A Three-Pronged Defense of Salvific Exclusivism in a World of Religions

by Brad Johnson

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The author defines and examines the basic arguments behind the classical approaches to other religions, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Of primary interest are the validity of inherent "truth claims" in each religion. He concludes that, within a Christian paradigm, a re-defined exclusivism meets an established philosophical, biblical, and ethical criteria, thus providing reasonability and warrant.

Religious diversity is nothing new. For example, while the ancient Assyrians were bowing before the war god Ashur, the Indian Brahmin priests were worshiping Agni, the fire god. While Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah thundered warnings of impending judgment upon Judah, Confucius was teaching the virtues of chun-tzu.[1] Twentieth-century globalization has, however, prompted a veritable renaissance of cultural knowledge and adaptation, particularly, but not exclusively,[2] in the West. Today there is an unprecedented accessibility to different religious traditions and cultures. Religious plurality is no longer a theory or a distant phenomenon; in fact, it is virtually impossible to live in a major Western city without coming into contact with some aspect of a non-Western religion. With the radical flux of immigration, communication and transportation, the world is, in essence, much smaller than it was a century previous ago.

Even more, non-Western religions are not simply surviving in the West; they are, indeed, thriving. Dr. Yvonne Haddad, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, has noted that the current rate of birth, conversion, and immigration of about twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand Muslims a year "make it possible to predict that by the first decade of the twenty-first century Islam will be the second largest religious community in the United States."[3]

This trend is not confined solely to North America. In France, for example, Islam is second only to Roman Catholicism, with Protestantism in third.

The consequence of this religious and cultural meshing is not lost, nor is something new, to Christianity. Born into a hybrid world of first-century Hellenism and Judaism, Christianity has, from its onset, adapted and contextualized in regard to its particular cultural or historical circumstance and setting. Contemporary religious plurality, though, has forced a renewed fervor of questions concerning the "key" tenet of the Christian faith, namely the role and/or necessity of Jesus Christ in salvation.

The questions are age-old, and yet they are alive as ever. For example, it is not at all uncommon to hear questions such as: "In the context of religious plurality, how can I say that Christ is the definitive self-revelation of God? If Christ is so crucial, why have not more followers of the world's religions been attracted to him? If only one-third of the world's population professes faith in Christ, what is Christ's relationship to the other two-thirds? Will the majority be excluded from salvation? Is Jesus a savior, one among many, or is he the unique Savior of the world?"[4] Clearly, one's Christology is the key component of one's theology of religions.

What follows is a summary and critique of the three major positions developed in response to religious plurality - exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. As is the case with any summary, only certain pillars of each (most notably, Christology) will be showcased and discussed. This is not, however, to negate the importance of unmentioned nuances. As it will become clear, this emphasis necessitates the primary focus upon the two polar positions, exclusivism and pluralism. When the dust settles, so to speak, this writer's contention is that an exclusive understanding of Christian salvation is explicitly biblical, morally and philosophically sound, and thus conducive to the inter-religious dialog key to sustaining any sort of cultural viability in the twenty-first century and beyond.

A definition of terms, however, is of primary importance. More to the point, an identification of the three positions is apropos. Classifications within religion are rooted in history. Prior to the 1980s, the three primary positions concerning other religions were "discontinuity" (Hendrick Kraemer), fulfillment (John Farquhar), and mutual appreciation (William Hocking).[5] However, the respective works of Alan Race and Gavin D'Costa have since laid the foundation for the current three-fold classification typical of the current nature of the debate.[6]

The following is a succinct explanation of the central characters and ideas behind each position. The exclusivist position has been the dominant position of the church as a whole through much of its history until the Enlightenment. Major representatives include Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Hendrick Kraemer, D.A. Carson, William Lane Craig, and R. Douglas Geivett.

Key to this position is the understanding of God's general and special revelations. God is manifested through creation (general revelation), but Man has responded by freely going against this revelation and, thus, stands guilty before a holy God. However, God has demonstrated a reconciliatory mercy through His word and deed, fulfilled completely in Jesus Christ. The historical person of Jesus, then, is the unique, final, decisive, and normative self-revelation of God to Man (special revelation). Exclusivists believe that Jesus Christ is the sole criterion by which all religions, including Christianity, should be understood and evaluated. Calvin Shenk explains:

Christ did not come just to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of knowledge. The revelation which he brought is the ultimate standard. Since in Christ alone is salvation and truth, many religious paths do not adequately reflect the way of
The Christian posits Jesus as the normative rule by which all religious phenomena and traditions are evaluated. This challenge seems to be the dividing line among the range of options inherent exclusivism. Some, like Harold Lindsell, can state emphatically, "God does not reveal Himself redemptively through other means than . . . through His children's missionary activity to a lost world." Another option is the pessimistic agnostic position toward the salvific state of the unevangelized. Adherents of this particular view posit special revelation as explicitly necessary for salvation and choose to go no further in their conclusions than what the Bible explicitly reads. Dennis Olkholm has pointed out, however, that "this agnostic stance toward the unevangelized can also be construed optimistically, though such optimism can only be held tentatively as a secondary theme, never to encroach on or revise the salvation-history scheme." More will be made of this option further in this study.

Inclusivists want to avoid monopolizing the gospel of redemption. They acknowledge the possibility of salvation outside of Christian faith or outside the walls of the visible church, but the agent of such salvation is Christ, and the revelation in Jesus is definitive and normative for assessing that salvation. Jesus Christ is believed to be the center, and other ways are evaluated by how they relate to him. Other religions are not just a preparation for Christ, but Christ is actually present in them.

The fundamental differences between exclusivism and inclusivism, differences that will be examined in more detail later, are the nature and the content of "saving faith." The former emphasizes explicit faith while the latter points to an implicit faith.

Differences abound within the inclusivist position as well, especially in regard to the understanding of Christ's inherent place in every religion. Some inclusivists focus only on individuals who have, out of no fault of their own, not heard the gospel. Hence, a normative understanding of evangelism is operative. Others, on the other hand, point out that the role of Christian missions is not conversion, as such, but to help people discover and unveil the Christ already within their religious tradition.

Finally, there is the pluralist position. This is undoubtedly the most difficult of the three to define in any general sense. The spectrum of pluralistic thought is as wide as it is long. The focus of this particular study will examine the contributions of its key figures: Paul Knitter, John Hick, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Just as in the previous positions, the interpretative range within just these three individuals varies. It is fitting, however, to focus primarily on them since they are the most vocal and influential figures espousing pluralism today.

Hick and Knitter argue the case for pluralism on the following grounds: (1) ethically, it is the only way to promote justice in an intolerant world; (2) in terms of the "ineffability of religious experience," so no religion can claim an absolutist stance; and (3) through the understanding that historical and cultural contexts must be the filter for any absolute religious claim. Hick has argued that all world religions attempt to relate to the unknowable Ultimate Reality (or, the Real), but because of their various cultural and historical contexts these attempts are all naturally different. Hence the various conceptions of the Real and the salvation(s) sought. The common soteriological goal, toward which all religions strive, though, is rooted in the desire to transcend self-centeredness and, in turn, encounter a new (unexplainable) experience with the Real. But, he emphatically emphasizes the fact that there is "no public evidence that any one religion is soteriologically unique or superior to others and thus has closer access to Ultimate Reality." Therefore, with pluralism, Christ is no more definitive or normative than any religious figure or concept. Or, as Andrew Kirk explains, "Rather than confessing that Jesus Christ is the one Lord over all, this view asserts that the one Lord who has manifested himself in other names is also known as Jesus." By "crossing the Rubicon," as Hick and Knitter illustrate, Christians are encouraged to abandon any claim of Christian uniqueness and the possibility of absolute revelation, accepting the fact that the Christian faith is one among many options.

This is the ideological landscape, or perhaps playing field is more appropriate. What follows is a condensed three-pronged examination in which the veracity of the positions are examined according to (1) biblical data and exegesis, (2) philosophical veracity, and (3) moral status. None of the criteria are independent of the other. In other words, one's ultimate conclusion concerning which position seems most appropriate must be judged according to its ability to satisfy all three components.

In his recent book, The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age John Hick attempts to use biblical data to support his supposition that the Incarnation was a metaphor created by the early church. He has presented three fundamental reasons for rejecting the traditional Chalcedonian-understanding of incarnation.

First, Hick concludes that if "Jesus was . . . the eternal creator God become man, then it becomes very difficult indeed to treat Jesus, the New Testament, and Christian faith as being on the same level as phenomena from other religious traditions." This statement is most undoubtedly true. The Christian posits Jesus as the normative rule by which all religious phenomena and traditions are evaluated.
Hick, however, willingly accepts the consequences he recognizes in the traditional affirmation; therefore, he opts for pluralism and is then forced to tweak traditional Christology.

Second, Hick finds the notion of one person truly being God and Man incoherent. "That Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept whose function is analogous to that of the notion of divine sonship ascribed in the ancient world to a king."[17] Hick maintains that the traditional understanding of the Incarnation isnot a logical contradiction, but rather a muddied statement that has no meaning.[18] He writes, "It is logically permissible to believe anything that is not self-contradictory; nevertheless, not everything that is not self-contradictory makes good religious sense."[19] Therefore, to Hick, since a literal interpretation has no religious significance or sense, it must be replaced with a metaphorical understanding. More will be said of the philosophical fallacy underlying this conclusion.

Third, Hick relies exclusively on the liberal wing of Christian New Testament scholarship. Hick contends that the brunt of scholarship proves that Jesus never thought of himself as divine, nor did his early believers. The doctrine, in fact, was a later development of the early church.

The fundamental problem with Hick's argument is his reliance solely on interpretations that support his supposition. He notes that "even conservative New Testament scholars, who are personally orthodox in their beliefs, are agreed today that Jesus did not teach that he was God."[20] This is both outright false and irrelevant. It is a fundamental flaw to assert that the otherwise orthodox scholars he cites (i.e. Moule, Dunn, and Ramsay) are at all representative of the whole of conservative scholarship. There is a wealth of evidence to the contrary supporting the claim that Jesus both regarded himself as God and that this self-understanding was recognized, and that the New Testament attestation of both is historically valid.[21] Furthermore, a high Christology is seen even within the minimum sayings dubbed authentic by several of the radical critics Hick cites.[22] Oscar Cullman has, thus concluded:

Our investigation of the Christological utilization of kyrios, 'Logos,' and 'Son of God' has already shown that on the basis of the Christological views connected with these titles the New Testament could [emphasis his] designate Jesus as 'God'. . . . The fundamental answer to the question whether the New Testament teaches Christ's 'deity' is therefore 'Yes.'[23]

The approach of Paul Knitter in his landmark work, No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions falters on similar exegetical grounds. Herein, he argues for a theocentric Christology that posits Christ as normative for the Christian experience, but non-absolute in any way. This foray into philosophy and the nature of truth will be discussed shortly. His use of Scripture to support his claim that "exclusivity claims," such as Acts 4:12 and John 1:14, are a sort of love language is dubious at best, and outright wrong at worst. While one can readily agree that the New Testament is filled with phrases of adoration and praise, it simply does not follow that there are no ontological implications to their praise. Does it follow, then, from Knitter's reasoning that all religious language should be understood in a non-cognitive fashion? Furthermore, he garners no textual support for his position that his love language was not intended to rule out the possibility of other saviors and lords apart from Jesus. The conclusion of Harold Netland seems appropriate when weighed with the evidence Knitter offers:

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the major reason for regarding such statements as noncognitive expressions of one's devotion and not as true-or-false assertions about actual states of affairs is a resolute unwillingness to accept the perceived undesirable ontological implications which follow if they are taken in their most normal, straightforward sense.[24]

In his most recent book, Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility, Knitter attempts to answer the critics concerning his pluralist -- although he now prefers "corelational"[25] -- position. There is much to applaud in this honest examination of his previous work, particularly his strong emphasis on global responsibility. However, the brunt of his Christology remains unchanged. While maintaining his original assertion that the exclusive claims in Scripture are a "confessional language," Knitter borrows John A.T. Robinson's explanation concerning one of the most clear exclusive claims, Acts 4:12. Knitter agrees with Robinson that the context of this claim, that is, in whose power had Peter and John just healed the crippled man, is "not one of comparative religion but of faith healing."[26] According to Knitter and Robinson the point is to show that the power of healing resides in the name of Christ, not Peter and John. Knitter concludes, "The strength, then, is on the saving power [emphasis his] mediated by the name of Jesus, not on the exclusivity of the name."[27]

Knitter and Robinson miss the eschatological point of the apostles' declaration, though. Beginning with Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2), kyrios [Lord] is used simultaneously for God and for the exalted Jesus. The word appears in several quotations from the Septuagint for God (2:20; 21, 25, 34; 3:22; 4:26). In 3:19, the word is used to refer directly to God (2:39; 4:29 cf. 4:24; 7:31, 33). Leon Ladd notes, "This usage goes back to the Septuagint where kyrios is the translation not only of Adonai but the ineffable covenant name Yahweh. It is therefore amazing to find the term used at the same time of both Jesus and God. Not only is Jesus, like Godkyrios; the term is used both of God and the exalted Jesus in practically interchangeable contexts."[28] Furthermore, Peter employs the language from Joel that speaks of the "Day of the Lord" [Yahweh] and of calling on the name of the Lord for salvation, a quotation that is explicitly linked with Acts 4:10, 12. The point of these verses, then, is not simply to show the source of physical healing, but to point back to the theme throughout Acts, namely that Jesus is Lord (exclusive) and the apostles are His witnesses (1:6-8).

Therefore, the healings throughout Acts are not representative simply of healing power alone. They, in fact, have their theological roots in the language of Mark 2 in which Jesus posits his authority to forgive sins along with his authority to heal disease. Thus, in Acts the apostolic healings are a witness to what the glorified Christ, discussed in 2:14ff, has accomplished in regard to forgiveness and his "already/not yet" eschatological kingdom.[29] It is only because Jesus is regarded as "Lord" that Christians can make definitive statements concerning His person and His salvific work.

Moreover, there is a strong sense of dissatisfaction emanating from the pluralist camp itself. Several pluralists have, indeed, criticized
The normative understanding of Christ, as attested by Scripture, is that the fullness of deity was present in the human Jesus (Colossians 1:19; John 1:1,14), hence Jesus is the ultimate self-revelation of God (John 14:9-10; Hebrews 1:1-3). Even more, he is the one and only Savior of sinners, the mediator between God and Man (1 Timothy 2:5). There is no other name by which salvation is available (Acts 4:12). Jesus' death is a once-and-for-all reconciliation and justification (1 Peter 3:1; Romans 3:21-26). Acceptance of this death by faith is the operative and saving response explicitly taught. The question remains, though, is this faith explicit or implicit?

Clark Pinnock and John Sanders have arisen as two of the most prominent evangelical spokesmen in regard to the inclusivist position. Sanders firmly believes that "people can receive the gift of salvation without knowing the giver or the precise nature of the gift." Pinnock affirms this conviction, "Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information." At one level, the exclusivist agrees with the latter; mere knowledge does not equal salvation. However, this position slips very close to a universalism that affirms biblical faith has no content or object.

This particular study will not attempt to fully reconcile the two themes in tension throughout Scripture: Jesus is Lord (exclusive) of all (inclusive). The argument from general revelation used by inclusivists must be balanced and held in tension with the biblical description of the power and ontological effect of sin. Romans 1:20 teaches that all people bear a responsibility for their sin of distorting general revelation. Neither Gentile nor Jew is without guilt (Romans 2:14-16). More pointedly, Paul states in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The Bible does not pretend to cast those who have not heard as innocent.

However, Romans 5:12-21 also teaches that if sin and death are universal, so are grace and life. Awareness of the unknown "logos," to put it in inclusivist terms, however, does not constitute salvation. Grace is only effected upon those who call for mercy (see 1 Corinthians 15:10-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1; Philippians 2:12-13). Salvation, then, is not a result of one's pious response to general revelation (or in a pious response to special revelation for that matter!), but only because of the grace of Christ. First Timothy emphasizes that God's universal desire to save man is demonstrated in the particularity of Christ's death.

The question remains, however, is an explicit faith and understanding of Christ necessary? In Romans 10:9-10, Paul appears to stress an explicit confession that Jesus is Lord and acceptance of his resurrection. By all rights, this appears as an "epistemological necessity." However, Sanders, however, disagrees on the basis of logic. He contends that the text is similar to the conditional statement, "If it rains, then the sidewalk will get wet." D.A. Carson explains:

> If the protasis is true, the apodosis follows: if it rains, the sidewalk is wet, and if you confess and believe, you are saved. But it does not follow that if you negate the protasis, the apodosis is negated. It does not rain, it does not necessarily follow that the sidewalk is not wet, for it might have been soaked in some other way, e.g., by a sprinkling system. Similarly, if you do not confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and if you do not believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, it does not necessarily follow that you are not saved.

Hence the necessity of an examination of the philosophical grounds of exclusivism. In other words, in order to prove the thesis that an exclusive faith is biblically explicit, one must also show that it is philosophically (and, as shall be demonstrated, morally) sound.

Philosophically, the above argument is logically valid. "If A, then B" conditional statements do not necessarily guarantee the truth of their respective "If not A, then not B" conditional statements. At first glance, the philosophical ground of exclusivism is crumbling. However, a second glance shows that the inclusivist's appeal to logic collapses upon itself. There is a vital classical exception to the rule, though. If all the members of class A are identical to the members of class B, and the conditional "If A, then B" is true, so is "If not A, then not B." In other words, if all those who confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead constitute class A, and all those who are saved constitute class B, and if the members of A and B are the same, it is entirely logical to believe that if you do not confess Jesus as Lord and do not believe that God raised him from the dead you are not saved.

Granted, both the exclusivist and inclusivist must assume that the two classes either do or do not respectively coincide. The emphasis Paul places on the value of "knowledge" in verses 9-10, 14-15 of this same chapter seems to show him with the same understanding that an explicit faith is, at the very least, normative. The point thus far is not to say that an exclusive understanding of Christian salvation necessarily exempts individuals with only an "implicit faith" wholesale. However, the weight of the biblical data, in accordance with sound philosophical reasoning, supports an explicit faith response to Christ, per the above thesis. The question of the state of the unevangelized, in the end, must fall into the hands of a sovereign God. Perhaps, it is apt to suggest that Christian witness should take precedent over Christian speculation concerning the inexplicit nature of the Bible's message concerning the salvific state of the unevangelized. The philosophical possibility that grace extends to implicit faith is, after all, only a theoretical possibility.

The philosophical debate is also not lost on the pluralist position. The brunt of the following philosophical analysis squares upon the normative pluralist understanding and application of "truth," particularly soteriological religious truth. The philosophical objections that pluralists point to regarding the normative understanding of the Incarnation cause inclusivists and exclusivists to unite in their understanding of a normative Christology. Neither Hick nor Knitter is acquiescent to the notion of the full divinity of Jesus.
As mentioned, while Hick maintains that the Incarnation is not a formal logical contradiction, it is void of meaning. Furthermore, he insists that it will have meaning only if the exact relationship between Jesus’ humanity and his deity can be “intelligently” identified. He remains unconvinced by the evidence that pre-Easter Christology entailed an understanding of Jesus’ divinity, as well as by the classical Chalcedonian formulation: (1) Jesus is fully man and (2) Jesus is fully God. This formulation is believable if (a) there are good reasons to believe that (1) and (2) are both true and (b) there are no good reasons to think that (1) and (2) cannot be true. The difficulty, or even impossibility, of explaining the union of the two is not a good reason to think the union is false. Hick does not agree with the union of the two because jointly they imply (3) Jesus is the only Savior. He, in fact, concedes this fact, “If [Jesus] was indeed incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must be uniquely superior to all other religions.” His “official” reason that the union of (1) and (2) is false is that the entailing uniqueness of Christianity is not compatible with the "new global consciousness of our time." This objection, however, smacks of twentieth-century sensibilities inhibiting what an omnipotent, sovereign God could logically do.

The pluralist feels justified in tweaking theology, to put it rather negatively, because of the underlying postmodernism in their understanding of (bi-level) truth. As the scope of this particular study is primarily Christological, a detailed critique of the general pluralistic approach to evaluating religious truth is not possible. A few comments, though, are warranted.

Christian exclusivity (or at least normative Christology) is based on the (western) principle of non-contradiction, that is the assumption that two or more incompatible assertions cannot all be true. Admittedly, this principle is not universally accepted. In Hinduism, for instance, there is the understanding that dharma (the fundamental way of life) may differ for individuals. Zen Buddhist meditation uses the koan (an irrational riddle or phrase) to compel the individual to move past such cognitive limitations as non-contradiction.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has fused his understanding of theological truth with this approach when he writes “in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and.” Paul Knitter does the same thing when he borrows John A.T. Robinson's terminology concerning the "two-eyed" nature of truth. Herein, Robinson compares Christianity and Hinduism, maintaining that the religious Ultimate is both personal (Christianity) and nonpersonal (Hinduism). Although he acknowledges the differences between religions, and refuses to advocate naive syncretism, but calls for a vague "unitive pluralism" that finds unity amidst the diversity.

One of the fundamental understandings of postmodern philosophy is that objective truth is not "out there" to be discovered. It is, in fact, impossible to discover because of the cultural limitations of language. At best, language simply constructs one’s personal reality; at worst, it is manipulative. Any attempt to "propose totalizing metanarratives that define and legitimize Reality are denounced as oppressive." Only the Self is the source of personal truth and reality; furthermore, this truth and reality is real only so far as it is actively manifested. Truth, then, is entirely personally pragmatic. Something is only "true" so far as one lives it.

Volumes of work are continually devoted to this ever-growing debate that has spread from the halls of academia to everyday culture. Robert Cook and Charles Taylor have identified one fundamental flaw of postmodernism. Cook has charged Hick with postmodernism, and not backed down despite serious objections from Hick. Hick’s response pointed out that several postmodernists have attacked his arguments as creating the sort of metanarrative postmodernism argues against: “there is one large, overarching explanation that claims to handle all religious phenomena, and that therefore fails to recognize the sheer diversity of opinion and outlook in the world.” Cook's rejoinder is key, however. He claims that Hick's skepticism that any religion can provide a metanarrative that truly explains reality is grounded in postmodernism. The fact that he creates a metanarrative in the process only identifies the fundamental flaw of postmodernism itself. Cook points out that "as soon as it makes an absolute claim that all truth claims are relative, it has forged its own metanarrative." Charles Taylor has come to the similar conclusion that "to believe something is to hold it to be true; and, indeed, one cannot consciously manipulate one’s beliefs for motives other than their seeming true to us."

Regardless, the bare bones of the pluralist contention are important. Namely, no religious tradition can monopolize religious truth; hence, adherents of various religious traditions can and should be willing to listen to, and learn from, other traditions. As shall be demonstrated below, Christian exclusivism does not affirm that all available religious truth is found within Christianity. Calvin Shenk makes an important distinction between the truth inherent in Jesus (as Lord), and the imperfections inherent in religion itself, including Christianity. Understanding this point of distinction is invaluable to the conclusion of this study.

Exclusive claims, however, are a necessary component of religion itself. For the most part, pluralists are glad to accept differences between religions, but they are not willing to concede that individuals recognize these differences as "exclusive" in a soteriological sense. While this methodology may hold true, to a certain extent, in matters of peripheral doctrinal differences, and even cultural paradigms, it is highly unreasonnable (perhaps untenable) to necessitate the removal of the traditional understanding of Jesus as Lord as "the only way to salvation." Hence, the pluralist imperative to re-interpret Christology. Such truth claims are not inherently wrong, though. Indeed, although no ally to the exclusivist position, Raimundo Panikkar recognizes the unavoidable nature of such "truth claims" within religion:

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.

The exclusivist insistence that a normative Christology is explicitly biblical and thus reasonable to affirm in a Christian context has resulted in scathing indictments, claiming such a position is ethically immoral and utterly detrimental to fruitful dialog. Consider the following statement by John Hick:

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There are two important clarifications necessary concerning the moral implications of exclusivist truth claims. First, there is a difference between interacting with people and evaluating truth claims. The attacks upon exclusivism are often due to an irresponsible conviction that dissent from someone else’s beliefs -- in favor of the truthfulness of one's own -- is intolerant and arrogant. Brad Stetson identifies that this is primarily rooted in mistakenly positing a necessary connection between (1) believing Christianity true and other religions untrue and (2) mistreating and disrespecting non-Christians. There is simply no necessary truth in the statement that disagreement entails negative treatment. Admittedly, though, Church history is filled with accounts of brutality and negativity; however, the fact that exclusivism is tied to these episodes may be less a matter of theological implication than it is a socio-historical phenomenon.

Moreover, the brutality and negativity is not a direct corollary of the teaching and ethic espoused by Jesus. In other words, the ignorance and failure of a teacher's followers does not necessitate an inadequate message. On the contrary, when a message stands directly opposed to the actions of the followers, as does the love-motivated ethic of Jesus with brutality, fault must lie squarely on the offenders shoulders and not regarded as a necessary contingent result of the message.

With this said, though, the postmodern understanding of pragmatic truth, while not entirely convincing, is beneficial and a much-needed emphasis in regard to the Christian witness Jesus calls for. James 1:22ff is emphatic in this regard: "But prove yourself doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." He goes on to posit a clear connection between faith and action. Individual Christians are encouraged to personalize such an understanding and strive to live the faith they have been called to proclaim.

The disparaging cries against exclusivism, then, are not without bearing or history. This writer suggests, though, that the pluralists that level the cries against exclusivism should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water, to borrow a cliché. Not every exclusivist is, or has been, a misogynist, a racist, or an imperialist; hence it stands to reason that the wholesale casting of the position as "immoral" is primarily a dramatic attempt at over-generalization.

Even more, if truth is pragmatic (as the postmodernist and pluralist affirms), would not the exclusivist be warranted in his/her belief that exclusivism is true (at least for that individual)? Perhaps the point of Christian witness, including dialog, is less a pointing to an "outside truth," as such, but to demonstrate both the experiential and evident plausibility of one's particular, exclusivist belief that Jesus is Lord of all. This does not reject the notion of an objective truth but displaces the myth that epistemological certainty regarding such truth is feasible this side of the grave. Biblical faith "in that which is unseen," as the Epistle to the Hebrews describes it, is an existential certainty. That is, it is a certainty, particularly in one's salvation in Christ, evidenced in one's "reasonable" belief albeit, not certainty that Scripture is divinely authoritative. The grounds for such a reasonable belief, admittedly, will vary between individuals, as will many of the beliefs themselves. This approach, indeed, tiptoes on the line between modernity and postmodernism, and neither is it entirely defined, but perhaps it is an approach in the right direction.

The form of witness this approach espouses is evident most clearly in a dialog that pluralists and inclusivists seem to think they have monopolized. The biblical example of such a witness necessitates the following attitudes: understanding, respect, humility, tolerance, and vulnerability. Each of the characteristics is, first, founded within the radical motivation of love that Jesus clearly emphasizes. They are, second, contingent upon the understanding that Jesus is the Christian's personal criteria of truth; Christianity is not, faith in the divine, not in religion, is the path to healthy dialog between religions. Furthermore, this understanding accepts and requires that faith is personalized while the person, the work and the message of Jesus remain the same. This (pragmatic, if you will) criteria is what prevents a hapless fideism that postmodern Christianity often slips into.

Exclusivist Christians have simply chosen to follow the way by which they know and interpret truth, Jesus. Shenk's first-person narrative is helpful:

We do not claim to know exhaustively, but we claim to be on the way. We do not hesitate to invite others to join us as we press toward fuller understanding of the truth. . . . Jesus is the truth, but not everything that Christians have claimed is true. Christians have been nearsighted and parochial or have married truth and power and have become oppressive. We deeply regret that some of what Christians have presented as truth is distorted. But limited knowledge or distortion should not cause us to slip into an easy relativism or distortion which debunks what is valid. Not that all we believe is distortion.

Shenk goes on to describe dialog in three levels. First, there is the "living dialog." This is a relational, day-to-day interaction with persons of a different faith. A second level is working with and toward common goals with persons of a different faith -- hence, exclusivists can solidly affirm the attempts of Paul Knitter, in his most recent work, to work with other religions for social justice. The third level is a formal dialog that attempts to understand and share the fundamental similarities and differences between the respective faiths represented, evaluating, and assimilating when necessary, each from one's criterion of truth. Because faith in Jesus as Lord is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, it seems to reason (per the arguments above) that the primary aspect of faith pluralists seem willing to do away with is the utmost important aspect to maintain.
The debates and lines between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism will probably intensify before they subside. Just as mutual understanding is necessary between faiths, this writer is convinced that similar understanding would be beneficial in regard to the respective positions. Attitudes, caricatures, and misconceptions are abounding, and will continue as long as the debate proliferates. This study is but one attempt out of many to balance a panoramic understanding of the three positionsto religions with an obvious conviction that one position is particularly valid. Moreover, this particular study has contended that despite the polemic to the contrary, the exclusive nature of believing in "Jesus as Lord" for salvation is explicitly biblical, philosophically and morally valid, and does not necessarily inhibit inter-faith dialog.

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Endnotes

2. See Paul Hiebert, "Christianity in a World of Religious Turmoil," World Evangelization 16 (May-June 1989): 19. Herein, Hiebert notes that 41% of the population of Singapore is Buddhist, 18% Christian, 17% Muslim, 5% Hindu, and 17% secularist.
7. Calvin Shenk, 35.
10. Alan Race and Gavin D’Costa contend they both are essentially still inclusivists, although Paul Knitter disagrees. See Race, 70-106; D’Costa, 106; Paul Knitter, No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), xiii.
11. Shenk, 43.
15. Hick and Knitter, viii.
19. Ibid., 104.
22. See the following works concerning the "Son of Man" sayings that should, by the critics' use of the criterion of dissimilarity, be judged no less authentic that all other sayings judged authentic using this criterion: Oscar Cullman, The Christology of the New Testament (London: SCM, 1959), 137-92; I. Howard Marshall, The Origins of New Testament Christology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976, 1990), 63-82. See also Royce Gordon Gruenler's approach to the texts found authentic using the criterion of dissimilarity in New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: APhenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).
For an excellent overview of this eschatological tension see C. Marvin Pate's The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).


I am indebted to Geivett and Phillips in regard to this formulation. See their article "Response to John Hick" in 4 Views on Salvation, 74-5.


Hence the cries against historical examples of exclusivism's failures, as will be highlighted later.


Carson, 147.

Ibid., 147.


Shenk, 137.


Stetson, 118.


