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Thus Jesus announced the kingdom over which neither Solomon—the ‘king of peace’—nor any other israelite king had reigned. Jesus showed himself to be God’s anointed, God’s representative, and God’s Son in his conquest of the forces of evil which had prevailed over the cosmos.<sup>44</sup> Betz says Jesus’ miracles are essentially ‘victories over death and the devil’.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Old Testament clearly stands behind Jesus’ working of miracles. Jesus was the Messiah who was bringing the longed-for peace to God’s creation. In so doing he was the unique Son of God. But the leaders, whom Jesus would have had recognize his Sonship ([Mk. 1:44](#)), were unwilling to accept him. The kingdom was thus taken from them to be given to another generation and time ([Matt. 21:43](#)).

These concepts of peace, sonship, and king flow together in Isaiah’s prophecy. He says the ‘son’, the ‘prince of peace’ is the one who will be born to sit on David’s throne, whose kingdom of peace will be without end, and who will be called ‘the Mighty God’ ([Isa. 9:6–7](#)).

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# Varieties of Pluralism

Paul Schrottenboer

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*With the emergence of Christian theologies of inter-religious dialogue and the increasing militancy of non-Christian religions, the concept of pluralism is in the forefront in contemporary theological agenda. The need to avoid the danger of syncretism, while maintaining the unique and absolute claims of Jesus, calls for a creative approach to other faiths. Paul Schrottenboer is former General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council and a long-standing member of the WEF Theological Commission. Here he discusses four aspects of pluralism from a broader perspective: cultural, religious, political and ecclesiastical—and returns the reader to the basic issues in order to develop the valid theology of pluralism which is needed in our time.*

Editor

## INTRODUCTION

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<sup>44</sup> Jesus said Satan was the ‘ruler of the cosmos’ ([Jn. 12:31](#); [14:30](#); [16–11](#)).

<sup>45</sup> Otto Betz, p. 69.

Without variety life would be monotonous, uninteresting, poor. Variety gives richness, potentiality and flavour to life. It is, we say, the spice of life. Dr. Abraham Kuyper referred to this aspect of our experience when in 1869 he declared that 'uniformity is the curse of modern life'. Among the many ideas he advocated was that of pluriformity. He applied it both to church and to state.

Life's variety not only gives pleasure but also produces tensions and conflicts, for with many differences we do not know how to cope in a calm and peaceful way. All too often they lead to open strife and permanent alienation.

A word much in use today to express differences is 'pluralism', a term that itself has a variety of contexts and connotations. The term 'pluralism' is often used imprecisely, without reference to the context in which it is used. When this happens the reader does not always know what the writer had in mind.

Another closely related term is 'plurality'. The difference between [p. 111](#) plurality and pluralism is that the latter is too much of a good thing. What this means should become apparent in what follows.

Another term closely related to pluralism is 'toleration'. The two terms differ, in that toleration describes an *attitude* which allows for differences, and pluralism refers to a *settled argument* where toleration and equality prevail.

The fact that we can speak of the many kinds of pluralism, and that it affects so many life zones, indicates that our society as a whole is pluralist. The sameness that once characterized our societies has largely disappeared.

Pluralism is seen by some as an evil to be eradicated where it exists and a plague to be avoided where it has not yet put in an appearance. Others see pluralism as the most just arrangement that society can hope for and believe it must exist not only in society but also in the church if harmony is to prevail.

It is the aim of this essay to demonstrate the need to distinguish clearly between areas or life zones of human existence in order to evaluate how pluralism functions in each. Pluralism in politics is quite different from pluralism in the church and our evaluation will differ accordingly. Moreover neither cultural or religious pluralism (both of which cover the entire spectrum of human existence); can be subsumed under either 'politics' or 'church'. In this essay we shall limit our comments to culture, religion, politics and the church.

## CULTURAL PLURALISM

Christianity from its inception has been a multi-cultural religion. As such it differs from its predecessor Judaism which was tied to the Hebrew culture. Not exclusively, for the Old Testament writings were translated in about the year 200 BC into Greek in what came to be called the Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible into a vernacular language.

At Pentecost the gospel was proclaimed in all sixteen languages which were represented by the people gathered at the feast in Jerusalem. This was not the result of a grand scheme of the disciples of Jesus; it occurred by fiat of the Holy Spirit who gave the gift of tongues to the followers of Jesus. Pentecost was the decisive breakthrough of the mono-cultural religion of the followers of Abraham whom God had singled out, separated for centuries from the other peoples of the world, preserved through many dynasties and finally used as the vehicle to bring forth the Christ who would become the Saviour and Judge of all nations, not just one. [p. 112](#)

Not only would the message of Jesus and the resurrection be proclaimed in all the languages of the then world, but people of every tongue would be accepted into the Christian church on an equal footing. This was the lesson Peter had to learn in his

encounter with Cornelius at Joppa ([Acts 10](#)) and the entire church was led to accept (when it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to them) that Jew and Gentile should be accorded equal status in the new fellowship of people who were saved by grace, not by performing works prescribed by law ([Acts 15](#)).

Again, this was not a discovery of the leaders of the early church. It was rather a conviction forced upon them by the Spirit of God in special revelation, much against their will. At Joppa Peter was finally convinced that when God made all foods clean his truth was marching on beyond the earlier particularism (for Jews only) to take into his saving arms people of every nation. Only then was Peter ready to baptize Gentile believers. How could he argue against the coming of the Spirit upon the band of followers of the way in Cornelius' house?

What the church experienced already at Pentecost it has continued to put into practice. Nowhere, perhaps, does this appear more clearly than in the way in which the oral reports of the life and sayings of Jesus and of the early expansion of the church were recorded. Jesus had spoken in Aramaic, the everyday language of the Jews after the Exile, but when his disciples wrote the Gospels and the Apostles sent their letters to the young churches, they wrote them all in Greek. At that very early age it became apparent that the new movement that was based on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth would not be limited to the Hebrew and Aramaic languages which only a small percentage of the people in the Roman Empire spoke. The vehicle of transmission for the Good News was the world language, namely *koine* Greek.

That Greek would be the language of the church for only a short while, and that even at that time only partially, was already decided at Pentecost when the gospel was heard by the people, everyone in his or her own language. The church took its cue from Pentecost and, following the Holy Spirit's example, has continued to proclaim the gospel in the vernacular languages. Even the hold of Latin upon the Roman Catholic Church has in recent times been broken.

This stress on using every language as a vehicle of transmitting the gospel has characterized the church until this day and has been most prominent in those circles which stress transcultural evangelism. The need to translate the Scriptures into the many languages was even [p.113](#) elevated to a part of the church's confession in the Westminster Confession of Faith (I, viii).

Prof. Lamim Sanneh makes the point in 'Pluralism and Christian Commitment' (*Theology Today*, April 1988) that Christian commitment is compatible with genuine pluralism. He observes that the translation work of the Christian missionary movement has led to the Scriptures being presented in more than 1,800 languages. The *missio Dei* is not in conflict with but consistent with the maintaining of cultural integrity. 'In centring on the primacy of God's word, Christian translators invested the vernacular with consecrated power, lifting obscure tribes to the level of scriptural heritage and into the stream of universal world history' (p. 27). Says he, 'If the argument is pressed that mission was wrong because it interfered with the cultures of others, then the evidence on the ground that mission in fact bolstered indigenous cultures should be sufficient to answer it' (p. 29).

It must be granted that for many decades the Protestant mission was reluctant to use the entire culture of the receptor people and in fact often imposed elements of the culture of the missionary, but of recent time it has become apparent that God uses every culture as an instrument not only to transmit but to live the Gospel. Today the principle that there is no absolute culture that is normative for all others is working through to relativize Western culture which has been the garb that has clothed most of the trans-cultural

mission work done in the past few centuries. Few still claim that people in the Third World need to be westernized when they declare themselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

With its stance of a multi-cultural transmission of the Christian message, of relativizing the Hebrew, Greek and Western cultures, the Christian religion stands in contrast to both modern Judaism and Islam. Orthodox Jews still insist on the priority of Hebrew; Muslims on Arabic. In the Synagogue and in the Mosque only the sacred languages are legitimate. No Christians are allowed to visit the Islamic holy city Mecca.

The Christian religion stands out among the other world religions as one that holds that Christian commitment to God, the faith of Jesus Christ, involves commitment to cultural forms in their essentially plural relativism. Christian commitment, as Sanneh says, is thus rewarded with a cultural pluralism of the most lively and diverse kind (p. 32).

The importance of recognizing cultural pluralism in the transmission of the gospel may be seen in the fact that culture (which is the product of human communal work that gives form to the way we live) shapes p. 114 both the tongue that tells and the ear that hears the gospel. It is the indispensable vehicle of communicating the Good News. It is that whole social environment in which and through which we seek to obey the truth of the gospel.

When the gospel comes to a people and they respond to it, the Good News impacts on the culture in two ways: it judges it by purging it of unacceptable elements and it transforms it, making it a fit instrument for the Master's use. The gospel, as it were, takes possession of the culture.

Because of the dual impact of judgement and transformation, there can be no identification of the gospel with one or other culture (for here the medium is not the message), nor can the culture of the receptor people be by-passed in bringing the gospel.

Space does not permit us to go into greater detail on how gospel and culture interact.<sup>1</sup> But it should be clear that pluralism in culture is not an obstacle to be deplored, but an opportunity to be grasped.

## PLURALISM IN RELIGION

The word religion usually refers to institutions and acts of worship. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for the church. As such it is one of several areas of life. At times it is understood as one of two fundamental life-dimensions, called the 'sacred'. It is then contrasted with 'nature', the secular area. Neither of these meanings is what we have in mind.

Religion as we now speak of it is that broad-as-life directedness of human existence that forces human beings to deal with God and his revelation and to serve him, or whatever or whoever takes his place.

This comprehensive meaning of religion was understood by the monastics who joined together in religious orders which controlled every aspect of their lives. But over time this comprehensive usage fell into disuse and religion was reduced to a part of human experience and later was reduced even more to one institution among many.

Religion as we speak of it is service, response. Man himself is not a substance, that is, something which, as Descartes said, needs nothing outside of himself to exist, but a

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<sup>1</sup> The contextualization of the gospel is dealt with in the *RES Theological Forum*, 'Contextualizing the Gospel', November 1987, Vol. XV, No. 4. The papers given at the RES 1988 Theology Conference in Harare (in the volume *Christ's Rule: A Light for Every Corner*) dealt with the same theme. Both are available from the REC Secretariat.

response being, totally and [p. 115](#) permanently dependent upon the God who made him, continues to uphold him and will one day call him to give account.

The Scriptures speak of man as the image of God. And whatever else this word conveys, it means that man is not self-existent but the reflection and representative of his Maker. It is instructive to note that the Genesis story tells us both that God made Adam and Eve in his image and that Adam had a son in his image, Seth ([Genesis 5:3](#)). Thus just as Adam could take his son in his arms and see that he looked like his father, so God could observe Adam as he was busy in the garden and see in him a reflection of himself.

Religion in this full, authentic sense means the total commitment and service of man. It is not one kind of activity along side of others, nor is it one area of life in the midst of other areas; in its Goddirectedness it is a way of life. Life is religion, *Gottesdienst*.

Plurality in religion means that there is in humanity a variety of total commitments: e.g. the Christian, the Hindu, the Islamic, the Buddhist, the humanist, African traditional religions and others.

Religious plurality has been a fact of life since humankind was early differentiated between the 'children of God' and the 'sons of man' ([Genesis 6:1, 2](#)). From the beginning man has had the tendency to turn from God to idols. From the worship of idols God called Abraham; from the worship of them God continued to call his people: 'You shall have no other gods before me' ([Exodus 20:3](#); [Deut 5:7](#)).

Religious pluralism (which as we shall note is not the same as plurality of religions) has become a topic for much discussion in recent time for a number of reasons. One of these is the recent mixing of people. Time was when people lived and remained in areas where nearly all the inhabitants held the same religious commitment. Thus the Hindus lived in India, the Muslims in the Islamic lands and the adherents of African traditional religion in their own part of Africa. For centuries in Europe after the Reformation Catholics tended to live in areas with a Catholic government and Protestants in Protestant lands. The one exception was the Jews who were scattered around the world in the diaspora; but even they tended to congregate in their own neighbourhoods. Today, thanks in large part to Western colonialism, the Christian mission and modern transportation, adherents of opposing religions exist side by side not only in the universities of all Western lands but in society as a whole. This movement of people goes far to explain why religious pluralism has become so prominent as an issue today.

In the West the prevailing attitude is: live and let live. Each religious community has equal right to the benefits of society along with other [p. 116](#) communities. It was not always so, nor is it true in every country today. In the time of the early church Caesar claimed that he was God and required of all his subjects to recognize that claim. At that time the Christians advanced the counter claim that Jesus is Lord and many paid the supreme sacrifice for that confession (cf. [Acts 17:7](#) for a direct reference to the conflict).

When in the beginning of the Constantine era (4th. century) Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire, the roles were reversed. Now the adherents of the non-Christian religions were given second rate status. They were tolerated but not considered equal.

Later, after the 16th. century Reformation, the idea prevailed for a century or so that every land should have its own religion (e.g. Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed). Accordingly, people who did not share the religion required by the rulers could either convert, or leave, or stay and suffer the consequences.

Today there is not only a mixing of religious communities in the West, but also a resurgence of non-Christian religions. At the turn of this century the other religions were seen to be in retreat and the widely held expectation was that eventually they would lose their vitality and strength, and all the while the Christian religion would advance.



That idea gets little support today. The power of the Islamic states, in which religion and politics are coextensive, is enough to convince one that Islam is undergoing a resurgence, with the help of petro-dollars. Likewise, Buddhism and Hinduism enjoy new life and engage in counter mission. Today on all sides the Christian religion is under attack—from atheistic governments, from secularists, from other religions.

We shall not at this time enter further into the practice by the state to determine or influence religion. That comes up for discussion under the section on pluralism in politics. What we should note, however, is the idea that now enjoys great strength in Western society, namely that the various world religions are all equally valid. No claim to truth can be considered absolute. This is what is usually meant by the term religious pluralism. It raises the issue whether there are many roads that lead to the Kingdom of God.

Some years ago a book appeared in the USA under the title: *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*.<sup>2</sup> It considers the question, How can p. 117 Christianity, which claims universality for its vision of God and confesses Christ's lordship over the world, live as one religious community among others which possess their own particular faith and truth claims? To this question answers are given by sixteen contributors of various theological orientations.

One answer to the question of religious pluralism comes in the form of syncretism, a position that would advance the mixing of religions, advocating in its most developed form the formation of one great world religion by incorporating into it elements of all the existing world religions.

The classic example of syncretism is the Pantheon in Rome. In this temple there is room for all the gods, but only if they all renounce the claim of exclusive access to ultimate deity and final truth.

This idea has been given more recent form in the Baha'i religion which originated in Persia and has erected its great nine-sided temple in Wilmette, Illinois, each side representing one of the great world religions. It will come as no surprise that the Baha'is have been persecuted in the Middle East by the Islamic state of Iran.

It is becoming popular to say that passages in the Bible (such as that Jesus is the only Way, that his is the only Name, that he is the one Mediator, the only Foundation and that his sacrifice of himself was once and for all time) are true for those who espouse the Christian faith. These affirmations must be understood, so it is said, as the 'language of love'. Thus, a young man may say to his bride 'You are the most beautiful woman in the World', and he means it. So too, the claim that Jesus is the one and only way to God is valid and true for Christians; but the adherent of another religion can make equal claims for the founder of that faith too.

In similar vein the Roman Catholic theologian Paul Knitter claims that since the New Testament writings were written in the expectation of the early return of Jesus Christ, all expressions about the finality of Christ were 'culturally limited'. Gregory Baum, also Roman Catholic, describes the exclusive claims as 'survival dogma', the language of power and domination. It is strange that the efforts to escape the force of the New Testament message of the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ can diverge so greatly as to call them in one instance the language of love and in another the language of domination.

We shall resist the inclination to consider at this time the question of whether the lostness of people who do not confess Christ as Saviour and Lord is compatible with the Bible's emphasis on the love of God. Suffice it to say that the Bible itself does not make a problem of what to many seems to be a contradiction. p. 118

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<sup>2</sup> *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*. G. H. Anderson and F. Stransky, editors. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981.

Space does not permit us either to consider further the question of the conflict of various truth claims. Nor can we comment on the influence of the idea of truth as relational in a subjectivist sense; and on whether such a view that a *priori* claims one religion to be true, and all others utterly false, has full biblical support.

We would observe that if the idea of religious pluralism takes hold, it will spell the demise of the Christian mission. Religious pluralism, we may conclude, is one kind that we would be most reluctant to accept.

In review, we may observe that religious *plurality* refers to the fact that there are many fundamentally different answers to the questions of human existence. A question we should consider in the section on political pluralism is how the different religious communities can live in civil peaceful coexistence.

Proponents of religious *pluralism* hold that these fundamental differences do not as *truth claims* mutually exclude one another. Those who oppose religious pluralism but recognize religious plurality hold that there can be no peaceful coexistence among conflicting claims of truth. They hold that the particularity of the Christian revelation is an essential aspect of the *skandalon* of the gospel.

## POLITICAL PLURALISM

The state is one of the public sectors in which the affairs of life in society are to be regulated by justice and are enforced by penalty and the sword. The state enjoys the right of coercion. The regulation of civil affairs is called politics or statecraft.

There is a similarity between religion and the state, namely that both are inescapable. We have observed earlier that, as the image of God, human beings cannot but respond to God in one way or other. Likewise, as inhabitants in a legal jurisdiction or state, one can choose to go from one state to another, but not from a state to a stateless condition.

This involuntary character of our involvement in the state (we are willy hilly a part of one civil jurisdiction or other) means that if there is to be true freedom and justice for all, then there must be a plurality of political options<sup>3</sup>, including the exercise of religion. The Muslim, the [p. 119](#) Jew, the Christian, the Humanist, the Buddhist and the atheist should all be accorded equal rights before the law.

This is not to say that all the opposing religious claims are as such equally valid; but it *is* to say that in a just society there must be the freedom to exercise all religions, provided that such exercise does not infringe upon the civil rights of others. A just state with a monoreligious stance is a contradiction in terms. Social justice also means that no one religion may enjoy preference over another.

The view that most adequately expresses the way in which equality of rights and opportunity may be protected for all religious groups and individuals is appropriately called 'principled pluralism'.

The society regulated by principled pluralism differs from the Islamic (sacral) state which wipes out the distinction between state and church. It must also be distinguished from the modern secular state which in the name of 'separation of church and state' seeks to abolish all influence and even the symbols of religion (the Cross, the Star of David, the Minaret) from public life. As a reaction against the infringement of the church upon the affairs of the state, adherents of the secular state seek to grant equality to all by putting the public sector out of bounds to all religions.

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<sup>3</sup> A symposium by Reformed persons of position papers and responses on Christian responsibility in government will be published in the spring of 1989 by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; it will be entitled *God and Politics; four views on reformation of civil government* (Gary Scott Smith, editor).



This view has the advantage that it grants to no religious body preference over another. It allows for no establishment of religion. In the secular society there will be no religious wars.

The flaw in this view is that, having identified religion in effect with church and cultic activities, it does not permit any expression of religion in public life. The result is a 'naked public square'.

The shortcomings of 'principled pluralism' are truly serious, for by seeking to restrict all manifestations of religion to the private sectors of church and home (and school if the parents are willing—and able—to pay double) the proponents are advocating what may be called the 'religion of secular humanism'.

As we noted earlier, man's response to God (or that which functions in his place—an idol) irresistibly functions in every sector of life, including the public sector, whether we are willing to recognize it or not. The idea of the secular state is one such response.

A prime *tenet of faith* of secular humanism is that in the really important area of life, where men and women make a living and decide the issues of society, people manage much better if they leave all their ideas of God at home. No less than the recognized religions, the unrecognized religion of secular humanism seeks to give answers to the fundamental questions of human existence. The basic conviction that man can manage best by keeping God out of public life [p. 120](#) functions as a control belief, determining what people may and may not do.

The idea of principled pluralism in politics accepts neither the idea of the sacral state, nor the halfway house that, while tolerating all, grants to one religion or denomination preference over others. It stands for full equality in civil affairs for adherents of all religions, without exception.

Nor does this kind of pluralism in statecraft opt for a secular state, which is a greater threat in the West today than the kind of politics that identifies church and state. It advocates a pluralism that is based on the principle of justice for all, in all life zones.

The basic principle is that people should exercise their religiously directed civil responsibilities in such a way that the free exercise of religion is not denied or restricted. The alternative to having to go either the way of the sacral state or the secular state is to give each and every faith community equal right and opportunity as well in public as in private. The mosque, the synagogue, the temple, and the church should all enjoy equal rights before the law. Muslims, Jews, Christians and Humanists should all share equally in tax money for education. Institutions for meeting social needs should all receive equal public protection and support, whether they are of one or other religious conviction or claim to have no faith at all. Where the policies of principled pluralism are put into effect a truly pluralist and just society can exist.

## PLURALISM IN THE CHURCH

We have observed that the Christian religion is multi-cultural. This means that neither culture nor language, nor race, nor social status are legitimate reasons to discriminate in the church against people. That which all believers have in common, and gives to all full equality, is their faith in Jesus Christ. And that one common possession is also the most basic. The church is a communion of saints. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him ([Romans 10:12](#)).

It will be apparent that when we speak of pluralism in the church we are dealing with an unusually important issue. This becomes clear when we reflect that the oneness of the church is an article of faith ('I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church'). This

oneness, moreover, is not to be thought of exclusively or primarily in terms of structure (important as that is) but in terms of agreement in faith and [p. 121](#) confession. Nowhere does this oneness appear more clearly than in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where he deplores the existing divisions and admonishes them to 'be perfectly united in mind and thought' ([1 Cor. 1:10](#)).

The question now arises whether we can in any way apply the pluralist model to the church and, if so, in what way and to what extent. Some may ask: if it works well in society, why not in the church? In what sense can we speak of a legitimate plurality of faith?

We are confronted in the New Testament with the great variety of gifts that God has given his people ([Rom. 12](#), [1 Cor. 12](#), [Eph. 4](#), [1 Pet. 4](#)). This variety is in each case seen as an enrichment of the One Body, the people of God. There should be no question that in terms of gifts that are used to enhance the life and witness of the church and manifest more clearly its oneness, a plurality is much to be desired. But then it should be clear that these differences are for the common good and that they build the church ([1 Cor. 12:7; 14:4](#)).

However, uniformity, a oneness of form, is not an option for the thriving church. Uniformity would have a deadening influence upon the life of God's people.

Variety in the church, including the full range of cultural plurality, must serve the unity. The use of all the many different gifts should be, as Paul says, 'for the common good'. As Peter states, it should lead to the praise of God ([1 Pet. 4:11](#)).

When we turn from the picture that the New Testament presents of the one body and its many members to the fractured christendom all around us, the question arises: Is there any way to justify the many denominations on the ground that a pluriformity of churches, like the interaction of the members of the body, enhances the greatness of the *Una Sancta*? Can it be said that in the great number of church communions the multiform wisdom of God ([Eph. 3:10](#)) is manifested? Or is it clouded over? If the church appears as a broken vase, does it make sense to speak of a pluriform vase?

Abraham Kuyper propounded the idea of the pluriformity of the church as a means to justify the existence of many denominations. He found a basis for this idea in the great differentiation there is in creation.

Kuyper, as well as Herman Bavinck, saw the 16th. century as the age of the pluriformity of the church. At the time, Kuyper claimed, the early Reformers were not aware of the transition then transpiring from a uniform to a multiform church because they had an unshakeable conviction that their confession 'bore an absolute and exclusive character'. The thought prevailed then that the truth, which is [p. 122](#) absolute, must result in a oneness of form and content. The time was not ripe for the idea of a pluriformity of churches. People still dreamed that the oneness of the church could be restored.

The events of history shook the church out of its dream. In the face of many church communions, not in fellowship with one another, the idea of a pluriformity of churches along the line of denominational structures evolved. Kuyper said it in this way: 'It is our firm conviction that pluriformity is a phase of development to which the church had to come visibly into view' (*Gemene Gratie*, Vol. III, p. 231).<sup>4</sup>

Kuyper found additional support for his idea of pluriformity in the inadequacy of our apprehension of the truth. Since all our subjective responses in appropriating the truth are incomplete, pluriformity in the church is the result. G. C. Berkouwer's observation is

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<sup>4</sup> In fairness to Kuyper it should be noted that he immediately added these words: 'But pluriformity [in the church] has come into existence historically in a way that affronts the sense of unity. If sin had not corrupted everything, then pluriformity would have developed without the loss of the unity, even if that unity could not federally be found.'

that the idea had its source, not in a study of the oneness of the church, but in the ‘organic’ (a term dear to Kuyper’s heart) development of history (*De Kerk* I, Dogmatische Studien, p. 69).

We should note that the church, unlike the state, is a voluntary association. No one is forced to become or remain a member. Proselytism, seen as a form of coercion (monetary or otherwise) to join a church is generally (and rightly) seen as illegitimate. A voluntary association has the right to set standards of membership without discriminating against those who choose not to agree, but the standards that are set should be derived from the nature of the church.

The church in its nature is a confessing community. This Jesus made abundantly clear when, after Peter had made his confession ‘You are the Christ the Son of the Living God’, Jesus replied, ‘Upon this rock I will build my church’ ([Matt. 16:18](#)). Apart from his confession Peter cannot be called the rock.

The voices that speak of pluriformity as a justification of the multitude of denominations, most of which do not recognize the others,<sup>5</sup> are not numerous today. The brokenness of christendom cannot be minimized to a difference in form. It can be said without fear of contradiction that the force of the Bible’s teaching on the [p. 123](#) essential oneness of the church and the need to manifest this oneness has been stressed in our age more than ever before.

Pluralism is a problem as well for denominations and local congregations as for the ecumenical movement. It is on the local level where differences in faith become most painful. In looking at the idea of pluralism in the church, we face the issue whether, and if so to what extent, conflicting views regarding the content and expression of the faith can be tolerated or approved.

The trend toward plurality (I do not say pluralism)<sup>6</sup> is manifest in churches far and near. Denominations generally are much more diverse today than they used to be. Differences cut across denominational boundaries, making them less distinct than they once were. Even in small churches of less than 50,000 members, deep differences have surfaced and groups of ‘concerned persons’ have arisen.

It makes good sense to distinguish between differences that do not affect the unity in the true faith and those that touch the heart of the gospel. But does this mean that only those articles of faith that ‘touch the heart of the gospel’ allow no difference of opinion? If so this means a change from the traditional view.

In Reformed thinking the church’s confessional standards have been understood as forms of unity, and it has been held that these standards in their entirety mark the limits of permissible differences in teaching and preaching. Reformed churches have therefore felt obliged to call a halt to the spreading of ideas that are out of harmony with any part of the standards that office bearers are asked to uphold.

It should be observed that, once the standards as a whole no longer set the limits, there is no clear line of demarcation between permissible and impermissible differences. Moreover, there is an observable tendency that leads from the one to the other, from the acceptable to the unacceptable.

This means that the churches will do well if they do not simply acquiesce in the *status quo* in which conflicting differences exist, even if such differences do not call in question central gospel truths. The churches will do better to try to resolve such differences as

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<sup>5</sup> The *Christian World Encyclopedia* lists 6,111 denominations in the world, of which 3,840 are unrelated to any world conciliar body (p. 794).

<sup>6</sup> When we speak of a plurality in this connection we *recognize* the existing difference: when we used the word pluralism in this context we refer to the *approval* of the differences.

cause conflict in order to clear the way for straightforward testimony and more effective service, both of which can easily be hindered where [p. 124](#) they experience internal conflict. Rather than turn the distress into a virtue, the distress should be the stimulus to reach the common mind that the Apostle set as a goal.

In answer to the question, Where should we draw the line? it will be necessary to keep in mind that the churches' confessions are subordinate standards, under and not alongside of Scripture. It should also be kept in mind that the church should be on the move, as its people, led by the Spirit, are led in community to reformulate its views, including those expressed in the confessions.

Here we touch on a crucial point. The church is a communion of believing saints and therefore its scholars, no less than the others, should be a community of faith-ful academics who lead the church so that as a whole they come to new insights. In such a common search, as in the normative model of the New Testament ([Rom. 12](#), [1 Cor. 12](#)) the diversity of viewpoint should serve the common good. This can happen only if it is clear at every step that the views that are propounded came from a sincere desire to understand and apply the gospel truth, the things 'most assuredly believed' by God's people.

The church is very much like a fragile vase that can so easily be shattered. It would appear that only God can put together again the shattered fragments of the world church today. This should not, however, cause us to turn away from the task of preserving the basic oneness, but should rather spur us on to 'maintain the unity' ([Eph. 4:3](#)) and to grow together into the full maturity of faith ([Eph. 4:16](#)).

## CONCLUSION

In our discussion of pluralism we have considered it under only four headings: culture, religion, politics and church. Pluralism has become in recent years, and may be expected to become in greater measure in the coming decades, an issue of great importance. There should be as little plurality as possible in our evaluation of pluralism.

Other areas in which a plurality is present, which we have not discussed, also need to be looked at closely. They too affect the life and witness of the church. We would therefore do well at another time to direct our thoughts and our pens to consider: 1) plurality in Scripture, 2) plurality in life style (with special reference to family and personal ethics) and 3) the presence of co-existing world views which deeply affect how we respond to the many kinds of pluralism in human society today.

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# Charismatics, Grace and Works

Bryan D. Gilling

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