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**THE CHRIST-LOGOS IN JESUS AND BEYOND:
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON
UNITY AMONG THE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The age-old problem of dialogue between the world's religions is fraught with dangers and with possibilities. False universalism either denies or laments the differences between religions. Yet a nuanced view of the transcendent unity of religions is suggested by Paul Tillich's definition of religion as the "substance of culture" and culture as the "form of religion." In this view, a distinction can and should be made between cultural competition and religious comradeship.

Christian attitudes toward other religions vary from exclusivism ("one true religion, all others false") to toleration and acceptance ("many ways"). Roman Catholic theology has developed as the fullest expression of acceptance of the validity of other world religions.

The Christian Bible provides surprising warrant for the idea of the transcendent unity of world religions. From the myth of the Tower of Babel to the theology of the Word in the Gospel of John, there are many intimations of the unity of all men who fear God and believe. Christians should interpret the Biblical passages about the Truth of God revealed in Christ as a Logos-event which is not limited to the historical person of Jesus.

A theology of unity among the Abrahamic Faiths can be tentatively traced in a language which may be acceptable to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The God of Abraham, the God of all three faiths, is One,

Unique, Personal, Just, and Merciful. The revelation of God comes through Torah, Christ, Quran, and through many prophets and prophetic events.

One school of thought known as "the perennial philosophy", represents an especially subtle approach to the possible transcendent unity of the world's religions. This approach does not deny or oppose the diversity found in different religions, but it understands this diversity as an exoteric or "outward" expression of Truth. At the same time, it posits an esoteric or "inward" expression of the same Truth which is potentially accessible to genuine believers within any of the great faith communities. This "perennial philosophy" approach deserves serious consideration and refinement. Finally, whatever the possibilities for seeing a transcendent unity of the various religions it is imperative for the adherents of the various religions to show tolerance for, and enter into dialogue with, adherents of other faiths. In such encounters, Truth will ultimately prevail.

"Distinguish in order to unite!" This time-honored methodological dictum summarizes the problem of dialogue between the world's religions. On the one hand, one cannot deny the differences between religions--including each one's claim to an "exclusive" Truth. On the other hand, one should not eschew the task of examining the similarities between religions in order to perhaps discover whether they possess a transcendent unity.

This subject demands extreme caution. There is a false universalism, provoked by sentimental dreams of an easy path to cross-cultural understanding, which asserts the unity of religions by denying or decrying their particularities. As

appealing as this view is in some quarters, it is an inherently flawed approach. Only by "working through" the differences between religions can we begin to glimpse the possible similarities and ultimate unity of the world's religions.

What, then, of the claims of exclusivism made by each religion? What, specifically, can be said about the relationship of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Could it be that these three "forms" share a common "essence"? If so, how should the interreligious dialogue proceed? If not, can there at least be some mutually agreed upon canons of tolerance?

Essence and Forms

Paul Tillich, the great twentieth-century Christian theologian, defined religion as the "substance of culture" and culture as the "form of religion." More precisely, according to Tillich, "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself." Within one distinct culture--whether

geographically, ethnically, or ideologically defined--Tillich's theses appears to hold. But, does Tillich's thesis have a wider application? Can we conceive of a Judeo-Christian-Islamic culture as the totality of forms in which the basic concern of Abrahamic Faith expresses itself? If so, we might begin to distinguish between cultural competition, on the one hand, and religious comradeship on the other.

I speak from the perspective of a Christian. But I am also a Christian who works as a teacher and scholar of religion. I have taught "Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" to hundreds of undergraduate students, and I have spoken and written about the religions of the Near East to audiences of businessmen, educators, government officials, military officers, and clergymen. These experiences may simultaneously help and hinder my effort to analyze the relationships between these faiths. But I am convinced that there is value in understanding the distinctiveness of each of the three Near Eastern religions and, also, that there is a way to give testimony to their transcendent unity without denying or obscuring their diversity. Many perspectives can be brought to bear on this important problem. Diverse contributions toward a solution should be welcomed.

This is a problem which could, in fact, absorb the energies of a generation of religion scholars and theologians.

Christian Attitudes Toward Other Religions

Paul F. Knitter has written a very useful book which thoroughly and creatively surveys the variety of Christian attitudes toward the world religions.<2> He begins by presenting three "popular" approaches to the problem of the world religions: (1) "all are relative" (Ernst Troeltsch), (2) "all are essentially the same" (Arnold Toynbee), and (3) "common psychic origin" (Carl Jung). These approaches are not necessarily Christian theological viewpoints even though they belong within a Christian cultural matrix.

According to the philosopher-theologian Ernst Troeltsch, "You cannot say one religion is better than another." He stresses the historical context of all knowledge. The truth, he said, can only be "truth for us"; yet it can also be "very Truth and Life."<3> For Troeltsch, God's revelation is offered to all peoples and to all religions. Knitter argues, correctly I believe, that the acceptance of Troeltsch's basic idea of historical context is a

prerequisite to interreligious dialogue. But Knitter wonders whether historical relativity is or can be the "final word" on the subject.

The historian Arnold Toynbee believed that there are "essential truths" beneath the vast diversity of religious practice. The essence of each of the great world religions, is virtually identical. In a truly global society, said Toynbee, "all the living higher religions ought to subordinate their traditional rivalries and make a new approach toward one another." <4> Knitter discusses the more detailed expressions of the "essential truth" thesis in the writings of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, and others. This approach is sometimes called the "perennial philosophy" thesis--the term suggests the belief that there has been a permanent, core teaching in the great world religions (namely, "the unity of the knower with the known"). Knitter dismisses these thinkers--too easily I believe--because they appear to him to ignore the claims of uniqueness and exclusivity made by the world religions. On the contrary, I believe the "perennial philosophy" thinkers provide schemata by which we might understand and accept the differences and the similarities between religions. In fact, this

approach, represented most completely by Schuon, is one of the most fruitful avenues for progress on the problems of interreligious dialogue and exclusivism.

The psychologist Carl Jung believed that a God-image in man "coincides" with the self. Thus, all persons are "endowed with the consciousness of a relationship to Deity."<5> All religions, therefore, have a common origin in the psyche and a common function in psychic development. Religions should, therefore, enter into dialogue with each other. Jung's view is useful in its own sphere. Yet, we may reply to Jung by asking whether religious truth should simply be equated with psychological wholeness. In Jung, we see an approach which seems to contribute, but only partially, to our grasp of the relationship between religions.

Knitter next turns to explicitly Christian attitudes toward other religions. He discusses evangelical Protestantism ("one true religion"), mainline Protestantism ("revelation, yes! salvation, no!"), and Roman Catholicism ("many ways, one norm").<6>

The German theologian Karl Barth is most representative of the evangelical Protestant view that God uniquely and exclusively revealed himself in Jesus

of Nazareth. "Religion" becomes a name for all man-made attempts to reach God without the mediation of Jesus. "Religion" is defined as unbelief! Even Christianity, as a human institution, is an instance of hubris and unbelief. Only the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is True. Barth writes, "The divine fact of the name of Jesus Christ confirms what no other fact does or can confirm: The creation and election of this religion [Christianity] to be the one and only true religion.<7> This type of claim to an exclusively True Religion has been quite typical of historical Christianity as well as of most other great world religions. Fairness demands that we be willing to admit that such a claim could be true. God could have chosen, in His infinite wisdom, to reveal himself to man in one and only one supreme act of "special revelation." However, I believe that this approach forecloses all true dialogue and elevates one "truth" by denying other truths. The evangelical Protestant approach which is represented by Karl Barth may appeal to some for its feeling of certainty but it will leave many wondering what kind of God would play a cruel hoax on the majority of the human race who have lived in non-Christian cultures.

For mainline Protestants it is much easier

than it is for evangelicals to accept the idea that God has revealed Himself through other religions. But most mainline Protestant theologians draw the line at the notion of authentic salvation through other religions. Their Reformation theology leads them to think in terms of "law and gospel"--the law is a negative preparation for the positive revelation in Jesus. Non-Christian religions always fall into the category of "the law." The theologian Carl Braaten writes, "Religions are not systems of salvation in themselves, but God can use even them to point beyond themselves and toward their own crisis and future redemption in the crucified and risen Lord of history [Jesus Christ]."⁸ This approach owes much of its insight to the Apostle Paul's teachings on law and gospel. But, the Pauline doctrine can be interpreted in a broader context which would lead the Christian to accept both revelation and salvation through other religions.

Roman Catholic views of other faiths--as well as of other Christian groups--have changed dramatically in the last generation. The most far-reaching expression of the change at the interreligious level was the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"

promulgated at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council affirmed that grace and salvation are universal--that God wills the salvation of all persons. The Council exhorted Christians "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, [to] acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these person."<9> Some interpreters see in the Council document an approach similar to mainline Protestantism: "revelation but no salvation through other religions." However, most Catholic interpreters have gone further. They argue that the Council allows for the possibility of both genuine revelation and genuine salvation through other world religions. Yet, the ambiguity remains. The document also asserts that "the church is necessary for salvation."<10> Can the phenomenon of God's grace coming into the world through other religions be included in the concept of "the church"? Many Catholic theologians, such as Karl Rahner, say "Yes!" For Rahner, non-Christian religions can be "a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation."<11> Yet, Rahner

maintains that there is a dynamic at work in the world which will eventually bring other religions--which he calls instances of "anonymous Christianity"-- into the Visible Church, into an explicitly Christian institution. There are many ways to God, but the way of Jesus is the norm against which the others are judged. Some Catholic theologians, such as Hans Kung, have taken Rahner's view one step further in asserting the permanent validity of other religions--this view does not expect other religions to eventually become explicitly Christian. In either case, the mainstream Roman Catholic theologians have gone further toward the full acceptance of the validity of other religions than have most mainline or evangelical Protestants. Eastern Orthodox theology responds to this problem in a way which is quite similar to the Roman Catholic approach.<12>

What is the conclusion to be drawn from this overview of Christian attitudes toward other religions? There are indeed a variety of ways in which Christians react to the truth claims of other faiths. There are deep and enduring problems to be addressed. And there are real possibilities for dialogue, tolerance, acceptance, and even unity.

Biblical Intimations of Unity

Most of the Bible, at least as Christians have traditionally interpreted it, implies that the overt conflict between truth and falsehood takes place in a battle between belief systems. Often, the Christian religion is equated with "truth", in contrast to other religions which represent falsehood, unbelief, idolatry, and paganism. But, I would suggest, there are also intimations of unity among the world religions or, at least, there are myths and sayings which would allow for a belief in such unity.

In the ancient Hebrew myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), God punishes the sinful pride of mankind by causing men to speak different languages, thus limiting their communication and mutual understanding. The clear implication of this myth is the essential oneness of the human race, and the implicit promise of God is to bring about the reunification of humankind. A recurring theme of the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments is God's unconditional love for an undeserving humanity. At the end of time, we hear repeatedly throughout the Bible, lions will lie down with lambs, the earth will be transformed ("New Jerusalem"), mankind will be of

one mind, one language, one faith. The theological attempt to discover a basis for the transcendent unity of the world's religions has solid Biblical warrant.

Much of the New Testament carries an undercurrent of concern for the Gentile (non-Jewish) world. Not only Paul, but Peter and the other apostles gradually came to realize that the gospel is "good news" for the entire world and not only for their fellow Jews. Jesus' own actions foreshadowed the universal mission of the Church. He met the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-38), he told a story in which a Samaritan proved to be a good neighbor, indeed a better neighbor than two Jews (Luke 10:30-37), he defended the Gentile converts' right to a decent place of worship when he cleansed the Court of the Gentiles of money-changers and sellers of sacrificial animals (Mark 11:15-19). In an oft-quoted passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd who collects his sheep: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). This verse retains its obvious meaning that Jesus intends his message for Gentiles as well as Jews. But, are Gentiles merely to convert to Judaism? Are

they not already "His sheep"? This passage can certainly admit of a view which understands Jesus as the Logos--the Word of God which is eternal and which is revealed to all mankind through the various world religions. The same can even be said of the passage in which Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Jesus as the Christ--not limited to his historical appearance as a man from Nazareth--is God's Word revealed to mankind. Implicit throughout the Biblical record, I believe, is the universal availability of salvation mediated through the Christ, the Logos. If Christians understand the Logos to have been made known not only through Jesus of Nazareth but through various ways in the other world religions, these Biblical passages can be meaningfully understood, although perhaps with a different interpretation than is commonplace.

Paul addresses directly the problem, for Christian faith, of the fate of souls who have not heard the revelation of God through Israel and the Messiah. "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves . . . what the law requires is written on their hearts" (Romans 2:14-15). The followers of

other religions are acknowledged as being God-fearing and as having knowledge of God's will "written on their hearts." Furthermore, "ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20). This and many other passages suggest a Pauline openness toward the idea that God's revelation is universal and that salvation is possible for all--even those who are beyond direct knowledge of the historical Jesus. Other, conflicting interpretations may be offered but there is at least a possibility that Paul would endorse the gist of Vatican II on the question of other religions rather than the exclusivism of Karl Barth.

The author of the Gospel of John speaks of "The Word" in the most universal terms: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The true light that enlightens every man . . ." (John 1:1,9). From a Christian viewpoint, then, a follower of another religion may be genuinely "enlightened." If so, then the Christ-Logos must be the light which enlightens that person. This is not to reduce all other religions to forms of "anonymous Christianity," it is merely to understand,

in Christian terminology, the event of salvation which has occurred in God's own way and in His own time (kairos).

This way of interpreting the scripture passages concerning Christianity's claims to exclusive Truth is certainly unfamiliar to many Christians. Yet, it is a way of understanding God's Word which can accomodate what we know (or think we know) about the truth contained in "other religions."

Imagine, if you will, that earthlings were to discover tomorrow that sentient, extraterrestrial life existed in the universe. Christians would be compelled to believe that either: (1) God's general revelation has been available to our alien neighbors but their salvation has awaited our sharing of the special revelation which occurred in Jesus of Nazareth, or (2) God's general revelation alone or some special revelation of the Christ-Logos has already made salvation available to them. Note the issue here is not whether sentient life can find God through the operation of the reason alone--this would be a perversion of genuine natural theology--but whether the Intellect embedded in every sentient life hears and responds to an actual revelation of God.

A Theology of Unity Among the Abrahamic Faiths

To construct a theological exposition of this thesis, one might proceed in a variety of ways. There are surely many diverse ways in which Christians could describe the transcendent unity of religious. I will attempt here only to offer one such option, and to limit the scope of my comments to three closely related religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The God-concept of the three Abrahamic Faiths is virtually identical. Monotheism, the oneness and uniqueness of God, is the defining characteristic--there is no ultimate contradiction between monotheism and such doctrines as the Christian Trinity, the Jewish Kabbalistic notion of Spirit (Shekinah) or the Muslim doctrine of Divine Attributes. God, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is One, Unique, Personal, Just, and Merciful. God has absolute sovereignty over the universe and has appointed human beings as stewards of His creation. God has not remained aloof from mankind but, rather, has revealed Himself to man--to Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, and to many prophets, as the Bible and the Quran proclaim.

For the Jew, I would suggest, the revelation of God has come primarily through the Torah, the Law,

and in God's actions in history such as the Exodus from Egypt, the return from Babylon, and the as-yet-unrealized reign of the Messiah. The Logos in Judaism may perhaps be most fully encapsulated in the concept of the Torah.

For Christians, the ultimate act of God's self-revelation occurred in Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh." This distinctive doctrine of Incarnation in Christianity--along with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit--does not introduce any notion of plurality into the God-concept but rather affirms God's Oneness in Three Persons, perhaps the greatest paradox in the Christian creed.

For Muslims, I would suggest, the revelation of God takes form in a Book, a Scripture which has subsisted for eternity as the Divine Word. The Quran, revealed through the Prophet Muhammad, is the disclosure of Allah's will for mankind, complete in its expression of Absolute Truth.

For each of these religions, as for Abraham himself, salvation comes through absolute and genuine faith in Almighty God. Salvation by faith does not prejudge the issue of the call to good works. But faith and God's response of mercy, forgiveness, and grace are the keys to salvation. Indeed, God's grace

or mercy must pervade the universe before any individual act of faith may occur.

The reward for faith, symbolized in a variety of ways in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is Eternal Life in the Presence of God. The absence of faith and the lack of salvation is separation from the Presence of God.

The believer is commanded to witness to the Truth which he has seen and experienced through the grace or mercy of God. If the Jew proclaims his witness in the terms common to Judaism, if the Christian witnesses to the Deity in the terminology of his own religious tradition, if the Muslim gives his testimony in his own specific and prescribed way, each is still witnessing to the One God of Abraham, the Only God and Lord of the Nations.

As for the doctrines of mission found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, let each believer invite all men to join themselves to God in faith. While that form of proselytism which invites a man to reject one Abrahamic religion and join himself to another is too narrow--from this point of view--let us not disparage or condemn any man who experiences a genuine act of conversion to a state of faith in God, even if it means substituting one faith community for

another. Let every believer join himself to a genuine community of faith, since there is ultimately only One Community of Faith.

I am not competent to judge whether the foregoing is either acceptable or sufficient to adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths. Perhaps each religion should be content to give its own specific, historically grounded, and symbolically concrete expression of faith in God. Yet, it is perhaps not too much to ask Jews to accept "the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord" (Isaiah 56:6), Christians to accept "everyone who has faith" (Romans 2:16), and Muslims to accept "the people of the book" (Quran 3:64) as fellow believers in the One God.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

The "perennial philosophy" approach to the world religions is just one expression of the thesis of the unity of the world's religions. But, I believe it is an exceptionally subtle approach which posits unity without denying diversity. Indeed, Frithjof Schuon argues that only in and through the diverse manifestations of the Word, the Logos, the Revelation

of God in the great world religions, does man achieve salvation. As Schuon puts it, ". . . the Divinity manifests Its Personal aspect through each particular Revelation and Its supreme Impersonality through the diversity of the forms of Its Word."<13>

Crucial to the "perennial philosophy" approach is the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric. The majority of believers in God, in whatever great religious tradition, have been exoterics, have participated in specific faith communities, affirmed specific creedal expressions of faith, and attached themselves to the specific forms of those communities. A minority of the believers in God, a spiritual elite in the various great religious traditions, have been esoterics, have transcended in diverse ways specific communities, creeds, and forms. Exoterism focuses on community, creed, form. Esoterism, by contrast, focuses on the individual, ineffability, essence. It is not so much the status of "mystic" which defines the esoteric and, therefore, the essence of True Religion. What matters is not the mystic but that which the Intellect of the mystic grasps. According to Schuon, "the universality of esoterism . . . is the same thing as the universality of metaphysic."<14> In his introduction to Schuon's

The Transcendent Unity of Religions, Huston Smith

explains:

Philosophy proceeds from reason . . . whereas metaphysic proceeds exclusively from the Intellect . . . [Intellectual] knowledge not only goes infinitely further than reasoning, but even goes further than faith in the ordinary sense of this term Whereas metaphysic proceeds wholly from intellectual intuition, religion proceeds from Revelation. The latter is the Word of God spoken to His creatures, whereas intellectual intuition is a direct and active participation in divine Knowledge.<15>

For Smith, "faith", "religion", and "Revelation" refer primarily to the exoteric plane, as in the phrase "one religion rather than another." At the esoteric level, a manifestation of Deity occurs which is best described in terms of "metaphysical certitude" with regard to "one universal Truth."

Whether the "perennial philosophy" approach is correct in all respects cannot be settled here. What is important is the decision among believers from different faith communities to seek dialogue and to remain open to the possibility of apprehending unity among the monotheistic faiths.

Is it possible to speak of religions as "forms" and also to speak of the "essence" of religion? Surely the similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam make it easier to propose a

shared vocabulary and a shared grammar of faith than it would be to reconcile all world religions, Eastern and Western. Nevertheless, the apparent unity of the Abrahamic faiths--at least it is "apparent" to me--suggests that a thoroughgoing synthesis of God-belief is possible at the esoteric or metaphysical level. And, furthermore, this transcendent unity of the world religions does not deny or decry the specific exoteric forms into which the world religions delineate themselves. From a Christian perspective, one would say, "There is Christ-Logos in Jesus and beyond." From a universal perspective we would say, "The Deity is manifest through diverse forms of the Word."

A Call for Tolerance and Dialogue

It is not necessary for those who believe in God to accept the "perennial philosophy" approach or to assent to the propositions contained in this tentative and experimental essay. It would be enough, for the present era, if sincere followers of each of the great world religions--and especially Jews, Christians, and Muslims--would pledge themselves anew to tolerance and dialogue with their respective

counterparts. It is surely possible for the genuinely faithful to apprehend that which is true and that which is false in the vast welter of religious doctrines and practices.

NOTES

<1> Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 42.

<2> Paul F. Knitter, No Other Name? (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 1985). I am deeply indebted to Knitter's work in this discussion of Christian attitudes toward other religions.

<3> Ernst Troeltsch, "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions" in Christianity and Other Religions, John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

<4> Arnold Toynbee, The Absoluteness of Christianity (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 117.

<5> Collected Works of Carl Jung, vol. 12, Psychology and Alchemy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 10-11.

<6> Knitter, No Other Name?, chaps. 5-7.

<7> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 1/2, trans. G. T. Thomason and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: Clark, 1956), p. 356.

<8> Carl Braaten, The Flaming Center

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 109.

<9> Lumen Gentium, 16.

<10> Lumen Gentium, 14.

<11> Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations,
vol. 5, Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), p. 125.

<12> See Knitter, No Other Name?, p. 136.

<13> Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity
of Religions, rev. ed., trans. Peter Townsend (New
York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 25.

<14> Ibid., p. 51.

<15> Huston Smith, "Introduction" to Schuon,
The Transcendent Unity of Religions, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

<16> Ibid., pp. xxviii, xxxi.