

# Can Only One Religion Be True? Considering This Question

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*Of any ethnic religion, therefore, can it be said that it is a true religion, only not perfect? Christianity says, No. The attitude of Christianity, therefore, towards religions other than itself is an attitude of universal, absolute, eternal, unappeasable hostility.*

—William C. Wilkinson, at 1893 World's Parliament of Religions<sup>1</sup>

*Howsoever men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.*

—John Hick<sup>2</sup>

*I am now, you might say, a card-carrying Buddhist. In 1939 I was baptized. In 2008 I took refuge. I can truly call myself what I think I've been over these past decades: a Buddhist Christian.*

—Paul Knitter<sup>3</sup>

The church bus was dark that night as our youth group made its way back home. I don't remember where we had been, but I do remember the subject of the conversation. A friend of mine asked what happens to people who die without ever hearing of Jesus. I had never considered that question prior to that night. Our youth minister declared authoritatively that nobody would be saved apart from knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior. The implication was that people

who had never heard of Jesus were still in their sins and faced eternal torment in hell when they died. It seemed unjust.

A little more than a year later, I was a student at a state university, living on campus with members of other world religions. I was struck by their sincerity and their moral way of life. In very many ways, they seemed just like me. Yet I believed them to be lost. There was a definite tension in my beliefs. On the one hand, I believed the Bible, and in the Bible, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). The apostle Peter also declares, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NASB). On the other hand, I was seeing with my own eyes young people who did not claim Christ as their personal Savior and were as serious about their religions as I was about mine. They seemed as moral and spiritual as I. How was I to make sense of these seeming contradictions?

I don’t want to make it appear as though I was existentially undone or troubled about these issues every moment of every day; I confess I was not. Most nights, I did not lose sleep pondering these questions. I just told myself that God was God and he could work it all out even if I didn’t know how he would do so. But at times, I pondered these issues with great seriousness. Would I be a Christian if I had not been born into a Christian family? What if I had been born in Asia or the Middle East? Though I would never have put it this way, the philosopher Rousseau expressed my feelings:

You announce to me God, born and dying, two thousand years ago, on the far side of the world, in some small town I know not where, and you tell me that all those who have not believed in this mystery will be damned. These are strange things to be believed so quickly on the authority of an unknown person. Why did your God make these things happen so far off, if he would compel me to know about them? Is it a crime to be unaware what is happening half a world away? Could I guess that in another hemisphere there was a Hebrew nation and a town called Jerusalem? You might as well hold me responsible for knowing what is happening on the moon. You have come, you tell me, to teach me of it; but why did you not come to teach my father? Or why do you damn that good old man for never having known anything about it? Must he be punished throughout eternity for your laziness, he who was so kind and helpful, and who sought only for truth? Be honest and put yourself in my place; see if I ought to believe, on your word alone, all these incredible things

which you have told me, and reconcile all this injustice with the just God you proclaim to me.<sup>4</sup>

The idea that God, who is morally perfect, could unjustly condemn people for not believing what they never had the chance to believe seemed absurd. What was I to do? Though I knew nothing about it at this point in my life, much ink has been spilled seeking to show that God is not, after all is said and done, unjust. So apparently I was not alone in feeling this way. Unbeknownst to me, I was wrestling with questions that arise in what theologians refer to as the theology of religions.

### THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, theology of religions is the branch of Christian theology<sup>5</sup> that formally addresses issues related to the phenomena of religions. I had come face-to-face with the two primary questions that the Christian theologian of religions seeks to answer: (1) What is the fate of the unevangelized? and (2) Is Christianity the only true religion, i.e., the only religion in which one can be saved? These are important questions indeed.

As far back as our historical records go, we find religious diversity. The Christian religion was born into a world filled with religions, just as was Judaism, the parent-religion of Christianity. Religious diversity is nothing new. Yet it *feels* like there is something new about interreligious encounters in today's multicultural, postmodern world. I suspect that the reason our contemporary situation feels new is due to access. Two hundred years ago, the average Christian in Europe or North America knew that there were Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, etc. but rarely if ever met a faithful member of another world religion. That experience was largely reserved for explorers, sailors, and missionaries. Today, I have Facebook friends from every continent on earth, and I can place a call over the Internet to virtually any place on this planet. Additionally, I can fly in hours to places that two hundred years ago would have taken months or longer to reach. In this sense, then, the world today is much smaller than it used to be. Religious diversity is nothing new—but widespread recognition of it certainly is.

The upshot of all this is that we live not only in a religiously diverse world, but also in a world that has been religiously desegregated. As long as those other religions were “over there,” we could live happily in our homogeneous environment. Out of sight, out of mind. Our theological and religious lives

were all neat and clean. But in today's world, thinking about Christianity and other religions is complicated. Complicated does not mean the worse for, but certainly it does mean more difficult. So where are we? We live in a world that is aware of the fact of great religious diversity and is in one way or another obliged to react to it, difficult though that may be.

Ever since Alan Race coined the terms *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* in his 1982 book, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*,<sup>6</sup> his threefold typology has become the standard terminology for theologians working in the theology of religions.<sup>7</sup> Exclusivism is the position that holds that salvation is available only through personal knowledge of and commitment to Jesus Christ. Concerning exclusivism, Race states, "Undoubtedly, the predominant attitude of the church through Christian history has been to regard the outsider as in error or darkness, beyond the realms of truth and light. More than simply an expression of popular piety, it was institutionalized and enshrined, for instance, in the axiom of the Catholic Church, '*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.'"<sup>8</sup> Exclusivism, therefore, "counts the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions, including Christianity, can be understood and evaluated."<sup>9</sup>

Concerning inclusivism, Race states, "Inclusivism in the Christian theology of religions is both an acceptance and a rejection of the other faiths, a dialectical 'yes' and 'no'. On the one hand it accepts the spiritual power and depth manifest in them, so that they can properly be called a locus of divine presence. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being sufficient for salvation apart from Christ and the way of discipleship which springs from him."<sup>10</sup>

Race does not explicitly define pluralism but writes, "The pluralism of this chapter refers therefore to a range of other possible options in the reconciliation of a 'truly Christian charity and perceptivity with doctrinal adequacy.'"<sup>11</sup> John Hick supplies a prime example of religious pluralism: "The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human, and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment."<sup>12</sup> Harold Netland helpfully summarizes Hick's statement of pluralism: "In other words, all religions (or at least the 'major' ones) are in their own ways complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to the one ultimate Reality."<sup>13</sup>

There is an increasing awareness that Race's typology, though helpful, needs to be expanded. In answering the question "Is there any basis for hope

that those who do not hear of Christ in this life will be saved?” Christopher Morgan expands the typology from three to nine:

1. **Church exclusivism:** No, outside the church there is no salvation.
2. **Gospel exclusivism:** No, they must hear the gospel and trust Christ to be saved.
3. **Special revelation exclusivism:** No, they must hear the gospel and trust Christ to be saved, unless God chooses to send them special revelation in an extraordinary way—by dream, vision, miracle, or angelic message.
4. **Agnosticism:** We cannot know.
5. **General revelation inclusivism:** Yes, they can respond to God in saving faith through seeing him in general revelation.
6. **World religions inclusivism:** Yes, they can respond to God through general revelation or their religion.
7. **Postmortem evangelism:** Yes, they will have an opportunity to trust Christ after death.
8. **Universalism:** Yes, everyone will ultimately be saved.
9. **Pluralism:** Yes, many will experience “salvation” as they understand it because they embrace their version of the real, though the question is erroneous because it assumes that Christianity is ultimate.<sup>14</sup>

A fuller explication is in order. *Church exclusivism* is the traditional position of the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, membership in the church was required for salvation. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) stated it thus: “Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus” (Outside the church there is no salvation).<sup>15</sup> Pope Boniface I (d. 422) declared, “It is clear that this Roman Church is to all churches throughout the world as the head is to the members, and that whoever separates himself from it becomes an exile from the Christian religion, since he ceases to belong to its fellowship.”<sup>16</sup> In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council affirmed, “There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.”<sup>17</sup>

*Gospel exclusivism* is a common Evangelical position. James Borland succinctly states it thus: “Everyone must hear and believe the gospel to be saved.”<sup>18</sup> The emphasis here is that salvation is made possible by hearing the propositional content of the New Testament message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Since the coming of Christ, one cannot be saved simply by trusting in a merciful Creator to be gracious. John Piper concurs:

The question we have been trying to answer . . . is whether some people are quickened by the Holy Spirit and saved by grace through faith in a merciful Creator even though they never hear of Jesus in this life. . . . The answer of the New Testament is a clear and earnest No. . . . But now the focus of faith has narrowed down to one Man, Jesus Christ, the fulfillment and guarantee of all redemption and all sacrifices and all prophecies. It is to his honor now that henceforth all saving faith shall be directed to him.<sup>19</sup>

*Special-revelation exclusivism* insists that none can be saved without hearing the gospel in this life unless God sends them special revelation in an extraordinary way, such as through a vision, dream, angelic encounter, etc. The emphasis here is that general revelation is not sufficient to save. The Second Helvetic Confession stresses that God commands evangelistic activity but stresses that he is also able to illuminate individuals apart from human proclamation: “At the same time we recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power; but we speak of the usual way of instructing men, delivered unto us from God, both by commandment and examples.”<sup>20</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith also states, “God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.”<sup>21</sup> Two contemporary proponents of this position, Bruce Demarest and Timothy George, stress that special-revelation exclusivism does not differ from gospel exclusivism as far as the *content* of the message is concerned. The difference is in the *means* by which the gospel is made known—God himself may reveal the message, whereas the gospel exclusivist insists that the only means by which one can hear the gospel is through human proclamation.<sup>22</sup>

*General-revelation inclusivism* maintains that general revelation is sufficient to lead someone to salvation but denies that salvation comes through any religion other than Christianity. All types of exclusivism and inclusivism agree that salvation is only through Jesus, but inclusivists deny that ignorance disqualifies one from God’s grace.<sup>23</sup> Essentially, inclusivists say that one can be saved *by* Christ without ever hearing *of* Christ. John Sanders puts it this way: “Inclusivists concede that in an ontological sense their salvation ultimately depended on the atonement of Jesus, since no one is saved apart from the redemptive work of Christ. . . . But inclusivists hold that while the source of salvific water is the same for all people, it comes to various people through different channels.”<sup>24</sup> This may have been the position of Justin Martyr. In

his first *Apology*, he states, “Those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus.”<sup>25</sup> Note that he speaks of them being regarded as “atheists,” i.e., they rejected Greek religions. It appears then that Justin would not be a world religions inclusivist.<sup>26</sup>

*World religions inclusivism* affirms not only that general revelation is sufficient to lead to salvation but also that the world religions are *means by which* someone could be saved. Without doubt, the two best-known proponents of this view are the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner and the Anglican layman C. S. Lewis. Rahner championed the idea of the “anonymous Christian”: “Therefore no matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection, anyone who does not say in his heart, ‘there is no God’ (like the ‘fool’ in the psalm) but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer. . . . And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an ‘anonymous Christian.’”<sup>27</sup> In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis declares something quite similar: “There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps most famously, though, Lewis pictures world religions inclusivism in a fictional work, *The Last Battle*, the concluding volume in his Narnia series, when Emeth, a faithful and virtuous Calormen, who has worshiped the god Tash all his life, relates his startling conversation with Aslan, Lewis’s Christ figure in the Chronicles:

He answered, Child, all the service thou has done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore, if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name of Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said

also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.<sup>29</sup>

Between exclusivism and inclusivism, Morgan lists *agnosticism* as an option. Essentially, those who hold to this position grant either that God might give extraordinary special revelation to select individuals and then they could respond in an appropriate way, or they might respond to the light of general revelation that they have and then God would respond by granting them salvation—but we can never know for certain that either is the case, because we have no clear biblical examples of this ever happening.<sup>30</sup>

*Postmortem evangelism* maintains that those who never heard the gospel in their earthly lives will have the chance to respond to it after death. Concerning this position, Morgan states, “It concurs with exclusivism when it stresses that faith is a conscious and explicit trust in Christ but sides with inclusivism when it contends that the love and justice of God require that everyone be given an opportunity to trust Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Though preferring the terminology of “divine perseverance,” Gabriel Fackre holds this opinion. Based in part upon his reading of 1 Peter 4, he states, “But the graciousness of God is such that *even these* failing to live up to the rainbow light they are given (sinners ‘judged in the flesh as everyone is judged’), will not be denied the good news proclaimed to all sinners—‘for this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead’ (1 Pet 4:6). Sinners who die outside the knowledge of the gospel will not be denied the hearing of the Word.”<sup>32</sup>

*Universalism* is the position that God will eventually save everyone on the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. This is an ancient position that was held at least as early as Origen.<sup>33</sup> In the eighteenth century, it was vigorously argued by Charles Chauncy in his book *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations*.<sup>34</sup> The most outspoken contemporary advocate of universalism is Thomas Talbott. Talbott argues for universalism both on a biblical basis and on a theological/philosophical basis. Arguing from the nature of an essential property he puts the matter thus: “This follows from the very nature of an essential property. If omniscience is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for God to hold to a mistaken belief; if justice is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unjust way, and similarly, if loving-kindness is an essential property of God, then it is logically impossible for him to act in an unloving way.”<sup>35</sup>



Others, such as Ted Peters,<sup>36</sup> writing from a Lutheran perspective, and Kallistos Ware, from an Orthodox perspective, make less dogmatic assertions. Peters prefers universalism to the alternative positions but stresses, “Now let me repeat a methodological caution mentioned earlier. The hypothesis regarding universal salvation is just that, a hypothesis. It is not dogma. It is an attempt to explicate evangelically the New Testament symbols. But in pursuing this line of theological reasoning I have never ceased to be aware that some other biblical texts seem to lead in another direction, in the direction of an everlasting double destiny.”<sup>37</sup> Ware, a bishop in the Orthodox Church, writes what he considers to be acceptable belief and practice for Orthodoxy—in making a qualified case that Christians should hope and pray for universalism:

How far can we go in our affirmation of the all-embracing character of salvation? “God desires for everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4): are we to believe that God’s plan will ultimately be frustrated? Or may we hope for an ultimate *apokatastasis* or “restoration” of things, in which every rational creature will be saved, including even the devil himself? Origen (d. c. 254) did not hesitate to affirm such a doctrine of universal salvation, but for this he was condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. St. Gregory of Nyssa also entertained the hope that the devil might eventually be saved, but he expressed himself in a more guarded way than Origen had done, and so he escaped condemnation; a qualified version of *apokatastasis* has therefore a legitimate place within Orthodoxy. Certainly, God’s ultimate plans for his creation remain a mystery which none of us at this present moment can begin to fathom, and we must be careful not to assert too much. But at least we know two things. First, God has given us free will, and he will never withdraw that gift from us; it is therefore possible for us to choose for all eternity to say “No” to him. Second, divine love is inexhaustible. Beyond this we cannot go; but, obedient to the words of St. Silouan the Athonite (1866–1938), “We must pray for all.”<sup>38</sup>

Finally, Karl Barth is somewhat ambivalent in his position:

If we are to respect the freedom of divine grace, we cannot venture the statement that it must and will finally be coincident with the world of man as such (as in the doctrine of the so-called *apokatastasis*). No such right or necessity can legitimately be

deduced. Just as the gracious God does not need to elect or call any single man, so He does not need to elect or call all mankind. His election and calling do not give rise to any historical metaphysics, but only to the necessity of attesting them on the ground that they have taken place in Jesus Christ and His community. But, again, in grateful recognition of the grace of the divine freedom we cannot venture the opposite statement that there cannot and will not be this final opening up and enlargement of the circle of election and calling.<sup>39</sup>

The categories in this typology are not cut-and-dried. Nor are they distinct and airtight. Sometimes a theologian will hold to more than one position. For instance, Clark Pinnock held to both world religions inclusivism and postmortem evangelism.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is probably best to think of these categories as positions along a continuum.

All of the positions are *particular* in nature. They all agree in affirming that salvation is available on the basis of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they all assume that humanity needs atonement for sin and that this need constitutes the ultimate religious problem. They disagree, however, as to how God makes salvation possible and to how many. But most significantly for our purposes, we must recognize that none of these positions affirms religious pluralism.

Unlike all forms of particularism, *pluralism* denies the necessity of faith in Jesus. In other words, pluralism belongs to an entirely different family and as such represents a radically new school of thought in the Christian theology of religions. This becomes clear in the preface to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* when one reads, “We wanted to gather theologians who were exploring the possibilities of a *pluralist* position—a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways. Such a move came to be described by participants in our project as the crossing of a theological Rubicon. In the words of Langdon Gilkey, it represents ‘a monstrous shift indeed . . . a position quite new to the churches, even to the liberal churches.’”<sup>41</sup>

Pluralism is not universalism. It is not asserting that, in the end, all will be saved by Christ. Neither is pluralism as simple as saying that all religions are really saying the same thing. Not all roads lead to God. Nor is it insisting that there are different roads up the religious mountain; there are different mountains. The great religions of the world diagnose the human predicament

differently and as a result really do disagree and therefore offer different solutions to humanity's predicament.

Harold Netland writes this concerning pluralism:

Pluralism, then, holds that salvation (or enlightenment or liberation) should be acknowledged as present and effective in its own way in each religion. No single religion can claim to be somehow normative and superior to all others, for all religions are in their own way complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to the one divine reality. Thus, although Christians can hold that Jesus is unique and normative for them, they cannot claim that Jesus is unique or normative in an objective or universal sense. Jesus may be the savior for Christians, but he is not the one Savior for all peoples.<sup>42</sup>

Without a doubt, the late John Hick was the foremost and best-known proponent of religious pluralism. His mature pluralist position is most fully stated in *An Interpretation of Religion* (see note 10, page 5).

But Hick has not published and will not publish the final word on this matter. In his recent book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, Paul Knitter has moved beyond granting that all religions (or at least the "great" or major world religions) are legitimate responses to the real, and has begun to speak of the religions as complementing and completing one another. In particular, he records his personal investigation of and participation in Buddhism. Knitter is clear that he still considers himself a Christian. He conceives of himself as having sort of a dual religious citizenship and "dually belonging" to both Christianity and Buddhism.<sup>43</sup> And he has made his dual citizenship official by becoming a Buddhist:

And so I made a big, but also an easy, decision during the summer of 2008 when I was doing the final revisions of this book. It was at the end of a ten-day Dzogchen Buddhist retreat at the Garrison Institute on the Hudson river. After careful consultation with my teacher, Lama John Makransky (who is also Professor of Buddhist Studies and Comparative Theology at Boston College), I decided to "Take Refuge" and to pronounce the "Bodhisattva Vows" as part of the Dzogchen community in the United States. I was given the *Dharma* name of *Urgyen Menla*—Lotus Healer.

So it's official. I am now, you might say, a card-carrying Buddhist. In 1939 I was baptized. In 2008 I took refuge. I can truly call myself what I think I've been over these past decades: a Buddhist Christian.<sup>44</sup>

Knitter grants that it is legitimate to question whether he is still a Christian or not—indeed he asks this himself, though, clearly, he seems to believe that he is.<sup>45</sup>

One obvious implication of Knitter's insistence that Buddhism completes his Christianity (and also that Christianity completes his Buddhism) is that both Christianity and Buddhism are incomplete in and of themselves. This seems to imply that all religions are incomplete in and of themselves. So the question then is this: is dual citizenship enough? This leads to the question of whether or not pluralism—at least Knitter's pluralism—is headed in the direction of *pantheologiae*. (I think I'm creating a neologism. *Pantheologiae* is not to be confused with metaphysical pantheism. It is an attempt to say “all theologies,” not “all is god.”) In other words, only in all religions taken together does one find the full answer to the human problem. At first glance, this appears to be syncretism on steroids. Knitter might say that Christianity and Buddhism have a unique and singular relationship and that one only needs dual citizenship rather than to be citizens of all world religions. But if this is the case, he needs to explain how and why this is so. And if no religion is complete in and of itself, and if we thus need to embrace and practice all religions, does he not run the risk of undermining pluralism's affirmation that all religions are valid *independent* responses to the real?

Possibly he might say that, for him, Buddhism completes Christianity (as Christianity completes Buddhism) but that such may not be the case for all. But then he seems faced with having to explain how his position does not disintegrate into relativism. Of course, he may be OK with relativism at this point, but I don't get that feeling from reading him.

Knitter desires to hear from his fellow theologians. No doubt he already has and will continue to do so.

### CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

I have tried in this essay to lay out some of the answers that theologians of religions give to questions such as those I wrestled with as a young Christian (and still wrestle with today). I have made little attempt to critique them at any

length or to state my own position. Space simply does not permit me to do so, and such is not the purpose of this introduction. Even then, though, the range of issues that come to mind and deserve attention is so immense that unavoidably, important questions are left out altogether.

In seeking to answer the question “Can only one religion be true?” certain obviously important issues arise that can only be mentioned in this introductory essay. Questions about the nature of truth are vitally important. Is truth that which corresponds to reality or something else—perhaps that which makes life meaningful? Can contradictory propositions both be true? Different scholars give various answers to these sorts of questions. What about the authority of Scripture? What role do sacred texts play in theology? What about hermeneutics? What of the efficacy of general revelation? What of conscience? What of original sin, if there is such a thing? What of hell? Does it exist? Is it forever? What of divine love and divine justice? What about the holiness of God—and his mercy? And unavoidably, one set of questions is invariably raised when Christian theologians of religion come to this question: What about Jesus? Is he unique? Is he necessary? If so, how and why? I could go on.

The question “Can only one religion be true?” is an extremely important question. If any single religion alone is true, then the nonreligious and those of other religions need to learn this. Similarly, if all religions are true, then those who think that only one religion is true need to learn this as well. How these questions are answered will necessarily have huge implications for missions and evangelism. It will also affect religious ethics and politics in a significant way. If more than one religion is true but not all religions are true, then obviously we need to know which religions are true and which are not. Furthermore, if more than one religion is true but one is more true than the others (or has more truth than the others), then we need to know that as well.

Evangelicals like me insist that the truly important question is not simply one of truth but one of salvation. Is salvation found in more than one religion? Logically speaking, it may be the case that salvation is not needed, that religious people are actually deluded, or that religions that hold that salvation is needed are simply mistaken. But what if salvation is needed? And what if salvation is not possible through all religions? Then it would seem to be vitally important to make certain that one’s religion was one that offered salvation. And if salvation is possible through only one religion, then it seems even more important to do so. In other words, this would then be a question of life and death—eternal life and death!

Unavoidably, sincere men and women from all religious groups and traditions will reach different conclusions as to whether or not only one religion

is true. Serious thinkers will want to examine the evidence and hear the arguments from all sides on this issue. Doing so will necessarily involve interacting with those who have different opinions. Emotions can run high when religion is the topic. Conflict is possible. Indeed, nobody living in our post-9/11 world could deny this. But reasonable people of good will can agree to disagree reasonably and also to continue to dialogue for the sake of all involved.

Not all of our authors agree. In fact, there is some serious disagreement on very important issues, but all agree that persons of good will can and should discuss these matters. We hope that you will carefully read the dialogue between Paul Knitter and Harold Netland and read each essay. Then make up your mind on this question. And after you've done that, study this issue some more—we intend to—because it's that important. Regardless of your religious background or persuasion, I pray that you—and I—will know the truth on this issue and then respectfully share it with others who need to know it as well. Grace and peace!

## Notes

1. William C. Wilkinson, "The Attitude of Christianity to Other Religions," in *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893*, ed. Richard Hughes Seager (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993), 321–22. Wilkinson ends this sentence by adding "by no means excepted, its attitude is an attitude of grace, mercy, and peace, for whosoever will." *Ibid.*, 322.

2. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 78.

3. Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: One World, 2009), 216.

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: Dutton, 1969), 269.

5. Philosophy of religion also addresses these questions but in a more controlled way, along the lines of what is typically called natural theology, whereas a theologian of religions will also seek to synthesize his or her convictions with systematic and biblical theology. Theology of religions also relates to the study of world religions. The focus of world religions typically is on understanding the main tenets and practices of the major world religions. Theology of religions will also relate to missiology.

6. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982).

7. Despite their widespread usage, there is a growing recognition that the threefold criteria are not nearly as useful as they are intended to be. In fact, numerous recent authors have criticized this threefold paradigm. To see only a few, see Ian Markham, "Creating Options: Shattering the 'Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist' Paradigm," *New Blackfriars* 74, no. 867 (January 1993): 33; Tim Perry, "Beyond the Threefold Typology: The End of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism?" *Canadian Evangelical Theological Review* 14 (Spring 1997): 1–8.

8. "Outside the Church there is no salvation." Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 10. Hendrik Kraemer is frequently mentioned as the paradigmatic modern exclusivist. See Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956).

9. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 11.

10. *Ibid.*, 38.

11. *Ibid.*, 71. Race does state that he will be studying especially Paul Tillich, John Hick, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *Ibid.*
12. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 240.
13. Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 54.
14. Christopher W. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms," in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, 25–36 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).
15. Cyprian, *De Unitate Ecclesiae* 6.
16. Pope Boniface I, *Epistle* 14.1.
17. Canon 1.
18. James Borland, "A Theologian Looks at the Gospel and World Religions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (March 1990): 3–11.
19. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 163. Cf. Robertson McQuilken, *The Great Omission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 42–53.
20. The Second Helvetic Confession, 1.7.
21. "The Westminster Confession of Faith, a.d. 1647," 5.3 in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 3:612–13.
22. Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 90; Timothy George in "Forum Discussion on Inclusivism," in *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, and Evangelism*, ed. Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury, 145–48 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).
23. J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 99.
24. John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 226.
25. Justin, *First Apology* 46.
26. James Sigountos questions whether Justin was an inclusivist. See James G. Sigountos, "Did Early Christians Believe Pagan Religions Could Save?," in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 241.
27. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 6:395.
28. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 209.
29. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier, 1970), 164–65.
30. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms," 26–32. Those advocating agnosticism include J. I. Packer, "Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 121–23; and Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 130–39, 147–58.
31. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms," 34.
32. Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 84.
33. Origen, *De Principiis* 1.6.1–2, 3.6.3, 6.
34. Charles Chauncy, *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations, Made Manifest by the Gospel—Revelation; or, The Salvation of All Men the Grand Thing Aimed at in the Scheme of God, as Opened in the New Testament Writings, and Entrusted with Jesus Christ to Bring into Effect* (New York: Arno, 1969). This is the most vigorous argument for Christian universalism until Thomas Talbott.

35. Thomas Talbott, "On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God: A Polemic," *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 2 (February 1983): 13. For a book-length treatment of his position, see Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal, 1999). For critical interaction with Talbott's position, see Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, *Universal Salvation: The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

36. Ted Peters, *God—the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 366–71.

37. *Ibid.*, 370.

38. Kallistos Ware, *How Are We Saved? The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1996), 84–85. For Saint Silouan, see Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 48.

39. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, J. C. Campbell, Iain Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, Harold Knight, and R. A. Stewart (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010): 2/2:417–18. Interestingly enough, Race sees Barth as the paradigmatic exclusivist. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 11.

40. Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 168–72. In fact, Pinnock argues not only that those who never heard the gospel would have a postmortem opportunity to hear the gospel but also that some who did hear of Christ would have additional postmortem opportunities. *Ibid.*, 173–75. Further complicating matters are the facts that there are competing typologies and that different scholars are assessed differently by differing critics and thus placed in different categories depending on who is assigning the categories. So the problem is not only terminological but also one of perspective.

41. John Hick and Paul Knitter, preface to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), viii.

42. Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 53.

43. Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

44. *Ibid.*, 216.

45. *Ibid.*, xiii. I must add here that, given what I know of Paul Knitter (I know him but not yet as well as I would like), it is inconceivable to me that he would have taken such a step unless he deeply believed he could remain a Christian. Failing that, he would not have become a Buddhist or would have left Christianity and would today profess to be only a Buddhist. We have many theological differences, but I have never questioned his honesty, forthrightness, or sincerity. Still, this is one of the points at which he and I disagree.