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continuity and coherence do p. 239 not obtain, then the revelations claimed by the various religions cannot *all* be authentic.

One final matter. Universalists often explain the variety of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Thus, Christianity is said to be a religion for Westerners, Hinduism a religion for Orientals, and so on. This, of course, still leaves the plurality of religions in the East unexplained! At the same time it reduces God's self-revelation to what human culture makes of it.

Moreover, it is misleading to say that Christianity is a Western religion, for it is, in fact, if anything, a Near Eastern religion. It is true that it has received certain Greek elements. But this circumstance cannot validate the notion that, just as a Western (i.e. Greek) superstructure was placed upon a Semitic foundation, so now we may erect an Eastern superstructure again in order to make Christianity accessible to the Eastern mind. This is nothing to do with Paul's becoming all things to all men. The Greek element entered Christianity during its formative stage, and it was inserted by those who under God's sovereignty and guidance gave Christianity its normative form. The changes which pluralists like Panikkar, Samartha, Ariarajah, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Carman, Paul Knitter and others advocate are of a nature that (as the Jewish scholar, E. B. Horowitz, pointed out), Christianity cannot admit and still be true to itself.[42]

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Chrys Caragounis is a professor of New Testament at Uppsala, Sweden. p. 240

Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth

Harold Netland

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Christian 'exclusivism' has increasingly come under sharp attack for supposedly being indefensible in our religiously pluralistic world. In this article several influential arguments against exclusivism—arguments which claim that it must be rejected since it is inherently intolerant or that it is based upon faulty notions of religious truth—are critically examined and are convincingly shown to be wanting. He concludes that if we are to have a view of the relation among religions which is epistemologically sound, and accurately portrays the values and beliefs of the respective religions, something like traditional Christian 'exclusivism' is unavoidable.
Editor

Few issues confronting Christians today are as significant or as controversial as the problem of the relation of Christianity to other religious traditions. What makes religious pluralism so problematic is the fact that adherents of various religions seem to be making very different, even contradictory, claims about the human condition and its relation to the religious ultimate. At the centre of issues stemming from religious pluralism is the

[42] in 'A Jewish Response' in *Christian Faith*, 64ff.

inescapable and knotty problem of conflicting truth claims.[1] Theravada Buddhists, Muslims, Advaita Vedanta Hindus, and Christians make wildly differing claims about the religious ultimate, the human predicament, and the nature of salvation or enlightenment. Who, if any, is correct?

For centuries it was accepted that since incompatible truth claims are being made, not all of the claims of the various traditions can be true. Some must be false. And thus it has traditionally been held that the Muslim and the orthodox Christian cannot both be correct in their respective beliefs about the identity of Jesus. Christians, convinced that the central affirmations found in the Bible are true, have regarded the person and work of Jesus Christ as unique, definitive, and normative, and the beliefs of other faiths which conflict with Scripture as being at best distorted or incomplete, if not simply false. This traditional position is reflected in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974: p. 241

> We also regard as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies, Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved (Douglas 1975:4.)

For lack of more adequate terminology, let us call this the Christian exclusivist position. Christian exclusivists, then, are those who maintain the uniqueness and normativity of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the truth and authority of the Bible as God's definitive self-revelation, and who assert that where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are not to be accepted as truth.[2]

It is important to recognize that Christian exclusivism is a species of a more general exclusivist position regarding the relation among religions. In this general sense, exclusivism can be defined as the position which holds that the central claims of one's own religious tradition are true, and that where beliefs of other traditions appear to be incompatible with those of one's own tradition, the former are to be rejected as false. What is often overlooked is that most religious traditions (with the possible exception of certain forms of Hinduism) are exclusivist in this sense. Theravada Buddhists, for example, characteristically reject as false those claims made by Christians which are incompatible with Buddhism.

In spite of its dominant position in the church throughout the centuries, Christian exclusivism has fallen upon hard times in recent years. Increasingly, it is being attacked by theologians and missionaries as naive, intolerant, and the product of an immoral religious imperialism. Waldron Scott speaks of the 'sheer incredibility to the modern person of an exclusivist approach' to the relation among religions (Scott 1981:69). Today a growing consensus exists among both Roman Catholics and Protestants that exclusivism is indefensible and must be rejected by sensitive Christians.

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[1] By 'truth claim' I mean any explicit or implicit claim to truth; that is, any statement which explicitly or implicitly affirms that a particular state of affairs obtains. 'Today is Friday', 'My dog is brown', and 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet' are all examples of truth claims.

[2] The use of the term 'exclusivism' is unfortunate in some respects, since it has, at least for some people, some undesirable connotations, such as narrow-mindedness, arrogance, insensitivity, self-righteousness, and so forth. The term is adopted here because of its wide use in the literature to refer to the position represented by the Lausanne Covenant. It is the thesis of this essay that a properly defined exclusivism need not have these undesirable associations. Further as defined here, Christian exclusivism does *not* entail that all of the claims of non-Christian religions must be false or that other religious traditions are without any inherent value.

Criticisms of exclusivism usually fall into one of three general p. 242 categories: those which argue that. exclusivism is intolerant or otherwise morally blameworthy, those which argue that exclusivism is somehow epistemologically deficient, and those which hold that exclusivism is not demanded by the data of Scripture. In this essay attention will be focused upon some arguments from the first two classes.[3] While fully aware of the difficulties associated with exclusivism, I am convinced that the widespread rejection of it is unwarranted and is largely based upon faulty reasoning as well as a misunderstanding of the implications of exclusivism. Since the issues involved are essentially epistemological in nature, the discussion will at times resort to philosophical analysis. I make no apologies for this. The central issues in the current debate over pluralism are inextricably linked to epistemology. Clear thinking on the relation of Christianity to other traditions demands careful and rigorous work in epistemology as well as a thorough understanding of the respective traditions themselves.

EXCLUSIVISM AND INTOLERANCE

For some people the sheer fact of religious pluralism is sufficient reason for rejecting exclusivism. That, simply because there are many different and even conflicting claims to religious truth we should conclude that *none* of them can be exclusively true. Since the exclusivist claims of any given religion can always be countered by those from other traditions, we ought to reject all exclusivist claims to truth.[4]

However, some careful reflection exposes the fallacy here. Simply because there is a variety of competing claims to truth, it hardly follows that *all* such claims must be regarded as false. It is certainly logically possible that at least some are true. Surely each claim deserves to be evaluated carefully on its own merits.

Much more damaging, however, are arguments which call into question the moral integrity of Christian exclusivism. Such arguments—increasingly influential in contemporary discussions—assume that there is something inherently arrogant, intolerant, or morally blameworthy in exclusivism.

> Exclusivism strikes more and more Christians as immoral. If the head p. 243 proves it true, while the heart sees it as wicked, un-Christian, then should Christians not follow the heart? Maybe this is the crux of our dilemma (W. Cantwell Smith 1981a:202).
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> The conservative Evangelical declaration that there can be authentic, reliable revelation only in Christ simply does not hold up in light of the faith, dedication, love, and peace that Christians find in the teachings and especially in the followers of other religions (Knitter 1985:93).
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> But if we restrict our attention to the great world traditions, the only criterion by which any of these could be judged to be the one and only true religion, with all others dismissed as false, would be its own dogmatic assertion, in its more chauvinistic moments, to this effect (Hick 1982:90).
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> At a time when the histories of different nations are increasingly being drawn together, when different communities of faith are in dialogue with each other as never before, and when people of the world for good or bad share a common future the exclusive claims of particular communities generate tensions and lead to clashes (Samartha 1981:22).

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[3] That proper interpretation of the biblical data demands a kind of exclusivism is demonstrated in the excellent article by Professor Christopher J. H. Wright (1984).

[4] This position seems to be implicit in some statements by John H. Hick (1982:118–119 and 1984:157) and Stanley Samartha (1981:28f.).

> The exclusive attitude of the past which regard its own opinions as supreme and others as not worth discussing is no longer useful, if ever it was (Parrinder 1976:32).

Similarly, the historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that the only way to purge Christianity of the 'sinful state of mind' of exclusive-mindedness and intolerance is to shed the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique (Toynbee 1957:95f.).

These are harsh words indeed, and if accurate would require the rejection of exclusivism by all morally sensitive persons. But in Christian exclusivism necessarily intolerant of other faiths? is the exclusivist necessarily guilty of arrogance, pride, or insensitivity to others? Is exclusivism necessarily an obstacle to greater global understanding, cooperation, and peace?

In considering such questions we must begin by admitting the shameful fact that throughout history religious exclusivists have often acted in highly barbarous and intolerant ways to those of other faiths. Not only is this the case in Christian church history but it is true of Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism as well (cf. Parrinder 1976: chapter 3). Cardinal Newman's apt comment is unfortunately all too accurate in depicting a long tradition of persecution and intolerance in religious history: 'Oh, how we hate one another for the love of God!' However, our concern here is not so much with history, nor even with the way people do in fact act in the present, as it is with the notions of exclusivism and tolerance themselves. Is there anything in the concept of Christian exclusivism itself which demands such intolerance and arrogance?

Let us examine the concept of religious tolerance more carefully. p. 244 Today a widely accepted assumption exists that being tolerant of other religions involves holding a positive attitude toward them, or responding favourably to adherents of other faiths. Often this positive attitude is directed not simply toward adherents of other religions but to their beliefs as well. Thus, Raimundo Panikkar seemed to imply that if one is truly tolerant of others he or she will not judge or critically evaluate other religions (Panikkar 1978:xviii). On this assumption, it follows that the Christian exclusivist who accuses Hindus or Buddhists of holding false beliefs is grossly intolerant.

Now there is an important truth here. By tolerating some entity *x* I am in some sense accepting *x* or displaying a favourable attitude toward *x*. Conversely, by being intolerant of *x* I am refusing to accept *x*. But it is crucial to see that in tolerating *x* there is also an important sense in which I am *not* approving of *x*. That is, tolerance involves acceptance in one sense of something toward which one has a negative estimation (cf. Newman 1978:187). It hardly makes sense to speak of tolerating something of which one heartily approves! Thus Maurice Cranston defines toleration as 'a policy of patient forbearance in the presence of something which is disliked or disapproved of' (Cranston 1967:143). Toleration has an element of condemnation built into its meaning.

Jay Newman correctly notes that it is widely and mistakenly assumed that tolerating a belief is primarily a matter of having a favourable judgement about the content of that belief (Newman 1978:188). Thus Christians who are willing to accept the claims of other religions as true (or at least not completely false) are regarded as tolerant while exclusivists who reject some such claims as false are said to be intolerant. But this reflects a confused notion of religious tolerance. For religious tolerance involves acceptance in some sense of something (e.g., a belief) toward which one has a less than positive estimation. Thus, if one tolerates a religious belief *p* then one accepts *p* in some sense while still not necessarily endorsing the content of *p*. One can tolerate *p* while still regarding *p* as false, or at best dubious. It is simply nonsensical to speak of tolerating a belief that one happens to accept as true. A fundamental distinction emerges here: it is one thing to accept someone's holding a particular belief, or someone's *right* to hold a

particular belief, but quite another matter to accept the content of the belief itself. Religious tolerance does imply the former, but not the latter.

An example might help to clarify the point. I have before me the August 10, 1986, issue of the *Japan Times*, which contains a letter to the editor from a Jodo-Shinshu Buddhist priest. In it he complains of a p. 245 Christian missionary who regularly drives past the Buddhist temple during funerals and other services, blaring over loudspeakers, 'You heathens had better consider the afterlife and repent, or else you will roast in hell!'

I suspect that few would hesitate to call this highly intolerant behaviour, and it is reproach to the cause of Christ that this kind of activity occurs at all. But notice *why* we condemn this as intolerant. Intolerance is marked by the refusal to accept something one can and ought (morally) to accept. The missionary in the example is intolerant because he refuses to recognize the right of the temple to conduct religious rites and sevices in peace, without interference from outside. It is not the fact that he happens to believe that the priest and the others are on their way to hell (distateful as this may be) that marks him as intolerant: nor is it the fact that he is trying to win converts to Christianity. Rather, it is the highly insensitive and repugnant manner in which he expresses his views and seeks to persuade that compels us to call him intolerant.

In tolerating a belief *p*, then, one is not adopting a special attitude toward the content of *p* itself (one might still regard it as false); rather, one is adopting a certain acceptance of someone's believing in *p*.[5] It would seem, then, that there is nothing necessarily intolerant in maintaining that religious beliefs which are incompatible with central Christian beliefs are false. This is not to deny that someone holding this position might act in a highly intolerant manner toward those of other faiths. The point here is simply that such intolerance is not *demanded* by exclusivism. There is no necessary connection between holding the beliefs of a particluar group to be false, and the radical mistreatment of members of that group (Griffiths and Lewis 1983:77f.). Certainly one can consider the beliefs of another to be false and yet treat that person with dignity and respect. To deny this is to suggest that we can respect and treat properly only those with whom we happen to agree. But surely this is nonsense. Is it not a mark of maturity to be able to live peaceably with, and act properly toward, those with whom we might profoundly disagree?

A further question arises, however, regarding attempts to persuade others to convert to Christianity. Is this not intolerant? p. 246

As the example cited above indicates, there certainly are insensitive, intolerant, unethical means of persuasion, and it is to our shame that those who call themselves Christian sometimes engage in such practices. However, provided one abides by the appropriate social and cultural norms and does not in any way infringe upon the dignity and freedom of the individual, I fail to see how attempting to persuade *in and of itself* should be rejected as intolerant. When conducted properly, attempting to persuade a person to give up a particular belief in favour of an alternative belief need not be morally questionable. Notice that if we do not accept this view of tolerance, the implication is that any time people engage in discussion or dialogue in order to overcome disagreement in belief they are being intolerant of each other!

EXCLUSIVISM AND EXCLUSIVISTIC TRUTH

[5] 'So it would seem that tolerating a religious belief is not primarily a matter of making a judgement about the content of that belief. It is not acceptance of the belief *per se*, rather, it is acceptance of someone's holding a belief which one considers to be significantly inferior to one's own alternative belief, if not by the standard of truth and falsity, then by some other standard' (Newman 1978:189).

It is not uncommon to come across arguments which suggest that exclusivism must be rejected because it is epistemologically naive, or because it is based upon outdated 'Western' concepts of truth and belief which are inappropriate in dealing with the realities of pluralism. When one really appreciates what religious truth and faith are all about, it is claimed, then it will be clear that maintaining that the beliefs of other religions are false is simply inappropriate.

One variation on this theme comes from those who hold that Christian exclusivism is based upon a Western (viz., Greek) notion of truth as exclusive and 'either/or', and that this conception of truth is inadequate. Wilfred Cantwell Smith claims that 'in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and' (Smith 1965:17). And Paul Knitter asserts,

> Today such a model of defining truth by exclusion, by making either/or absolute judgements, has been opened to criticism from various fronts.... Our contemporary historical consciousness has recognized the ongoing, pluralistic nature of truth. (Knitter 1985:218).

From now on, he claims, we must recognize that '... all religious experience and all religious language must be two-eyed, dipolar, a union of opposites' (Knitter 1985:221).

That we must stop looking at religious traditions through an exclusivistic, 'either/or' framework and should adopt a holistic, dipolar, 'two-eyed' approach is the thesis of Bishop John A. T. Robinson's provocative book, *Truth Is Two-Eyed* (1979). Robinson draws a contrast between two distinct approaches to religious phenomena—a p. 247 'one-eyed' approach and a 'two-eyed' approach. The former emphasizes just one dominant conception of the religious ultimate, and carries with it an implicit or explicit claim to exclusivity. On the other hand, the 'two-eyed' approach rejects any such claim to exclusivity, and incorporates two basic visions of reality which are found in varying degrees in both Hinduism and Christianity—the religious ultimate as personal and as nonpersonal. Robinson claims that the 'one-eyed' approach carries with it an unwarranted exclusiveness which is narrow-minded and negative, and is the product of bigoted ignorance (Robinson 1979: x, 16, 24, 54). Religious truth can be attained only by transcending the 'either/or one-eyed' approach of exclusivism.

> But truth may come from refusing this either-or and accepting that the best working model of reality may be elliptical or bi-polar, or indeed multi-polar (Robinson 1979:22).

We should observe that Robinson is not calling for a naive syncretism, 'taking up partial insights from every quarter, fusing and absorbing them into an all-embracing whole' (Robinson 1979:21). Rather, he is concerned to discover how one can be faithful to both visions of the religious ultimate (viz., as personal and nonpersonal) at once, 'without the exclusive and negative corollaries of a one-eyed approach' (Robinson 1979:21). Although one should not minimize or ignore basic differences in religious traditions, one should push beyond such differences toward the 'unitire pluralism' which, while recognizing the differences, allows for a 'unity of vision' among the two polar centres (Robinson 1979:39, chapter 4).

Similarly, Paul Knitter calls for a new model of truth:

> Truth will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to *relate* to other expressions of truth and to *grow* through these relationships—truth defined not by exclusion but by relation. (Knitter 1985:219).

These proposals are difficult to assess, since it is not entirely clear just what is being advanced as the preferred alternative to exclusivistic truth. Much of the language (especially in Robinson's case) makes use of suggestive metaphors and symbols, but what one gains in literary style of one often sacrifices in perspicuity. There seem to be at least three ways to interpret the above comments:

(1) Exclusivism is to be rejected because of its narrowmindedness and unwillingness to learn from, and be informed by, other religious traditions. p. 248

(2) Exclusivism is to be rejected because of its acceptance of the principle of noncontradiction, in religion one must not be limited by the 'either/or' exclusivism of the principle of noncontradiction, but must go beyond it to recognize the dipolar nature of truth.

(3) Exclusivism is to be rejected because it fails to recognize that in spite of genuine differences in beliefs, ultimately the truth claims of the major religions do not contradict each other but are complementary.

Each of these possible interpretations will be briefly examined. I will argue that only (1) is epistemologically defensible, and that it poses no threat to a properly construed Christian exclusivism.

1. Perhaps Robinson and Knitter are indicting exclusivism simply because it is perceived to be a position which fails to recognize that no religious tradition can have exhaustive knowledge of God and that there is much that the Christian can learn from the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and others. If so, their criticism is well taken. For it would be the height of hubris for any human to claim complete or exhaustive knowledge of the divine. (Can one have *exhaustive* knowledge of anything?) Notice, however, that it does not follow from rejection of the claim to exhaustive knowledge of God that a particular religious tradition cannot be justified in claiming accurate and reliable (though admittedly not exhaustive) knowledge of God. And, while undoubtedly there are exclusivists who are narrow-minded and are unwilling to learn from other religions, there is nothing in Christian exclusivism as defined in this essay which rules out Christians learning and benefitting from interaction with other religions. A Christian exclusivist certainly can and should be willing to learn from other religious traditions.

2. But I suspect that more than this is intended in the attack upon exclusivistic truth. Although not explicitly stated in this manner, it is possible to interpret Robinson's and Knitter's comments as a rejection of exclusivistic truth because of its dependence upon the principle of noncontradiction. Strict adherence to the principle of noncontradiction is frequently regarded as a hindrance, rather than an asset, in understanding religious 'truth'. There is often a subtle (or not so subtle!) distrust of clear-cut logical categories and distinctions.

However, even in religion, the price one must pay for rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is simply too high. The principle of noncontradiction can be expressed in both its logical and ontological forms.[6] The logical principle applies to propositions,[7] and states that a p. 249 proposition cannot be both true and not true (false). The ontological principle applies to states of affairs (viz., anything that is or is not the case) and maintains that something cannot simultaneously both be and not be in the same

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[6] The classic statement of the inescapably basic nature of the principle of noncontradiction is found in Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1005b, 15–1009a. See also Copi (1978), 11. pp. 306–308.

[7] A proposition is, roughly, the *meaning* expressed by a declarative sentence. For our purposes we can think of propositions as roughly synonymous with statements. Whereas sentences are always formulated in a given language, propositions are translinguistic in that the same proposition can be expressed in a variety of languages (cf. Gorovitz *et al.*, 1979, pp. 85–98).

respect. Contradiction has a strict definition: it is the affirmation and denial of the same meaning. The price of rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is forfeiture of the possibility of meaningful affirmation or statement about anything at all—including statement about the religious ultimate. One who rejects the principle of noncontradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has abandoned a necessary condition for any coherent or meaningful position whatsoever.

That the principle of noncontradiction is inescapably basic to all thought and being can be demonstrated as follows. Suppose that someone asserts that in religious matters one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction but must advance beyond it to recognize the 'unitive pluralism' of religious truth. Let us use 'P' to stand for the statement of this position.

> P: In religion one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradication but should go beyond it to recongize the 'unitive pluralism' of religious truth.

Clearly, the one asserting P does so with the presumption that what is expressed by P is true, that the state of affairs to which P refers actually obtains. (If this is not the case, then, of course, there is little point in considering P!) And in advancing P as true he or she implicitly rejects what is incompatible with P as false. For to deny this is to imply that what is being claimed by P is both that in religion one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction *and* that in religion one should be limited by the principle of noncontradiction. But clearly this latter position is absurd. Now, if in asserting P one is implicitly rejecting what is incompatible with P as false, then one is actually appealing to the principle of noncontradiction in the assertion of P. That is, the principle is actually being presupposed in the very statement of the rejection of the principle! p. 250

It is simply impossible to refute the principle of noncontradiction since it is a necessary condition for *any* coherent, intelligible, or meaningful position whatsoever. And it is crucial to see that this is not simply a Western presupposition which is not necessarily binding in a non-Western context. The fact that Aristotle (a Greek) happens to have been the first to formulate the principle explicitly is entirely irrelevant. The principle is binding upon all humans—Chinese, Japanese, Indians, as well as Greeks. The principle is irrefutable since any attempt at refutation necessarily makes implicit appeal to the principle itself (cf. Hackett 1979:6–7, 118; Copi 1978:306f.). Significantly, no less a critic of exclusivism than R. Panikkar admits the exclusive nature of truth:

> A believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his religion to be true. Now, the claim to truth has a certain built-in exclusivity. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true. And if a certain human tradition claims to offer a universal context for truth, anything contrary to that 'universal truth' will have to be declared false (Panikkar 1978:xiv).

3. It is possible to interpret the earlier comments of Knitter and Robinson as not calling for rejection of the principle of noncontradiction, but as advocating the position that although beliefs among the various religions may initially appear to be contradictory but are complementary. Exclusivism is then to be rejected since it naively maintains that there are contradictions between, say, the basic beliefs of Christianity and Buddhism when in reality this is not the case.

This is an increasingly popular position today, and it finds its most persuasive spokesmen among those who accept what Paul Knitter calls the 'theocentric model' of the relation among religions. In addition to Knitter, W. Cantwell Smith, J. A. T. Robinson, R. Panikkar, S. Samartha, and J. Hick are articulate apologists for this view. Roughly, the theocentric position holds that ultimately it is the one divine reality who is at the centre

of reflection and devotion in all the various religions, and that no single tradition can legitimately claim superiority or definitive truth. While readily admitting significant differences among beliefs in the various traditions, it is maintained that ultimately all the major religious traditions are authentic historically and culturally conditioned responses to the same divine reality.

Space limitations prevent consideration in depth of this proposal here. However, several brief comments are in order. Since the theocentric model is a comprehensive theory about all the major religious traditions its adequacy will be a function of at least two p. 251 factors: (i) the accuracy with which it reflects and the ease with which it accommodates the various traditions, and (ii) the internal consistency and plausibility of the theory itself. I have argued elsewhere that this model is seriously deficient in both respects (Netland 1986). In particular, I have argued that the theocentric model fails as a general explanation of religious pluralism, since it is forced to deal with troublesome exclusivistic doctrines (e.g., *satori* in Zen Buddhism and the doctrine of the incarnation in Christianity) by reinterpreting them so as to eliminate problematic elements. But such reinterpretation actually distorts the respective traditions.

Further, the theocentric position is logically committed to the position that the many different conceptions of the divine or religious ultimate (Allah, Shiva, Krishna, Yahweh, Nirvana, Sunyatta, etc.) are all various culturally and historically conditioned images of the same single divine reality. This entails that term such as 'Allah', 'Jesus Christ', 'Krishna', 'Shiva', 'Nirvana', and 'Emptiness' ultimately all have the same referent, although the connotations of the respective terms may differ. However, the implausibility of this position becomes clear when one carefully considers the meanings of these terms as they are used in their respective traditions. It is difficult indeed to avoid concluding that the ontological implications of the Judeo-Christian image of the divine as Yahweh, who is ontologically distinct from, and independent of, the created world, are incompatible with the ontological monism of the notion of Nirguna Brahman from Advaita Vedanta, or the monistic idealism of the Yogacara school of Buddhism.

Interestingly, even Harold Coward, hardly an advocate of exclusivism, recognizes the difficulty posed by traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and Yogacara Buddhism for the theocentric model. 'Christian theologians, even those with considerable exposure to Buddhism and Hinduism, seem almost wilfully to turn a blind eye to this problem' (Coward 1985:45).

EXCLUSIVISM AND PROPOSITIONAL TRUTH

The notion of truth operative in Christian exclusivism has been attacked from yet another perspective. Exclusivism is based upon the idea that *beliefs* are integral to religious traditions and that religious beliefs are either true or false. But a number of recent thinkers has argued that this emphasis upon beliefs and their accompanying truth value exhibits profound confusion over the nature of religious faith and practice. In this connection perhaps no one has been as influential as P. 252 the Islamic scholar and historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith's many writings are always stimulating and provide much material for reflection and discussion. Our concern here is primarily with his attack upon exclusivism because of its dependence upon the notion of propositional truth and his own alternative theory of religious truth as personal truth.

Smith is insistent that truth and falsity, as generally understood, are inapplicable to religious traditions.

> Further, I would contend that man's religious life is liberated, not devastated, when it is recognized that 'a religion' cannot in and of itself be true or false. The notion that a given

> religion may be true, or even more, that it may not be true, has caused untold mischief. Or again, that one religion is true while another is false; or equally misleading, that all religions are equally true (which is, of course, nonsense). We must learn that this is not where religious truth and falsity lie. Religions, either simply or together, cannot be true or false—as one rejoices to recognize once one is emancipated from supposing that there are such things in our universe (Smith 1962:322).
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> It is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity is true, as an abstract system, something 'out there' impersonally subsisting, with which we can take comfort in being linked—its effortless truth justifying us and giving us status. Christianity, I would suggest, is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather, it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar, as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in actual existence (Smith 1967:67–68).

There are two reasons for Smith's rejection of the notion that religions can be true or false. First, he claims that it is a serious error to think of 'a religion' as a distinct, 'systematic religious entity, conceptually identifiable, and characterizing a distinct community' (Smith 1962: 119; cf. also 1981b:93–94). Rather than thinking in terms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity as distinct religious systems, it is more helpful to concentrate upon the personal faith of religious individuals, which collectively makes up the religious history of humankind. Second, Smith holds that when we speak of truth in religion we must not think in terms of the truth and falsity of religions or religious beliefs as such but rather of the personal truth of religious faith.

We cannot here consider Smith's thesis that it is a confusion to think in terms of 'a religion', or of distinct religions.[8] But we should observe p. 253 that even if it is granted that the notion of a religion as a distinct entity is somehow mistaken, the problem of the status of religious beliefs and conflicting truth claims in religion still remains. For we would still have individuals who accept and propagate certain beliefs, dogmas, teachings, and the like, and presumably these are all accepted by the individuals in question as true. We would still have, for example, Augustine maintaining that an omnipotent God exists who created the universe *ex nihilo* and Vasubandhu asserting that it is simply the product of karmic effect. So simply shifting attention from religions as such to the religious orientation of individuals does not dispose of the question of the truth value of the religious beliefs of believers.

What does concern us here, however, is Smith's contention that when the adjective 'true' is applied to religion, it must be understood not as propositional truth but as personal truth. For this constitutes the heart of his attack upon exclusivism.

> Truth and falsity are often felt in modern times to be properties or functions of statements or propositions: whereas the present proposal is that much is to be gained by seeing them rather, or anyway by seeing them also, and primarily, as properties or functions of persons … The very suggestion that truth is not an inert and impersonal observable but that truth means truth for me, for you, is challenging … I particularly wish to query the vision that it is legitimate or helpful to regard truth, and falsity, as pertaining to statements considered apart from the person who makes them or about whom they are made (Smith 1974:20, 29, 31).
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> Religious traditions cannot be dubbed true or false, in the sense of simplistic logic. They can be seen as less or more true in the sense of enabling those who look at life and the universe through their patterns to perceive smaller or larger, less important or more important, areas of reality, to formulate and to ponder less or more significant issues, to act less or more truly, less or more truly be (Smith 1981b:94).

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[8] But see the incisive critique of Smith by Niniam Smart (1974:45–47).

> The truth of anything that pertains to man lies—has lain, historically—not sheerly in that thing, but in man's involvement with it (Smith 1981b:67).
>
> Truth, I submit, is a humane, not an objective, concept. It does not lie in propositions (Smith 1981b:190).

Unfortunately, Smith never provides a clear definition of just what is meant by personal truth, but what is intended seems to be something like the following: The locus of truth is not propositions, statements, or beliefs but persons. Religious truth does not reflect correspondence with reality so much as it signifies integrity and faithfulness in a person, authenticity in one's life, or existentially appropriating certain beliefs in one's life and conduct. p. 254

> Human conduct, in word or deed, is the nexus between man's inner life and the surrounding world. Truth at the personalistic level is that quality by which both halves of that relationship are chaste and appropriate, are true (Smith 1974:26).

Clearly there is a strong moral element in personalistic truth. 'There is no room here for that kind of truth that leaves unaffected the moral character and private behaviour of those who know it' (Smith 1974:37). Personal truth is not something abstract and detached from one's own life; it demands existential appropriation. 'No statement might be accepted as true that had not been inwardly appropriated by its author' (Smith 1974:35). Further, there is nothing static or unchanging about personal truth. Beliefs—and even religious traditions—can *become true*, or might be 'true for me but false for you'. A religious tradition '… becomes more or less true in the case of particular persons as it informs their lives and their groups and shapes and nurtures their faith' (Smith 1981b:187).

Acceptance of personal truth has far-reaching implications for exclusivism. For instead of regarding truth and falsity as properties of propositions and beliefs which are accepted by believers in the various traditions, truth will be regarded as a dynamic, changing product of the faith of individuals. The assumption that religious beliefs are integral to religious traditions, that they have objective truth value and that sometimes beliefs from different traditions conflict with each other—an assumption basic to Christian exclusivism—will have to be rejected as grossly misleading. No longer would it make sense to speak of the truth of, say, the doctrine of the incarnation without also making reference to the response of faith to that doctrine. The doctrine could only be said to be *true for someone*, and it would only be true to the extent that someone existentially appropriated belief in the doctrine.

What are we to make of this proposal? We should begin by observing that Smith's emphasis upon the subjective, personal dimension of religious phenomena is quite legitimate: religion is a complex dynamic which is centred around the religious faith of individuals. He correctly points out that religion cannot be reduced to a tidy set of religious beliefs. And our concern in studying religion should not be simply an academic interest in beliefs themselves but in understanding the comprehensive religious orientation of believers. Further, it is possible that he intends his proposal to be simply a reminder that in religious matters mere intellectual assent to propositions is insufficient: one must appropriate beliefs so that one's character and conduct are significantly altered (we are to be *doers* of the Word and not hearers only!). If so, this is certainly a necessary p. 255 reminder, even if it is somewhat misleadingly presented as a theory of truth. But I suspect that more is intended than simply this healthy exhortation. For throughout his writings personalistic truth is presented as the preferred alternative to propositional truth. However, there is a pervasive ambiguity in his discussion which allows for at least three possible interpretations:

(4) Personal truth can legitimately be applied to religion whereas propositional truth cannot.
(5) Both personal and propositional truth can be applied to religion, but personal truth is somehow more basic and fundamental than propositional truth.
(6) Both personal and propositional truth can be applied to religion, but propositional truth is more basic than personal truth.

I will argue that only (6) is epistemologically acceptable, and that on such an interpretation the problem of conflicting truth claims—and thus exclusivism—is still with us.

The major difficulty with (4) and (5) is that the epistemologically most basic notion of truth in any realm whatsoever is that of propositional truth. Of course, 'truth' and 'true' can have a wide variety of meanings in ordinary use: we can thus say 'the purse is true alligator', or 'he is a true Democrat', or 'Jesus is the Truth', or 'her music is full of truth', or 'his speech just doesn't have the ring of truth', and so on. And it may even be that something like the concept of personal truth is indispensable to understanding religious phenomena. But what Smith fails to recognize is that there is an important sense in which propositional truth is logically basic and is presupposed by all other meanings of 'true'.[9]
p. 256

This can be illustrated as follows. Let us use 'S' to stand for the statement of Smith's theory of personal truth.

> In religion, truth is to be understood primarily as personal, that is, as having its locus in persons who satisfactorily appropriate religious beliefs.

It is crucial to see that if p. is offered as something which we should accept as true (and surely this is Smith's intent), then it is itself dependent upon the notion of prepositional truth. For p. expresses a proposition which makes a claim about reality; it asserts that reality is such that truth is primarily personal and has its locus in persons who satisfactorily appropriate religious beliefs. And in proposing p. Smith is suggesting that we accept it because it is *true*, that is, that reality actually is as the proposition expressed by p. asserts it to be. It is important to see here that the sense in which p. is presumed to be true is *not* that of personal truth. For if p. were said to be true only in the sense of personal truth, then it would be true only insofar as you or I appropriate it to allow it to impact significantly upon our lives. p. might then be true for Smith but false for me, or true for me but false for you. But clearly this is not what Professor Smith has in mind. Thus in advancing his theory he is implicitly presuming that p. is true in the logically basic sense of prepositional truth.

Further, the suggestion that religious beliefs *become true* to the extent that they are internalized and appropriated—if meant to exclude the notion of prepositional truth—is

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[9] Smith has little use for what he disparagingly calls 'Western logic': 'Modern western logic, I myself am pretty sure, though serviceable for computers, is in other ways inept and is particularly ill-suited, it seems, for thinking about spiritual matters' (Smith 1981a:201). Unfortunately, Smith gives little evidence of understanding what logic is all about. While there is a sense in which we can speak of 'Western logic' or 'Indian logic', etc., the most basic principles of logic—such as the principles of noncontradiction and identity—are normative, universal, and transcultural in that they are necessary conditions of all rational activity and communication, regardless of the culture or language in which these occur. One must distinguish between rejecting and refuting these principles. While there have been individuals in Western and non-Western cultures who have rejected the principles of noncontradiction or identity, no one has refuted them, since any attempt at refutation necessarily makes appeal to these very principles. For more on the objectivity of logic see Roger Trigg (1973); Hilary Patnam (1981: chapter 5); and the classic work by Edmund Husserl (1970: vol.1. chapters 1–8).

confused. For one will appropriate such beliefs only if he or she already accepts them as true in a nonpersonalistic, or prepositional, sense. That is, the belief that Allah is a righteous judge will only 'become true' in a personal sense if the Muslim first accepts the proposition expressed by 'Allah is a righteous judge' as true. To put this in other terms: we might admit that 'true' can be used to mean 'authentic', 'genuine', 'faithful', and so on. Religious truth would then be a quality of life in the believer such that there are no glaring gaps between what one professes and the manner in which one lives.

To say that 'Allah is a righteous judge' is true would then be to recognize that a particular Muslim's life and conduct is congruous with belief that Allah is a righteous judge. But this presupposes that the Muslim accepts and appropriates not only a set of practices and a manner of life but also a set of beliefs and values which taken together articulate a comprehensive perspective on reality. And such beliefs will be accepted in the first place because the Muslim regards them as true. That is, as accurately portraying the way reality actually is. Thus personal truth should not be regarded as an alternative to prepositional p. 257 truth, for it presupposes prepositional truth (cf. Wainwright 1984:358f. and Wiebe 1981:212f).

Donald Wiebe correctly notes that Cantwell Smith seems to be confusing the question of truth with that of response to the truth, or with the existentialist concern with 'authentic existence', of not living a lie (Wiebe 1981:213). But the truth value of a belief or proposition and the degree to which one allows that belief to impact upon one's life are two very different things.

We should note in conclusion that Smith's theory also fails to recognize that propositions are inseparable from religious belief and commitment. To be sure, 'belief' and 'proposition' are synonymous, and there is more to believing than simply giving mental assent to a proposition. But in believing one always believes *something*, and *what* one believes is a proposition. Believing may involve more than simple assent to propositions but it cannot be reduced to something less than that. Wiebe correctly notes that 'talk of truth in religion must concern itself primarily with belief [doctrine]' (Wiebe 1981:185). The fact is that adherents of the various religions believe certain propositions about the religious ultimate, humanity, and the nature of the universe to be true. And where these beliefs conflict—as they occasionally do—we have the problem of conflicting truth claims.

CONCLUSION

We have critically examined several influential arguments which have been levelled against Christian exclusivism. I have argued that, properly construed, there is nothing in exclusivism itself with demands an intolerant or insensitive approach to other religious traditions. Further, there is nothing in the concept of tolerance which is incompatible with holding that some of the beliefs of other traditions are false. Similarly, I have argued that attempts to discredit exclusivism by showing the inadequacy of an exclusivistic, prepositional understanding of truth cannot succeed. To the contrary, any adequate understanding of religious truth must include the notions of the exclusivity and prepositional nature of truth.

Of course, we must recognize that there is much more to religion than mere religious beliefs. And certainly religious traditions can be appreciated and evaluated on a wide variety of grounds. We might for example, evaluate them on the basis of their historic record in contributing toward promotion of literacy or medical care, or on the basis of their tendency to provide social cohesion and stability, or to promote justice and equality, and the like. But I suggest that the most p. 258 important question is not what a religion

does for society, but rather whether what it affirms about the nature of reality is in fact the case. The most significant question we can ask of any religious tradition is whether its fundamental claims are true.[10]

If we are to take seriously the concepts and beliefs of the various religious and portray them accurately, and also have a view which is epistemologically sound, I do not see how we can avoid something very much like the traditional Christian exclusivist position. And if the central claims of the Christian faith are true—as I am convinced that they are—then it follows that those claims made by other traditions which are incompatible with Christianity are false. As the late Bishop Stephen Neill put it,

> The Christian faith claims for itself that it is the only form of faith for men. By its own claim to truth it casts the shadow of imperfect truth on every other system. This Christian claim is naturally offensive to modern man, brought up in the atmosphere of relativism, in which tolerance is regarded almost as the highest of the virtues. But we must not suppose that this claim to universal validity is something that can be quietly removed from the Gospel without changing it into something entirely different from what it is. (Neill 1984:30).

Christian exclusivism does not entail that *none* of the claims made by other religious traditions are true. But what it does deny is that beliefs of other traditions can be true when they are incompatible with those derived from Scripture. Further, as noted earlier, Christian exclusivism certainly cannot boast of exhaustive knowledge of God. There is a vast sum of knowledge about God and the world of which we are unaware. And finally, there is no room for exclusivism, properly understood, for any pride or arrogant triumphalism. All of us are, at best, no more than sinners saved by God's grace. Nor should we forget that adherents of other religious traditions are, like us, created in God's image and the objects of God's limitless and unfathomable love. Humility and genuine respect should characterize our interaction with those of other faiths.

But it is a serious error to presume that such humility and respect demand glossing over the question of truth. p. 259

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[10] Stanley Samartha makes the curious statement that 'the question of truth is indeed important, but God's love is even more important … Love takes precedence over truth' (1981: 54–55). But surely this is unacceptable as it stands. Important as the love of God is, the concept of God's love would have no relevance for anyone apart from the truth of certain key propositions—e.g., that there is a God, that God loves all persons, that God's love is supremely manifested in the incarnation, etc.

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Herald Netland serves in Japan under the Overseas Missions Department of the Evangelical Free Church of America. p. 261