be both ignorant and mischievous. But the damage, as Torrey documents, is incalculable.[111]

The therapeutic culture has so invaded the church that some seminaries now have more students enrolled in counseling programs than are training to be preachers of the gospel. Some "evangelical" churches pride themselves on being "Twelve Step" churches, i.e., churches where the "Twelve Step" model of Alcoholics Anonymous is taken as the controlling model for support groups dealing with everything from addiction to obesity to codependency to problems with self-esteem. Relatively few pastors have both the training and the courage to deal with genuine problems in *biblical* categories that challenge the therapeutic culture at multiple levels.[112] In the realm of biblical scholarship, one can read learned essays with titles like "The Heuristic Value of a Psychoanalytic Model in the Interpretation of Pauline Theology."[113]

The point is that the Freudian model, locked in naturalism, has both reinforced and been reinforced by philosophical pluralism. The loss of truth and standards "out there," in objective reality, has encouraged this inward focus, this self-absorption. It is a long way from the perspective that teaches that the first commandment is to love God, and the second is to love one's neighbor— from which of course we must infer that the first sin is not to love God, and the second is not to love one's neighbor. It is a long way from the instruction of him who insisted that those who seek their own life will lose it, while those who take up their cross daily and follow him will find life, eternal life (Matt. 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-9:1; Luke 9:22-27).[114]

Summary and Reflections

In aiming for a measure of clarity in a confusing discussion, I have distinguished empirical pluralism, cherished pluralism, and philosophical pluralism. The first is merely a useful label for referring to the growing diversity in most Western countries. The reality is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad, though clearly it spawns elements of both. The second category is cherished pluralism: the empirical reality is highly praised in many quarters as a fundamentally good thing, though many disagree, circle the wagons, and retreat to their own subculture. The third category, philosophical pluralism, is at bottom an epistemological stance: it buys into a basket of theories about understanding and interpretation that doubts whether objective truth is accessible, and locates most if not all meaning in the interpreter, not in the text or object interpreted. This step distinguishes postmodernity from modernity; an extension of this step is deconstruction.

The impact of philosophical pluralism on Western culture is incalculable. It touches virtually every discipline— history, art, literature, anthropology, education, philosophy, psychology, the social sciences, even, increasingly, the "hard" sciences— but it has already achieved popularity in the public square, even when its existence is not recognized. It achieves its greatest victory in redefining religious pluralism so as to render heretical the idea that heresy is possible. Tolerance is radically redefined, and masks a

sometimes brutal intolerance, at times in the faddish categories of PC ("political correctness"). It has contributed to the destruction of gratitude, and turned not a few women and men into chronic whiners and finger-pointers. For the Christian, it has certainly altered some of the priorities that must be adopted in evangelism.

What I have called the "correlatives" of pluralism are no less significant. They are not exclusively causes of philosophical pluralism, nor are they exclusively effects. They are fellow travelers, and doubtless within various elements of society at any given time they are more one than the other. Eight were briefly described and discussed: secularization, New Age theosophy, rising biblical illiteracy, vague appeals to the cosmic Christ, the sheer pragmatism of baby busters, the hegemony of pop culture, rugged individualism veering toward narcissism, and Freudian fraud. The selection is arbitrary: it is based on personal impressions of what elements are important. But it would not take much imagination to extend the list.

Much of the rest of this book is an attempt to understand and evaluate these developments and to think our way forward from within the Christian framework. This is not the place to anticipate the discussion, but two things may usefully be said.

First, all but the most sanguine pluralists admit that there are immense dangers ahead and that signs of cultural decay abound. Where we differ is in both diagnosis and solution. But let no one doubt that although the issues discussed in this book are in the first instance intellectual challenges, and occasionally difficult intellectual challenges, they are fraught with practical implications for church and society alike. Writing of only one small part of the broader problem, namely the single-minded pursuit of individualistic "rights," Feder is not wrong to conclude:

> Absent a delicate balance— rights and duties, freedom and order— the social fabric begins to unravel. The rights explosion of the past three decades has taken us on a rapid descent to a culture without civility, decency, or even that degree of discipline necessary to maintain an advanced industrial civilization. Our cities are cesspools, our urban schools terrorist training camps, our legislatures brothels where rights are sold to the highest electoral bidder.[115]

Or as Colson puts it:

> As Dorothy Sayers observed: In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair . . . the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.[116]

Second, it is imperative that we remind ourselves how innovative philosophical pluralism is. When Machen confronted the impact of modernism on Christianity, his driving point was that the liberalism of his day, whatever it was, was not Christianity at all, even though that was the way it paraded itself.[117] At least he recognized what was at stake, and addressed the fundamental issues. Today we must recognize that philosophical pluralism is not only non-Christian (though some Western pluralists think of themselves as Christians), but that the nature of the relativism it spawns and the worldliness that it engenders are in some respects qualitatively new, and must be addressed in fresh terms. Many generations have recognized how difficult it is for finite and sinful

mortals to come to close agreement as to the objective truth of this or that subject, but this is the first generation to believe that there is no objective truth out there, or that if there is, there is no access to it. This necessarily changes the character of at least some of the debate.

For example, a bare fifteen years ago, Stephen Sykes, arguing that tolerance for theological diversity must not be adopted unquestioningly but must be justified by argument, wrote the following:

> A Christian Church which is aware of a wide variety of diverse theological positions and which deliberately decides not to adopt one of them, but rather to tolerate diversity, still has to offer a definite reason for doing so and to justify that reason in the face of objection…. Toleration of diversity itself needs to be justified theologically if it is to be able to claim any kind of integrity.[118]

Modernists may be impressed by the reasonableness of this argument; postmodernists will be entirely unimpressed. If their understanding of understanding is correct, if their deployment of radical hermeneutics is correct, the notion of a coherent theological position that a church adopts to the exclusion of others can never be more than a socially determined preference, which is scarcely what Sykes has in mind.

And that is the challenge.

ENDNOTES

[1] This article first appeared in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996) 13-54, and is reprinted with permission.

[2] "Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations," *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, ed. William Schweiker and Per M. Anderson (New York: Univ. Press of America, 1987) 2.

[3] Paul V. Martinson, "Dynamic Pluralism" *Dialog* 28/1 (1989) 8.

[4] Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[5] Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience: A Study of Eighteenth Century Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988). That is also one of the leitmotifs of the recent textbook by Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

[6] For example, the 1991 National Survey of Religious Identification, performed by two researchers from the City Univ. of New York, found that 7.5 percent of their respondents indicated "no religion"; the Williamsburg Charter Survey on Religion and Public Life insists that while "religious nones" constituted only 5 percent of the population as recently as 1972, by 1988 they constituted 11 percent of the population. Whereas some polls put the percentage of Muslims in the U. S. at 0.5 percent (so the National Survey of Religious Identification [1991]), others say the percentage of Muslims now rivals the percentage of Jews (about 2 percent).

[7] For some useful statistical data, cf. George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

[8] One thinks, for instance, of George Gallup, Jr., and Sarah Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1989).

[9] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton Univ.

Press, 1988); idem, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[10] See, for example, the highly diverse essays in Mary Douglas and Steven M. Tipton, ed., *Religion in America: Spirituality in a Secular Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

[11] Of the various books that extrapolate present trends into the future, one of the sanest (and certainly one of the easiest to read) is Russell Chandler, *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[12] "God Is Alive," *Maclean's* 106/15 (April 12, 1993) 32-42.

[13] *The Myth of the Empty Church* (London: SPCK, 1993).

[14] *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 1.

[15] Ted Peters, "The Lutheran Distinctiveness in Mission to a Pluralistic World," *Dialog* 22 (1983) 296.

[16] *The Gravedigger File* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983) 92.

[17] Ibid., 96.

[18] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[19] Cf. John D. Woodbridge, "Culture War Casualties," *Christianity Today* 39/3 (March 6, 1995) 20-26.

[20] Dr. Harold Netland, in a private communication, rightly says that "philosophical pluralism is, in my usage, an umbrella term that embraces a variety of contemporary positions that are united in their opposition to the idea that we can know objective truth: e.g., ontological non-realism (there is no objective reality "out there" to be experienced and known); constructivism ("reality" is merely a construct of social experiences); perspectivism (we can never know reality as it is; the most we can know is reality from our perspective); various forms of relativism (truth, rationality norms, and the like are all relative to, or internal to, particular contexts).

[21] For a useful essay, see Thomas Finger, "Modernity, Postmodernity—What in the World Are They?" *Transformation* 10/4 (Oct./Dec. 1993) 20-26.

[22] This phrase is commonly used to refer to the basket of tendencies that focus less and less attention on either the author of the text (the concern of historical criticism and exegesis) or on the text itself (the concern of the more recent literary critics), and more and more on the subject, the knower, the reader.

[23] The distinctions between modernity and postmodernity will be explored at some length in the next two chapters.

[24] "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," *Theology Today* 51 (1994) 105.

[25] Ibid., 105.

[26] Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," 106.

[27] See the important work by David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

[28] See the provocative and analogous thesis of John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

[29] This fact makes the assessment of some popular conservatives sadly out of touch with reality. See, for example, Pat Robertson, *The Turning Tide: The Fall of Liberalism and the Rise of Common Sense* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), which sounds more like optimistic hype announcing another run at the presidency rather than careful cultural analysis. The conservative backlash he perceives is itself profoundly pragmatic; there is little evidence that the underlying worldviews are changing.

[30] Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

[31] Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditionalist World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970). According to my colleague John Woodbridge, the expression was first coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1761-62.

[32] See George Barna, *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1991).

[33] So H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., *Bioethics and Secular Humanism: The Search for a Common Morality* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1991). E.g., p. 140: "All that remains to ground a general secular morality. . . is the possible bond of mutual respect among persons." It is not difficult to demonstrate the appalling instability of so fragile a basis.

[34] So John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993). A similar attempt to salvage advantage out of both empirical and philosophical pluralism in the arena of literary criticism is

found in Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979).

[35] Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983) 11-38.

[36] New York: Simon & Schuster.

[37] 1972 edition, 236.

[38] Ibid., 237. Of course, several interesting presuppositions lurk behind this "spectrum" as to the science, but I shall briefly treat this subject in chaps. 2 and 3. At one point, where they treat biographies and autobiographies, Adler and Van Doren acknowledge that "we expect the author to be accurate, to know his facts." The work almost calls out for a little source criticism.

[39] Leonard I. Sweet, "The Modernization of Protestant Religion in America," *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935-1985*, ed. David W. Lotz, Donald W. Shriver, Jr., and John F. Wilson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 19-41.

[40] This analysis has been common since the 1970s, and especially in some of the work of John Hick. It is nicely summarized in Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 8-27.

[41] See especially Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985).

[42] For example, under the first category we may place what S. Mark Heim (*Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* [Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985] 111-14) would call "parallel pluralism"—the view that the Christian faith is right *for me*, while the Muslim faith may be right *for Muslims*, and so forth. Such a position can be reasonably adopted only when the truth claims of the respective religions have been relativized or abandoned or reinterpreted. See also R. Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) xviii.

[43] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Macmillan, 1985) 99.

[44] Ibid., 102. Cf. also his *Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988). Hick is discussed at length in part 2 of this book.

[45] "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987) 37-50, esp. 38, 39.

[46] *The Time Being* (London: SCM, 1992).

[47] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1972).

[48] *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

[49] Ibid., 200. I should mention that Cox fails to note that a number of the *philosophes* were in fact deeply religious.

[50] For a useful hint at some of the religious implications of postmodernism, see Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds., *Shadow of the Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[51] The "anonymous Christian" theory of Karl Rahner (a form of inclusivism) is well known, and I shall discuss it later. But some discussion goes beyond that: e.g., Ernest D. Piryns, "Current Roman Catholic Views of Other Religions," *Missionalia* 13 (Aug. 1986) 55-62; Chester Gillis, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[52] I shall deal with this more substantially in chps. 2 and 3. For an excellent example, one might read Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

[53] This is not an exaggeration: only a very vague statement would be acceptable to the Theravada and many Mahayama Buddhist and Jain participants, who are of course explicitly atheistic.

[54] Closing paragraph of the final jointly signed Declaration, widely circulated in manuscript form before being published in newspapers and other media.

[55] Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1992) 78.

[56] Ibid., 80.

[57] The problem is compounded when Braaten (ibid., 72) seems even more open to "the so-called religions of grace," viz., Bhakti Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. Here Braaten, possibly influenced by Emil Brunner, seems to be unduly swayed by the importance of *sola gratia* in confessional Lutheran perspective, without really coming to terms with the essential polytheism of Hinduism and flickering pantheism that lies even behind Mahayama Buddhism. On the latter, see esp. Masao Uenuma, "A Christian View of Prayer and Spirituality in Muslim Thought," in *Teach*

Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1990) 192-204.

[58] *The Myth of Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[59] The next few paragraphs are adapted from D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 38-39.

[60] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[61] "Educating for Moral Values in a Pluralistic Society," *Greek Orthodox Review* 29 (1984) 393-99.

[62] See especially Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

[63] Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Polities, Economics, and Militance*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 3 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), "Introduction," 5 (italics theirs). I am indebted to John D. Woodbridge for drawing this passage to my attention.

[64] Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1989) 72-73 (italics hers). One cannot fail to note that her dismissal of dogmatism is very dogmatic. Her comment must be fallacious for any reader to avoid a dogmatic acceptance of it!

[65] S. D. Gaede, *When Tolerance Is No Virtue: Political Correctness, Multiculturalism and the Future of Truth and Justice* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 23.

[66] See Herbert Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

[67] David K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 3 (1993) 515.

[68] *Time* 138/6 (Aug. 12, 1991) 14-22.

[69] Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

[70] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) 107. For a detailed outline of how secularization proceeds, analyzed from a social science perspective, see David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). For discussion of the theory, see Jonathan D. Harrop, "The Limits of Sociology in the Work of David Martin. Towards a Critique of David Martin's Sociology of Religion Centered on His Essay: 'Can the Church Survive?'" *Religion* 18 (1988) 81-85. Cf. also Klaas Runia, "The Challenge of the Modern World to the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994) 301-24.

[71] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 79. Wells distinguishes between secularization (a process dealing with the external and sociological) and secularism (that which concerns the internal and the ideological [80]); others make slightly different distinctions. But the distinctions do not concern us here.

[72] Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., *Fundamentalism, Mythos, and World Religions* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993) 153.

[73] Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992).

[74] Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 81. This is not to say that there are no elements of contemporary secularization theory that do not need challenging. For example, Harvie M. Conn, "The Secularization Myth," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12 (1988) 78-92, offers substantial evidence against the commonly held thesis that urbanization and secularization go hand in hand.

[75] Some would argue that the decisive nail in the coffin of any doctrine of providence was the Holocaust. Among Jewish theologians, that is a recurring theme. The argument has received relatively meager treatment by Christian theologians, though see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Human Nature, Election and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977); Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word Books, 1976-83) 6: 485-91.

[76] Quoted by Dan Coats *Imprimus* 20/9 (Sept. 1991) 1.

[77] The contemporary presidential "God bless you" or "God bless America" is no parallel.

[78] Peter B. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).

[79] David Atkinson, *Expository Times* 105 (1994) 190.

[80] Amply if sensationally chronicled by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy:*

What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

[81] George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

[82] See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).

[83] See J. A. Walter, *A Long Way from Home: A Sociological Exploration of Contemporary Idolatry* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979).

[84] Among the better ones are Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988); James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1992).

[85] E.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

[86] Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy for the New Age* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) perceives not a few parallels between the New Age movement and ancient Gnosticism.

[87] Cf. the appendix to this volume, "When Is Spirituality Spiritual?"

[88] Melvin Tinker, "Battle for the Mind," *Churchman* 106 (1992): 34-44.

[89] Cited in *Christianity Today* 35 (May 27, 1991) 40.

[90] For a useful summary of the development of the expression, and a telling critique, see Sun and Sumithra, "Conversion: To Cosmic Christ?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992) 385-97.

[91] Raimundo Panikkar, "The Meaning of Christ's Name," in *Service and Salvation*, ed. Joseph Pathrapankal (Bangalore: C. M. I., 1973) 242ff. Cf. also his 1964 book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981). Panikkar exegetes a passage from the Hindu Scriptures, *Janmadi Yasyatah*, which on his reading speaks of the cause, power, and goal of all things, but leaves this cause/power/goal unnamed. Panikkar names it "Christ."

[92] One of the most useful surveys is a fairly recent article in *Atlantic Monthly*. Neil Howe and William Strauss, "The New Generation Gap" (Dec. 1992) 67-89.

[93] E.g., Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change: An Arresting Look at the New Realities Confronting Churches and Para-Church Ministries* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990).

[94] See, for example the telling review of Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester: Crossway, 1989) written by William Edgar and published in *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991) 377-80.

[95] See, most recently, Simon Vibert, "The Word in an Audio-Visual Age: Can We Still Preach the Gospel?" *Churchman* 106 (1992) 147-58.

[96] See especially Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

[97] Clearly this is a sweeping generalization. Quite apart from individual exceptions, there are numerous pockets within these countries (e. g. immigrant Chinese) which in this respect stand in marked antithesis to the broader culture.

[98] Whatever its faults, the modern study that turned scholarly attention to the emphasis on the corporate in the Old Testament was H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964 [1935]). For a useful study of the place of the individual in the same corpus, cf. Frederick J. Gaiser, "The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Wellness," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 14 (1992) 1-29.

[99] Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

[100] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), flyleaf outlining the thrust of the chapters.

[101] Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Search for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

[102] This is not to go along with cliché-ridden assessments of the 1980s advanced by the political left—"the decade of greed" and the like. The hard economic data do not, by and large, support the view that the 1980s were the worst of times economically, except for the very rich, or that most Americans were more greedy in the 1980s than in the 1970s: see the well displayed data in Richard B. McKenzie, *What Went Right in the 1980s* (San Francisco:

Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1994).

[103] Cf. George Roche, *A World Without Heroes: The Modern Tragedy* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 1987).

[104] Cf. Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

[105] Phillip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1992).

[106] Ibid., xiv.

[107] Thomas Sowell, *Is Reality Optional? and Other Essays* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1993) 4 .

[108] One thinks of the well-documented case of Margaret Mead (on which see a fuller treatment in chap. 5). More generally, see, for example, Robert J. Priest, "Cultural Anthropology, Sin, and the Missionary," Carson and Woodbridge, *God and Culture*, 85-105.

[109] See, for example, O. Hobart Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961); Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1975); Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); Robert C. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Other in the Age of Therapies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and especially E. Fuller Torrey, *Freudian Fraud: The Malignant Effect of Freud's Theory on American Thought and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

[110] The expression is that of Charles Sykes, in *Imprimus* 21/7 (July 1992) 1.

[111] *Freudian Fraud*, see above n. 108.

[112] See Robert C. Roberts, "Psychobabble," *Christianity Today* 38/6 (May 16, 1994) 18-24.

[113] Robin Scroggs, *The Text and the Times: New Testament Essays for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 125-50.

[114] See Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[115] Don Feder, *A Conservative Jew Looks at Pagan America* (Lafayette: Huntingdon House, 1993) 219.

[116] Cited by Charles Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1989) 93.

[117] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

[118] *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 7-8; cited in Jerry L. Walls, "What is Theological Pluralism?" *Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall 1985) 61.