

FAITH MEETS FAITH

An Orbis Series in Interreligious Dialogue

Paul F. Knitter, General Editor

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FAITH MEETS FAITH seeks to promote interreligious dialogue by providing an open forum for the exchanges between and among followers of different religious paths. While the series wants to encourage creative and bold responses to the new questions of pluralism confronting religious persons today, it also recognizes the present plurality of perspectives concerning the methods and content of interreligious dialogue.

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FAITH MEETS FAITH SERIES

Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered

The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions

Edited by
Gavin D'Costa

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10. Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," p. 47.
11. Khantipalo, pp. 114-15.
12. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.
13. See *Mahaparinibbanasutta*, V, 23-30, in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part 2, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1910), pp. 164-69.
14. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," pp. 22-23.
15. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow," pp. 75-76.
16. See William A. Christian, *Meaning and Truth in Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 156-63.
17. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow," p. 75.
18. See J. A. DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism," in *Theology and Dialogue*, ed. Bruce Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming).

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Religion for the Marketplace

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The authors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* invite us to acknowledge the culturally conditioned character of all human claims to know God, or Reality. What is obvious to the reader is, naturally, the culturally conditioned character of their own affirmations. While I want to resist the cultural relativism this volume espouses, I believe that the sociologists of knowledge can provide a useful starting point for a critical examination of their thesis. Peter Berger has taught us to speak of the "plausibility structure," the body of assumptions and practices which, in any society, determines what beliefs are plausible within that society and what are not. When a society is brought into contact with another society having a different plausibility structure, four responses are possible. The first is simple rejection and the putting up of fences around the home ground. A second is surrender to the invader. A third is the struggle to reform the existing plausibility structure so that it can take account of the new insights brought by the invader. The fourth is pluralism: What is true for us may not be true for them. The third of these options is what a living culture will choose; the fourth, I suggest, is the sign of approaching death.

Western European peoples lived for many centuries in a fairly coherent plausibility structure. This has now been heavily invaded. The invasion is itself the result of the earlier penetration of Western ideas into the non-European world. The political ideas, the science and technology, and—to a lesser extent—the religious beliefs of European peoples have for two hundred years penetrated the lives of peoples in all the other continents, bringing about revolutionary change and prompting a reverse impact upon Europe, not only through the communication of ideas but also through the movements of people. The situation is complicated by the fact that, during the same period, the traditional belief structure in Europe was breaking up. The rise of science from the seventeenth century, and the intellectual

and political developments of the eighteenth were bringing about a dualism in European thought between a public world of what (in the seventeenth century) came to be called facts, and a private world of what (in the nineteenth century) came to be called values, understood to be matters of personal choice. In this latter area pluralism was already becoming the rule; in the former it was not. The explosion of European power into the rest of the world during the nineteenth century was much more a matter of the export of Europe's political and scientific ideas and its science-based technology than of its religious beliefs, and even Christian missionaries were heavily involved in exporting European secular thought and practice through their schools, hospitals, and "development" programs.

European people had already become pluralist in their attitude to religion; only a minority of the traders, administrators, and educators who went from Europe to the rest of the world in the nineteenth century were Christians. As is well-known, strenuous efforts were made by the East India Company to protect India from the contagion of Christianity, which might have a damaging effect on commerce. Until very recently few Europeans had any hesitation in commending "modern" scientific methods and their technical applications, to the rest of the world. To do so was seen as benevolence, not as imperialism. And "modernization" is the ruling ambition of most of the intellectual and political leadership of the non-European nations. Several, such as Japan, have already outdistanced the European nations in this respect. Culturally speaking, the Third World is a shrinking entity.

That period in European history which those who lived in it called the Age of Reason was emphatically not pluralist in respect of what it regarded as its great achievement. Its vision was of a universal rationality applicable to all human beings of whatever race or nation, a rationality which would deliver all peoples from the shackles of ancient tradition and dogma, a pure light in which everything would be seen as it really is and in which human reason would bring all nature under rational control for human purposes. It was in the power of this vision that the revolutionary armies of France swept through most of Europe, and that the traders and colonists and administrators and teachers went from Europe to the rest of the world. This new faith had indeed Christian roots. It had been brought forth out of a Christian culture, a culture pervaded by the idea that every human being is of supreme dignity as made in the image of God, and that human beings are not merely part of a cosmic order but responsible agents in a meaningful history. But the new faith of the Enlightenment saw Christianity as merely one of the surviving traditions of which it had no further need. After an unsuccessful attempt to suppress its practice (at least in France), it became a tolerated private opinion. Europe settled into a compromise in which religious beliefs were tolerated as matters of personal opinion, but public affairs were ruled by the new faith. In respect of "religion," Europe became pluralist; in respect of "reason" it did not. And religion was only

tolerable "within the limits of reason." The scientific method developed in Europe, and its fruits in technology, were of universal validity. They were gifts to be shared with all human beings.

The disintegration of Europe in two catastrophic wars destroyed that confidence. Europe is no longer sure that its culture is of universal validity and even North America is beginning to lose its confidence. The scientific method is in question even while its technical fruits are eagerly grasped. The growing ecological crisis puts Western culture in the dock as the accused in a trial about the murder of the environment. There is little for the Westerner to say in the world forum except: "*Nostra culpa; nostra maxima culpa.*" In this situation any confident affirmation of the truth is suspect. The pressure of pluralism becomes almost irresistible. And it is not surprising that Christians are carried along by the current. The claim that Jesus alone is Lord and Savior of the world is seen as impermissible arrogance. Even if this claim is generously interpreted to allow that non-Christians may be saved through Christ, this is even more offensive—adding condescension to arrogance. Yet it is difficult to see how Christianity can survive the denial of what has from the beginning been its central affirmation. How can pluralism be commended to the Christian mind? That is the "pastoral" problem¹ which the writers of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* have to meet. Pluralism is itself one position among other possible ones. It also makes truth-claims that have to be set against rival truth-claims which have to be denied. It cannot pretend to innocence among its arrogant rivals. That is why, as Knitter says, its advocates have to find ways of "mediating the new nonabsolutist position to the ecclesia."² This will not be easy. The ecclesia includes some who are already capable of exercising the "hermeneutic of suspicion" and are liable to recognize the proposals of the "mythographers" as simply evidence of one more collapse of faith, the symptom of a culture in deep crisis.

The basic question is epistemological. Can Reality be known? Salvation, if there is such a thing, cannot be available apart from a right relation to reality. But the central contention of the book is that reality is unknowable. In some respects we are here on familiar ground. The central section ("The Theological Mystical Bridge") develops themes which are familiar to anyone who has lived in India. But there is a difference. Although India is almost infinitely hospitable to all forms of religion, there is always the immensely strong pull of the strict teaching of the Vedanta; namely, that while Reality is not knowable as an object of the subject's knowing, there is—even in this life—a human possibility of such union with ultimate reality that the duality of subject and object disappears, and this faith provides a center of coherence for the multiplicity of Indian religion. But for the writers of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* it appears that all forms of religion are equally valid. Almost at the outset of his essay, Wilfred Cantwell Smith quotes as "a brilliant and immensely illuminating perception" the verse in the Yogavasishta which says: "Thou art formless. Thy only form

is our knowledge of Thee."³ The subjective pole of knowledge is the only one; the objective has disappeared. It follows that there can be no such thing as idolatry in the pejorative sense, since *all* concepts of God are "idols"—human constructs. What is to be condemned is the identification of the image with the Reality it represents. "For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry."⁴ What is to be affirmed, on the other hand, is that God has inspired Christians to develop their religion just as God has done for Muslims and Hindus. Smith does not claim that all these attempts of God have been equally successful, but he does not propose any criterion by which we might judge which of them correspond to God's intention. We are left to our subjective preferences. While this position, like that of other writers in this section, owes much to the Hindu concept of the *ishta devata*, the god of one's choice, there is little doubt that it is attractive to contemporary inhabitants of the affluent North because it corresponds exactly to the ethos of the consumer society where the choice of the customer is free and sovereign. Each of us is free to choose the image of God we find congenial. There is no objective reality which calls our sovereignty into question, no power "out there" to challenge us. It does not require a highly developed "hermeneutic of suspicion" to recognize the cultural origins of this theory of religions. It belongs to the world of the supermarket where the customer is king.

With more sensitivity to religious realities than Smith, Samartha speaks of the different religions as different responses to the one Mystery and says that while each can make normative claims upon its own adherents, it cannot make these claims on others. The different formulations "can only be symbolic, pointing towards the Mystery, affirming the meaning disclosed, but retaining the residual depth."⁵ Different people ask different questions about the human predicament and therefore receive different answers, and it is "presumptuous if not incredible" to suggest that there is one answer for all.⁶ But we do not adopt this attitude in other areas of our search for truth. The natural scientist is also a seeker, trying to know reality. In this area also different people ask different questions and come up with different answers. But because it is believed that the matter in hand concerns the real world and not just the subjective psychological experiences of the scientists, one does not remain content with mutually contradictory answers. It is indeed true that the being of God is beyond comprehension by the human mind. But this does not mean that we are free to make our own images of God. Nor does it warrant the denial that God could have acted to make himself known. Both the luminosity and the depth of the divine mystery are presented to us in the incarnation, the whole fact of Christ. In Christ we find both a holiness that must burn up all that is unholy, and a tender mercy and compassion which goes to the uttermost limit to receive the unholy. No human mind can grasp the depth of that mystery. But, having been laid hold of by it, no human being can think of it as merely one among many symbols of an unknowable reality. To affirm that this is

truth, not merely truth for me but truth for all, is not arrogance. It is simply responsible human behavior.

But it is also more than this. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that the true center is not me and my need of salvation, but God and his glory. To center the whole discussion on the human need for salvation is to shut off oneself from a vision of the truth. That is what some of these writers have done. If God has indeed done what the gospel affirms that he has done, then the question How shall I be saved? is no longer in the center. In the essays which make up *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* it is in the center. But the true center is, can only be, God and his glory. That is what is wholly missing here. There is only, in the background, the shadowy figure of Reality, whatever he, she or it may be. Firmly in the center is the self and the quest for personal salvation. And the self remains, in the end, alone in an unknown and unknowable world.

This "Theological-Mystical Bridge" is a well-trodden one and has been examined by many critics. I propose, therefore, to give major attention to the first and third of the three "bridges" proposed for the crossing of the Rubicon, to the arguments for religious pluralism drawn from reflection on the relativity of historically developed beliefs, the diversity of human cultures, and the priority of the struggle for justice. Gordon Kaufman's essay begins with the urgency of the need for human unity, an urgency which no one can doubt. The problem arises because there has to be some center, some vision of what it is to be human, which can hold together the diversity of human desires. The Enlightenment had such a vision and hoped to unite all humankind in the power of it. Unfettered reason would enable all people to agree about what is the case. Human history could indeed be written as the story of successive attempts to unite wider and wider swathes of the human race in one community. The usual name for these attempts is imperialism. Someone or something must draw the conflicting wills of human beings together. And therefore, as André Dumas has said, every proposal for human unity which does not specify the center has the self as its unacknowledged center. The Christian gospel is the Good News that a center has been provided around which it is possible for human beings to become one, because their sins against one another are forgiven and their conflicting wills and desires are cleansed of their egotism and directed toward their true goal. This proposal for human unity is not discussed by any of the writers.

Kaufman seeks a solution to the problem of unity by drawing attention to the historically conditioned character of the Christian gospel. "Modern historical consciousness," he says, enables us to recognize the culturally conditioned character of the Christian faith. The Christian faith provides a series of symbols through which people in particular circumstances have sought to understand the world. "From our modern historical vantage point" the religions of the world "seem best understood as the product of human imaginative creativity in face of the great mystery that life is to all

of us.”⁷ Now it is obvious that “modern historical consciousness” is itself a culture-product and can claim no epistemological privilege—a fact which Kaufman later acknowledges. No reason is given for preferring this particular example of human creativity to those developed in the great religions. It is commended as eliminating the absolute claims of particular religious traditions, without destroying these traditions.

The problem is that all these traditions, while they are undoubtedly products of human imaginative creativity, also make truth-claims. In this respect they are in the same class as the scientific tradition. The great intellectual achievements of modern science are (as is now widely acknowledged) also products of creative imagination and intuition. But they claim to give a true understanding of a reality outside of the creative mind of the scientist. They are not merely psychological states. They do not claim *absolute* truth in the sense of claiming that there is nothing more to be discovered. But they do claim to give a truthful account of what is the case, in the sense (1) that statements which contradict the findings in question can be confidently described as untrue, and (2) that further discoveries will extend or deepen, but not negate the findings in question. If I may borrow an example from Harold Turner, the discovery of the proper classification of elements according to the atomic table was a true advance in the understanding of the physical world. It has led the way to further discoveries about the structure of the atom itself. These new discoveries go beyond the work of Dalton but they do not invalidate it. They build upon it, and its truthfulness is confirmed by the fact that it has led the way to further advances in understanding. There is no claim to absoluteness if that means that there is nothing further to discover. But there is a claim to truthfulness in the sense of validity and indispensability as a way forward in the exploration of the real world. And there is a claim that the truthfulness of this discovery requires us to say that previous beliefs, such as belief in existence of phlogiston, are untrue.

In saying that all the religions are products of human imaginative creativity in different cultures and at different times, Kaufman is, of course, correct. But in suggesting that they are therefore of equal validity and that none of them can be regarded as normative in respect of the others, he is surrendering that which is at the center of them all, namely, a concern to know the truth. In this respect he and his colleagues in this enterprise are victims of the dualism in Western culture to which I have referred. Ever since the invention of the telescope shocked European thinkers into the realization that things may be different from what they seem to be, and since Descartes offered to open up a way to a kind of knowledge which would be indubitable and without uncertainty, expressed in the exact formulae of mathematics, there has opened up a dualism between a false objectivity and a false subjectivity, between a world of “facts,” which are supposed to be imposed upon us apart from any interests or commitments of our own, and a world of “beliefs,” which are supposed to be a matter

of the personal disposition of each believer. The truth is that all knowing is the activity of a knowing subject, and that the creativity, the power of imagination, and the intuitive grasp of hitherto hidden patterns of meaning on the part of the knowing subject are involved in all our efforts to penetrate the world around us. But to affirm this subjective pole in all our knowing does not mean to make it merely subjective. What we discover in this enterprise is a trans-subjective reality, a real world which we share with all other human beings. We therefore publish it, commend it to others, and test it against all new situations and all other beliefs. It is subjective in the sense that I am personally committed to it. But it claims to make contact with realities beyond the self, and this claim is always subject to the test of adequacy to “make sense” of the whole of experience.

Such powers of knowing are developed within specific human communities, with their specific languages and traditional symbols and concepts. There is no other kind of knowing. When Kaufman tells us that we must distance ourselves from our own tradition “taking a step back from unconditional commitment to it,”⁸ he would be asking us to step off the edge of the world, unless it were obvious that he is in fact asking us to accept another tradition. All knowing, all reasoning, and all ways of conceptualizing the world about us are the products of specific human communities. The idea that there might be a standpoint, a kind of rationality, which is exempt from this particularity and could “de-absolutize” them all, is an illusion. As MacIntyre has argued,⁹ it is the typical product of a cosmopolitan culture which imagines that all truth can be translated into a European language. Our traditions of religious belief are not things we can step back from. They are more like the contact lenses in our eyes, through which we achieve a certain clarity and coherence in understanding the world. We abandon them only when they fail to give us clarity and coherence in our efforts to understand and cope with the world around us, and when someone is able to offer us a better set of lenses.

John Hick, however, believes that religions are not about “what is the case.” They are not “world-views”; they are alternative paths to salvation. As there is no standpoint available from which one could make a valid judgment on the success or otherwise of the different religions, and as all the records are ambiguous, it is not possible to affirm that one religion is more effectively salvific than others. All are paths to salvation, and salvation comes from turning from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Once again, of course, there is no accepted account of Reality. It, or he, or she, is conceived differently in the different traditions. There is no compelling evidence available to us about the nature of Reality that could provide a criterion for passing judgments on the different conceptions of it embodied in the different religious and secular traditions.

It seems to me that five comments on this position are in order:

(a) It seems to be logically self-defeating. How does one know that there is a Reality which is unknown? There are, after all, confident affirmations

by Muslims and Marxists and Christians and Buddhists about what reality is. On the basis of what prior knowledge is it possible to deny that any of these claims is true? If something is truly unknown, then there is nothing to be said.

(b) Hick is not without a standpoint. He makes judgments on various aspects of the religious traditions, and particularly upon the evils for which Christianity is responsible. He affirms that we have no agreed definition of sainthood, but has no difficulty in recognizing its absence when he sees it. Where is the ontological foundation for these judgments? Is it anything other than the generally accepted worldview of a Western liberal of the late twentieth century, and if so, what are the grounds for thinking that this worldview corresponds to Reality?

(c) Hick now extends his well-known Copernican revolution. He asks that we move from a Christocentric worldview not just to a theocentric, but to a "Reality-centric" view.¹⁰ Ultimate Reality may be impersonal.¹¹ We must not exclude the atheist from salvation. Paul Knitter in his essay speaks of a soteriocentric view; the basis for human unity is the common search for salvation, however it may be directed.¹² Let us consider what is involved in this move. A Christocentric view takes as its clue the person of Jesus Christ, a person about whom there are records which are available for examination. Granted that Christians through the centuries have constantly tried to depict Jesus in their own image, or as a representative of what they conceive to be the ideal human being; nevertheless, such depictions can always be checked and corrected against the record. Jesus, as I read the New Testament, confronts me as a real person whose words and deeds pose radical questions to me and to my own ideals. There is an objective reality which calls into question my own beliefs, ideals, and practices. The church has regarded this given reality as the center for its understanding of the world. Hick offers, as an alternative to this, "Reality." But how am I to conceive of "Reality." I have to form my own conception of it on the basis of some clue. If all particular and specific clues are excluded, how am I to conceive of "Reality." Whatever concept I form, it is my own creation. It cannot call me into question. It is I who am at the center. The Hickian revolution is exactly the opposite of the Copernican. It is a move from a view centered in the objective reality of the man Jesus Christ, to a view centered in my own subjective conception of ultimate reality.

(d) Certainly all human beings seek salvation—in some sense of the word. They seek safety, happiness, security, freedom from oppression. They seek it in vastly different ways. They seek it through religion, through sex, through money, through power. There is hardly any limit to the paths to "salvation." It is our conflicting struggles for salvation that destroy the world. The universal human demand for salvation is in no sense a clue to human unity. Hick's discussion begins from the old slogan "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*"¹³ and concentrates on the claims that the religions make to offer ways of salvation. But religions can make these claims only because

they make truth claims, affirmations about what is the case, and these claims are in many cases mutually irreconcilable. If there is in some sense a real world, a real cosmos, and not simply a multitude of separate worlds created by the imagination of human beings, then salvation can only be the fruit of a right relation to that real world. And it is possible to be right or wrong in our understanding of what kind of a world it is. To separate the quest for salvation from the business of understanding what is the truth about the cosmos would seem to be a recipe for disaster.

(e) It is not possible finally to evade the question of truth and error. To do so would surely be the sign of death. All living creatures seem to be, in their different measures, endowed with a need to find out what is really the case, to explore the world around and to find out how things really are. That is why they have eyes and ears and noses and the tactile sense. The fact that their understanding of the world depends upon the development of these sense organs does not alter the fact that it is the world external to themselves which they are seeking to explore. And they can be mistaken. They can mistake a trap for place of safety, and a poisonous plant for food. In that part of our divided culture which is still vigorous and developing, the scientific half, the same curiosity, the same passion to find out how things really are, prevails. Scientists are increasingly ready to acknowledge the role played by intuition and imagination in their work. But they will not accept the idea that their work is simply a product of their creative imagination. It is well-known that, for example, Einstein passionately affirmed that the special and general theories of relativity are a true account of how things actually are. That confidence was confirmed many years later when the technical applications of his theories were found to be far-reaching. The scientific part of our culture continues to flourish because it does not accept pluralism. It does *not* assume "the parity of all scientific views." It does not pretend to absolute truth, but it insists that it is possible to come to a fuller and fuller grasp of truth and that one can only do so by identifying and eliminating error. This is not condemned as "imperialistic" unless scientists (or more usually their popularizers) begin to claim that the methods of natural science are the only ways to reach truth. Its success depends upon the vigour of the scientific community and upon its willingness to accept the discipline of an established scientific tradition. In the other half of our culture, that which deals with "beliefs" and "values," this vigor and this discipline are lacking. It would seem that a proposal to sever the search for "salvation" from the business of distinguishing truth from error, is a sign of the approaching death of a culture. What is certain is that this kind of pluralism will simply crumble in the presence of a confident and vigorous claim to know the truth—such a claim as Islam is at present making with increasing vigor in the contemporary world.

This is the issue which Langdon Gilkey, alone among the writers of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, attempts to face. What, he asks, does a pluralist do in the face of an event like the rise of the Nazi power in Germany

in the 1930s? Having stated that we have to accept the "rough parity" of all the cultures and religions¹⁴ Gilkey goes on, very rightly, to point out that there are religious positions which are "intolerable." He acknowledges that, in the face of Hitler, the absoluteness of the Barmen Declaration was the only proper stance. In the presence of the "demonic"¹⁵ elements in religion we have to affirm an absolute commitment to certain values, and these values cannot be sustained apart from a certain worldview. "Paradoxically, plurality, precisely by its own ambiguity, implies both relativity and absoluteness, a juxtaposition or synthesis of the relative and the absolute that is frustrating intellectually and yet necessary practically."¹⁶ Gilkey's proposed route out of this intellectual frustration is subtle, and I find it hard to follow. He advises us to follow "the venerable, practical American tradition" as exemplified in John Dewey and William James. The former advised us that a puzzle which is irresolvable by reflection may be solved by "intelligent practice," and the latter taught us that there are forced options, situations where an intellectually unresolved dilemma is settled by the fact that we have to act one way or the other. "If we would be personal and social beings, and even more if we must take a role in liberating action, we must stand somewhere and act from some base." That is an absolute obligation. But, lest this base, this standpoint, should become the source of an oppressive absolutism, we have to recognize the relativity of our standpoint. "A *relative absoluteness* represents a posture essential to public and political praxis," and it is also essential for genuine interreligious dialogue. The juxtaposition of relative and absolute is "numbing in reflective theory. Thus reflection must not, because it cannot, precede praxis; on the contrary, it must begin on the basis of praxis."¹⁷

I hope that I have faithfully rendered Gilkey's argument. It prompts me to the following reflections. The first refers to the "forced option." If we are faced, as Christians in Germany were faced, with the claim of an absolutist ideology backed by the power of a ruthless state, then it is a situation such as William James described as a forced option. One either keeps one's head down, or one protests and faces imprisonment, torture, and death. There is no neutral position. The dilemma is solved in practice, one way or the other. But which way? If, like Gilkey, one has been schooled for generations in a faith which teaches that ultimate reality is on the side of justice and freedom, and if this determines what it means to be "real personal and social beings," and if there is an *absolute* commitment to that belief, then one protests and pays the ultimate price. Without this, it would seem that "intelligent practice" would mean keeping quiet.

The second point is about the relation of reflection to action. Gilkey repeats the fashionable view that praxis precedes reflection. This is precisely the kind of thinking which lies deep in the roots of the phenomenon of Hitler and his movement. In reaction against the imperial claims of reason as expressed in the work of the French *philosophes* and politically embodied in the French revolution and its imperialistic consequences, Ger-

man thinkers asserted the priority of the *Volksgeist*, the claim of the spirit of a people to determine what is good and true and beautiful for them. The road from this to the apotheosis of "blood and soil" is well-known and well-trodden. If action is to precede reflection, then action is dictated by something which has not been clearly thought out. It is dictated by whatever impulses are dominant in the society to which one belongs. In a generous spirit like Gilkey's, long-trained in a Christian tradition, it is dictated by a love of freedom and justice. But that tradition endures, and Gilkey can draw upon it, only because it has been fought for and defended by those who believed that it had absolute authority because its validity rested upon God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. It is, for Gilkey, axiomatic that "no one revelation is, or can be, the universal criterion for all the others."¹⁸ No grounds are given for this assertion except that "so we are now seeing." It is merely surrender to a contemporary fashion of thought in a small circle of intellectuals. It is, of course, a denial of the central affirmation of the Christian faith. It has no future. My third comment is on Gilkey's statement that any claim to absolute truth can lead into oppression. This is true. No one can be more tyrannous than the "liberator" when he has gained power. The twentieth century is strewn with sad illustrations of this truth. But here we come to the heart of the matter. The unique character of the Christian gospel, a uniqueness which the "mythographers" wish to deny, is that it affirms that the sovereign and absolute claim of the Creator is presented in the form of a crucified man. The revelation of the truth is a contradiction of all imperialisms.

It is the fact that the cross is the very center of the Christian proclamation that drastically relativizes every Christian claim to embody the full truth of God in any intellectual system or to embody the perfect righteousness of God in any political order. But this is a radically different kind of relativizing than the one Gilkey proposes. Every specific claim, intellectually or politically, made by the Christian church is relativized not by invoking the "rough parity of all religions"; that invocation is merely an abdication of responsible thought. It is relativized by invoking the name of Jesus. Everything is held *sub specie crucis*. The Christian church has sometimes seemed to claim possession of all truth, and sometimes tried to attain supreme power. When it has done so, it has been false to its title-deeds. What the church does and must always do is to point to the total fact of the incarnation—Jesus in his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection—as the point where the Absolute *has* been made present among the relativities of history. When it faithfully does so it does three things: (a) It confronts all human beings with the absolute claim of their Creator upon them to live a corporate and personal life corresponding to what has been set forth in the events of the gospel. (b) It places every human response to this claim in the light of the gospel, where it finds both judgment and forgiveness. (c) It offers a fellowship within which human beings can mutually minister to one another both that judgment and that forgiveness, so that they can

continue to act with a confidence which is cleansed of arrogance. It is the absoluteness of what God has done in Christ that relativizes our particular formulations and programs.

The Christian claim that the truth is revealed in Jesus does not close the door to further enquiry but opens it. The truth claim has both positive and negative implications; it implies that acceptance of it will lead to further insight into the truth; it implies that claims which deny it will not lead to further truth.

It is in the light of this revelation that we must resist the fashionable call to place action before reflection, and to exalt orthopraxis above orthodoxy. Should the church be seduced by this call, then its claim to bear witness to absolute truth would indeed become a cause of oppression. If absolute claims are made for any specific proposal for praxis (whether it is called liberation, or whatever) then the way is open for domination. But the church is bound to make an absolute claim in respect of *doxa*, of who is to be worshipped, glorified, and obeyed. On that the church cannot compromise. The judgment on its praxis, as on that of all human beings, is reserved to a higher court and a later hearing.

As our discussion with Gilkey shows, the writers of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* are aware of the problem raised by total relativism. In relation to any claim to know the truth they are relativists. All claims to know the truth are condemned as imperialistic. But they believe (and this is the rationale of the third "ethico-practical" bridge) that there is an escape from relativism by way of practice. There is an absolute obligation to seek justice and liberation. This provides them with the needed standpoint, a refuge from a clueless relativism. It is impossible to make absolute claims for Jesus or any other particular name in the history of religions. But it is possible and necessary to claim absolute validity for the praxis of justice and liberation. What is involved in this replacement of the name of an actual person by these abstract nouns?

In the first place, it means that the self is in command. If there is no Judge to whose authority I must bow, then it is I who decide what is just. To return for a moment to Hitler and his movement, the rationale was the claim of justice for Germans under foreign rule. The reason we need law courts is because none of us, not even the most godly, can be trusted to be judge in our own cause. We all long for justice, and it is these passionate struggles that tear the world to pieces. There is a tragic irony in Paul Knitter's citation of Aloysius Pieris's definition of true religion as "a revolutionary urge, a psycho-social impulse to generate a new humanity"¹⁹ while his beloved Sri Lanka is being torn to pieces by rival claims to "justice" and "liberation." Pieris himself, in his own essay, shows a much deeper awareness of the centrality of the cross as the place where the true justice of God is set forth. When we absolutize words like *justice* and *liberation*, we remain locked into our own definitions of what these words mean. There is nothing to stand in the way of our imperial claims. When

we place at the center the cross of the one who is Lord and Judge, then we are on the way to the realization of a justice and a freedom which are truly God's gifts, and deliverance from our own imperial pretensions.

The writers of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* share a common commitment to justice and freedom as supreme goods. But they destroy the basis upon which alone this commitment can be based. Their enterprise is a profound disservice to the cause in which they believe. The "developed" world at the moment is hell-bent on what is called economic growth and is more and more committed (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) to a sort of social Darwinism that sees life in terms of competition and the elimination of the unfit. This, or something like it, is the public doctrine. In this worldview there is certainly no "option for the poor." The poor are the unfit to survive. They may be objects of a private charity, which remains as the late fruiting of an older belief-system. But this "charity" has no ontological ground. This public doctrine is a form of paganism which surrenders ultimate authority to "the market"—a modern form of the ancient goddess *Fortuna*. It can only be resisted on the basis of another belief about Reality, about what is the case. The writers seem to have abandoned any claim to know what Reality is. Insofar as their words are heeded, they can only have the effect of destroying the possibility of resistance where resistance is called for. It will be left—as on previous occasions—to those who confess an absolute commitment to the crucified and risen Lord—to pay the price of resistance.

The essay of Tom Driver is a fitting conclusion to the book. What is implicit in the rest of the book becomes explicit in his words. He is a polytheist in the ancient mold, who believe that "inasmuch as God has different histories, then God has different 'natures'"²⁰ All belief in the ultimate coherence of things has been abandoned. Chaos has come again and there will be nothing left except the will to power of the competing human projects. The volume will of course be welcomed by those who find it easier to drift with the tides of relativism than to make a confident affirmation of faith in revealed truth. In that sense Paul Knitter's "pastoral tool for mediating the new nonabsolutist Christologies to the ecclesia"²¹ may be useful. But I suspect that the church also contains quite a few toughminded Christians who are sufficiently familiar with unbelief to recognize it when they see it.

NOTES

1. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," p. 195.
2. Ibid.
3. Smith, "Idolatry" in Hick and Knitter, p. 55.
4. Ibid. p. 59.
5. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow," p. 76.
6. Ibid. p. 77.

7. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness and Christian Theology," p. 8.
8. Ibid. p. 9.
9. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
10. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 23.
11. Ibid. p. 34.
12. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," p. 187.
13. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 16.
14. Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," p. 39.
15. Ibid. p. 44.
16. Ibid. pp. 44-45.
17. Ibid. pp. 46-47.
18. Ibid. p. 48.
19. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," p. 186.
20. Tom Driver, "The Case for Pluralism," in Hick and Knitter, p. 212.
21. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," p. 195.

11

Is "Pluralistic Theology" Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions?

JÜRGEN MOLTMANN

In the light of the abundance of perspectives in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and the impossibility of addressing all, or even a major portion of them, I will limit myself to discussing two questions. Is the "dialogue" of world religions, as understood there, the only reasonable relationship among the world religions as they increasingly encounter one another in the contemporary world? Secondly, is the ideology of "pluralism" presented in that book the only possible and reasonable basis for dialogue?

DIALOGUE—ONLY ONE POSSIBILITY IN THE ENCOUNTER OF RELIGIONS

Throughout history, there have been series of very different levels at which persons and communities belonging to diverse religious traditions and worldviews have met. One of these is represented by the European wars of religion that followed the Protestant Reformation. Those wars rose out of an absolute condemnation of other interpretations of Christianity as idolatry, superstition, and even devil worship. Although ostensibly taking place among *Christians* and not members of totally different religious traditions, as is increasingly the case of interreligious contacts today, those events are illustrative.

In their interaction there was no true dialogue of speech, but murder,

Translated by Marianne M. Martin