EIGHT

THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Christians who live in a culture with several religions face deeper problems than differences in doctrine. In many countries of the world, including the United States, you do not have to cross national borders to find yourself surrounded by other religions. Christians have long been a minority in Western universities. But only in the last few decades have other religions become active competitors throughout society.

Christianity in the West faces what Peter Berger has called a "legitimation crisis." Religious plurality[1] is a threat to Christian faith when other religions are perceived as attractive and/or Christian faith is "delegitimated" as a foundation for life. In the United States, "secularism" used to be seen as the major opponent of Christian faith and indeed of all religion. But the feared (or hoped for) process of secularization has proved illusory. People in America are not becoming

less religious. On the contrary, they are more religious, albeit not in relation to the mainstream institutional churches.[2]

In most of the world (excluding Western Europe) the deep religiousness of most people has never been in doubt. In Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America religion is seldom considered optional. Even in China and the formerly communist world religions of all different stripes are resurgent.

Comparative religion studies in universities, seminaries and Bible schools all focus on doctrine and practice. Anthropology, phenomenology, sociology, theology and apologetics are useful tools for such study. But *ethics* is the place where most Christians vividly experience the challenge of other religions.

Ethical Challenges to Christian Truth

The ethical challenge to Christian faith comes from three directions. First is the challenge of aesthetic and spiritual experience. The discovery of great beauty and deep spiritual experience in other traditions challenges the sometimes ugly and shallow practices of Christianity. Second, the virtues and goodness of some believers in other faiths puts to shame the crass egotism and materialism of many Christians. Third, there are great social, economic and political evils practiced in the name of Christianity. In some places, non-Christian cultures produce societies that display a moral excellence unusual in "Christian" countries. Western civilization has failed to provide a universal example for the rest of humanity.

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify and address these challenges to Christian faith. Several major theological attitudes to other religions will be examined. I will suggest a dialectical approach that holds in tension the good and evil in all religions. This perspective calls for dialogue, humility and honest conviction.

The Challenge of Aesthetic and Spiritual Experience

Buddhism. When I lived in Berkeley, through a consultation on ethics and nuclear weapons I developed an unlikely friendship with a prominent nuclear physicist. Michael May, formerly director of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, is a Zen Buddhist. One day he invited me to a *zazen,* or meditation sitting, at the local Zen center. Starting at 5:00 a.m., we meditated in utter silence and stillness for over an hour. Unlike the Buddhists there, I meditated on the goodness of God. But I was profoundly touched by the simplicity, beauty and tranquillity of the experience.

In later conversations May expressed his gratitude for years of disciplined Zen practice. He said that if he had found a Christian program of meditation with the disciple and rigor of Zen, he would have followed it. In any case, the differences in religious teachings were unimportant to him since "it is the experience and practice that matters." Sometimes when listening to a dull sermon or singing an inane hymn, I think back with regret to the fulsome silence of the Zen hall.

Shortly after the *zazen* experience my family and I were in Kyoto, Japan, where we visited many ancient temples. Some filled us with awe because of their exquisite beauty and harmonious peace. It is good just to know that such places exist in the world! I saw my own wonder reflected in my children's eyes and sensed all of our questions about how another religion could mediate such a great aesthetic, spiritual experience.

A missionary who spent twenty-eight years in Sri Lanka said that when he went to the mission field he believed Christian faith was unique and other religions were false. All that changed when he visited a Buddhist holy place, Anuradhapura. There he experienced

such a sense of peace that he felt he was truly in the presence of God. The difference in faiths no longer mattered. The missionary became convinced that all religions include love and compassion. From then on he saw his ministry not as "creed" but rather as "need." Because of the great beauty and depth he experienced in another religious context, he lost his faith in the unique truth of the Christian gospel.

Hinduism. Only the most insensitive fail to see spiritual and aesthetic excellence in the people and practices of other religions. In a Hindu temple the use of flowers, food, incense, dance, music and art as vehicles of praise proclaims a rich tradition which makes Christian worship sometimes appear shallow, cold and overintellectual. In Hindu Bali I was totally unprepared for the artistic beauty, playfulness and joy that seem inherent to Balinese religion.

One evening in a Balinese village we saw a long procession of beautifully dressed women carrying magnificent flower and fruit offerings on their heads to the temple. Donning appropriate Balinese dress, we followed and were treated to a wonderful evening of entertainment. Dances, dramas, laughing children, chanting adults, serious priests—the whole village was there. This was no show put on for tourists. Nor was it a major festival. It was just ordinary life. Extraordinary!

Islam. Spiritual practices often strike us at a deeper level than doctrines. At a World Council of Churches consultation on Christian education in a Muslim context, I led a worship session using the forms of Muslim ritual prayer. Having announced my plan several days before the service, I was amazed at the anxiety it generated. Liberals who would think nothing at sacrificing Christology for the sake of interreligious dialogue were noticeably nervous about participating in a Muslim form of ritual prayer.

The only thing in the entire *sholat* that might be rejected on doctrinal grounds is the affirmation "Muhammad is the Prophet of God." This phrase was changed to "Jesus is the Son of God." The service began with the wonderfully chanted Arabic call to prayer and included removal of shoes, ritual washings accompanied by prayers of repentance, affirmations of the mercy and greatness of God, and prayers of praise accompanied by various prostrations.

As in the *zazen,* I found that a foreign act of worship gave me a new experience of God. As I repeatedly prostrated myself, forehead to the ground, and extolled the greatness of God, I was profoundly impressed with my own unworthiness before the almighty and holy God. Even more amazing was my imagination of what it must be like to structure your life around prayers like that, five times a day, for as long as you live! It's easy to see why *Islam* means submission. Now I can better appreciate the frequent calls to prayer blasted over loudspeakers from mosques near our home. They remind me of God's greatness and the goodness of worship. As the 4:00 a.m. call puts it, "Prayer is better than sleep!"

The challenge of virtue in other religions is not just intellectual. We feel in our senses and emotions the goodness of a foreign faith. This may weaken our confidence in the universal truth of Christian faith even while our mind continues to believe orthodox Christian doctrine. The ethical imperative of mission may lose its urgency.

Other religions have a great deal to teach Christians about beauty and worship. Religions are vehicles of the highest aspirations and longings of the human spirit. They provide basic foundations to whole cultures. Christians believe all people are made in the image of God. The Word of God is at work in everyone who comes into the world (Jn 1:9). The kingdom of God cannot be equated with the church; nor should we entirely discount evidence of God's work in non-Christian

religions.

The dark side of religious experience. Unfortunately, this sanguine picture must be balanced with the dark side of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Religions are too often inane, tyrannical and demonic. First, religion is not only a vehicle of "the highest aspirations of the human spirit" but also a vehicle of narrow, petty, superstitious and inane sensibilities. Of course it is unwise to judge others, especially from strange cultures. What is inane to me may be deeply meaningful to you. Still, kitsch, sentimentality and superficiality are ubiquitous. The "worshiper" waving incense in front of a garish idol in hopes of good luck in her mahjong game is easier to pity than to admire.

It is more serious when religious experience is used as a weapon to oppress the weak. The Marxist critique of religion as the opiate of the people has a lot of truth to it. Buddhist monks pressure followers into hours of chanting when their needs would be better addressed by thought and work. Muslim mullahs enforce strict conformity to rigid rituals in spite of the hardship it places on people who are already dirt poor. Hindu mendicants live their lives in severe deprivation in search of release from suffering.

Third, religious experience is also a vehicle of the demonic. Contrary to my Western education, I believe there are real demons and evil spirits that use religion to subjugate and destroy people. Aesthetic and spiritual experience can be the channel of degradation and oppression. In Indonesia the line between "spiritual" and "material" is not so distinct as in the West. Converts to Christianity sometimes experience great release from fear and bondage to spiritual oppression.

One of my most profound spiritual/aesthetic experiences occurred in a Hindu temple in Calcutta when I was twelve years old. Having lived in Hong Kong, I was used to seeing temples and idols. But nothing had prepared me for the overwhelming sense of the presence of great

evil as we entered this temple. I was terrified and experienced vivid nightmares for days afterward. Certainly there is no way to evaluate such an experience objectively. But I think I was in the presence of evil powers that had taken control of some of the worshipers.

The demonic may be seen at many different levels of spiritual experience. Religious art is often nightmare art that makes Hollywood horror movies appear tame in comparison. The gods appear not only crazy but horrible. When religious art combines kitsch with horror, as in the Tiger Balm Gardens in Hong Kong, the net effect is nauseating. The demonic, working through deep or shallow spiritual experience, is active at the individual level in personal oppression, in groups of people under the control of a cultic leader and in major social movements such as Nazism and the Serbo-Croatian-Muslim war, in which cruelty exceeds the limits of understanding.

The tendency in the overrationalized West is to treat "principalities and powers" as personal beings if you are Pentecostal, as structures of injustice if you are a social activist, as mythological representations of human experience if you are liberal and as doctrines if you are evangelical. I see no reason that they may not be all four.[3]

The Challenge of Goodness in Non-Christians

Most of us have been gifted with acquaintance with a few people whose sheer goodness is stunning. They are "salt of the earth" people. We may also know many more who, while not so outstanding in the saint department, are good, solid folks who show more than their fair share of the "fruit of the Spirit." More than a few Christians, including myself, owe their conversion to the witness of such people. Their faith, hope and love are a powerful attraction. They make us believe that all the rhetoric of faith may just possibly be true.

Are Christians better people than non-Christians? What happens, then,

when you keep running into really good people who are not Christians but devout believers in another faith? The easiest way to avoid the ethical challenge of the virtuous pagan is to confine your relationships with non-Christians to "ministry." If you always are in the position of preacher, teacher or minister, you are much less likely to face a human being whose life may put yours to shame. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out, we are not confronted with other faiths but with other believers.

Just as the lack of goodness in fervent Christians may be the most powerful argument against Christianity, so the goodness in non-Christians is a powerful argument for a relativistic attitude to other religions. The many "ordinary," good non-Christians are more challenging than the occasional saint. We may view Mahatma Gandhi as an exception, as unique or even as a secret Christian (not likely). No such luck with your everyday virtuous Hindu. In light of the extravagant hospitality of a poor Muslim farmer, we may wonder who first taught us to love our enemies. In the face of the tranquillity and compassion of a Buddhist monk, we may wonder who knows more about the peace that passes understanding.

In Muslim Pakistan my family was repeatedly impressed with the devotion, goodness and honesty of some of the serious Muslims we met. As we rode up into the Himalayan mountains in an ancient bus, I sat next to a devout Muslim who was deathly carsick. This tended to limit the possibility of conversation, since he had his head out the window half the time and was white as a sheet (no mean feat for a Pakistani!). My first surprise was that in his excruciating nausea he seemed genuinely concerned that he might be disturbing me. As the poor man staggered from the bus at a prayer stop, before refreshing himself and attending to his prayers he guided us to a nearby restaurant, explained what there was to eat and gave the waitress instructions on our behalf.

During the eighteen hours we shared the bus, although he obviously felt awful he was unfailingly considerate, dignified and thoughtful of our needs. As we ascended the mountains and darkness covered the snowy peaks, we were sore, miserable and exhausted from the constant jostling. Freezing drafts of wind penetrated our tropical clothes, but our twelve-year-old son was too tired to care and fell asleep on the floor. I knew I was sitting by an angel when my Muslim neighbor quietly took off his own coat and laid it over my son. When we arrived in Gilgit at 3:00 a.m., all the passengers hurried off to find a bed. As we stood in the dark feeling lost, our sick benefactor came back to lead us to a decent hotel before disappearing forever into the night.

This is just one story out of dozens that could be told of kindness, gentleness and integrity coming from Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Christians—people who give without expecting a reward. Of course it would be easy enough to match the good stories with bad ones. There are thieves, hypocrites and cruelly arrogant followers of all the world's religions.

There are no statistics to determine whether a higher percentage of Christians are "brave, honest, loving, peaceful and true." But even if such a thing could be demonstrated, it would not vitiate the question: If Christianity is the only truth, why are there so many devoted religious people whose virtues outshine those of many Christians?

John Hick argues that there is essential parity between the world religions in terms of good and evil effects on people. He says,

> Each tradition has constituted its own unique mixture of good and evil . . . some of its aspects promoting human good and others damaging the human family. In face of these complexities it seems impossible to make the global judgment that any one religious tradition has contributed more good or less evil, or a more favorable

balance of good and evil, than the others.[4]

Hick argues that the failure of Christianity to produce more good people or just societies leads to the conclusion that it should no longer be considered the one and only truth. This is a leap in logic that nevertheless retains some intuitive force. Simple modesty and a desire not to arrogantly assert that we have all the truth may make a Christian hesitant to claim that Christ is the only way, truth and life.

The real issue here is not salvation by grace as opposed to works. Knowing that all our righteousness is as filthy rags before a holy God and that only grace, appropriated by faith, can bring us new life does not answer this ethical challenge of pluralism. The question is, Where is the new life that should be mediated by faith in Christ? Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." Could it be that the Holy Spirit is failing the body of Christ?

A negative assessment of non-Christian practices. Often Christians deny that ethical excellence in non-Christians poses any threat to Christian faith. First, there *are* many Christians whose lives exemplify Christian virtues. Their stories help substantiate the goodness and truth of Christian faith but do not answer the questions posed by pluralism. Second, crime and evil in society are associated with people who are not committed Christians. But the law-abiding virtues seem to correlate with any disciplined religious devotion rather than specifically Christian commitment.

Third, evil sometimes reaches its zenith in religious leaders like the Ayatollah Khomeini, Rajneesh and Jim Jones, as well as quasi-religious tyrants like Hitler and Stalin. In religions there are vices and structures of oppression so dark that the existence of the demonic becomes a lived experience. I remember the horror of seeing little Hindu kids in Singapore pull great weights that were attached to their backs by hooks through their skin. These children had to placate the anger of

their parent's gods. I remember villages in Sumba, a small Indonesian island, devoting all their wealth to be buried with their king while the people lived in miserable poverty and even slavery. All too commonly people face torture or death if they attempt to leave their religion. Women are treated like property and lower castes like dirt.

Comparative religious ethics usually focuses on similarities between the positive moral teachings of the world religions. But any serious consideration of religious ethics must also confront the doctrinal assumptions that are expressed in the dark practices of religion. Ultimately Hinduism knows no evil, Buddhism knows no sin, and Islam tolerates no dissent.

Unfortunately, Christianity is not exempt from the house of horrors. Some who led murderous crusades were even canonized as saints! Perhaps such people were not true Christians. Or at least they were horribly mistaken, victims of a fundamental perversion of Christian ideals.

Should we look at ideals rather than people? A standard freshman objection to Christianity is to point out the Crusades, or the Inquisition, or the hypocrites in the church down the street. In university I used to respond to criticisms of that sort by disassociating myself from the form of Christian religion indicated. I'd say, "Don't look at the church, look at Jesus. In Christ you will see the Truth."

But the same kind of argument can be made on behalf of other religions. In Islamabad, Pakistan, we were fortunate to stay with a devout Muslim innkeeper who was honest and friendly. All over Sharif's house there were pictures of Mecca and verses from the Qur'an. Late one night he tried his best to convert me, or at least to get me to read the Qur'an. It was a novel experience to be on the receiving end of what very much resembled a fundamentalist Christian style of evangelism.

Sharif argued that all truth is contained in God's revelation through Muhammad. The Qur'an is the most perfect book of instructions about how to live. If only the world obeyed God's commandments in the Qur'an, there would be peace and justice.

Perhaps Sharif was afraid I was thinking of all the war and injustice within the Muslim world, for suddenly he gripped my hand and said something very familiar. He said, "I know that Muslims fail to live up to the teaching of the Qur'an. The whole Muslim world is far from what it should be. *But don't look at Islam, look at the Qur'an. There you will find truth.*"

A positive view of good people in other religions. There is no conclusive answer to the challenge of goodness in other religions. It is better to regard the phenomenon from a positive standpoint. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has set eternity into the hearts of men" (NIV). Some of the finest people are drawn to religion in order to find expression for their own sense of transcendence. Others spend their entire lives seeking to fill Pascal's "God-shaped vacuum" in their heart.

Good people who bear the image of God are drawn to religion in part because of a hunger and thirst for righteousness. All of the major world religions express high ethical ideals. As in Christianity, few people live up to these high ideals, but some come closer than others. As Aristotle recognized long ago, people learn virtue by practice. The quality of their home life may have as much to do with how far they succeed as which religion they follow. Religions offer the disciplined patterns of behavior that can provide a road to relative virtue.

The Challenge of Competing Religious Social Projects

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge to Christian confidence in a universal Christian truth stems from a major cultural paradigm shift. Western culture is no longer recognized as the center of the world,

but rather stands accused of hundreds of years of oppression. Christians are confronted with massive *social* evils, both present and past, which are associated with Christianity.

We must live with a long history in which unimaginable cruelty and oppression have been justified by "the true faith." Even now, racism, environmental exploitation, war and sexism are given a Christian warrant in places like the United States, Europe and Africa. In contrast, the nonviolent simplicity of the Hindu Gandhi, the peace and tranquillity promoted by Buddhism, the nature reverence evident in Native American religions and the rejection of Western sexual decadence in many Muslim countries may appear very attractive.

The accusing finger pointed at Christian religion is a sign of the decline of the Western empire. For four hundred years it seemed to Europeans and North Americans that their "civilization" was superior in every way: politically, militarily, economically, socially, scientifically, morally and religiously. Indeed, not only the colonialists but also their subjects seldom questioned English, Dutch, French, Spanish or American superiority. A book like *A Passage to India* delicately shows the paradox of how colonial subjects experience a profoundly internalized inferiority married to repressed rage.[5]

When everyone assumed Western civilizations were more advanced than others, it was easy to assume that Christianity was also superior. Christianity was considered the foundation of Western leadership. Westerners believed Christianity was either the only truth (conservatives) or at least the most advanced religion (liberals).

But since World War II, Western superiority has come under increasing attack, and by now it is no longer assumed. In fact, at least morally and religiously, the opposite is often assumed. With the flourishing of Japan, even scientific superiority can no longer be assumed. But the most devastating attack is in the area of social ethics.

I still remember the time, in 1966, of my first vivid recognition of the evil of my own people. The land of the free and the home of the brave was also the land of systematic genocide of Native Americans, black slavery, exploitative capitalism and neocolonialism. The Vietnam War, the explosion of racial riots, the ecology crisis, the nuclear threat and the linking of world poverty with Western neocolonialism not only called into question the righteousness of Western political institutions but also cast grave doubts on their purported Christian roots.

Imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism are historically linked with the mission of the church. Many people wonder whether another religion might provide a better basis for life on this planet. Many more question whether any religion can claim universality.

Religions as social projects. Religions are not primarily privatized systems of personal morality, belief and experience. They are also the basis of civilizations. Religions are social projects.[6]

The very word *religion* is problematic, since it groups together the ways diverse cultures understand and interact with "the real" as if such ways had certain common characteristics. In fact, different cultures construe what is real in radically different ways.

The category of religion reflects the dichotomizing tendency of Western thought to separate the spiritual from the material world. "Facts" and "values" are considered unrelated. The politically expedient (and necessary) division of church and state promotes the illusion that religion occupies the realm of values—aesthetics, personal ethics and spiritual experience. In this way of thinking, material life—that is, politics, economics and social order (facts)—must be regulated by reason and science. For thousands of years cultures have struggled to separate religious from political power. The particular way this is done in Western liberal democracies has many merits. But it should not confuse the fact that Christianity, like all the world religions, aims to

bring about a certain kind of society.

The core of Jesus' teaching concerns the coming kingdom of God. The Bible conceives this kingdom as universal in scope and characterized by equality, justice and peace. In this kingdom all will bow before the one and only God as revealed in Jesus. History is in motion toward the coming kingdom. Just as Abraham set out for a land he did not know, so the exodus is a paradigmatic story in Hebrew-Christian religion with its image of a journey out of slavery toward freedom.[7] Similarly, Jesus defeated death and promised to return to usher in the kingdom. The dynamic of Christianity is the transformation of the world.

Though no less concerned about justice and equality (at least for males), Islam foresees both a different path and a different goal in the ideal society. God has dictated a single, universal sociocultural structure governed by the written, absolute commandments contained in the Qur'an. Not only the material precepts but also the assumed Arabic social structure are to be perfectly followed. Since the Qur'an contains the actual words of God, it may not be translated out of Arabic.

The ideal Muslim society is one that is faithful to Qur'anic law in every detail. The commandments of God are the basis for a just and righteous social order. The dynamic of Islam is obedience and submission to God. A corollary of submission to God is a strong belief in fate. Consistent with an emphasis on the overwhelming power of God is the acceptance of whatever happens as the fated will of God.

The ideal social project of Hinduism is diverse, since Hinduism has no unified body of doctrines. The safest definition of Hinduism is "Indian religion." Therefore it is not surprising that Hinduism has not spread much beyond India. Nevertheless, certain social features of Indian and Balinese religion are well known and foundational. A clearly defined caste system is based on reincarnation and *karma* (the belief

that your social situation results from merit or guilt built up in past lifetimes). Since all that is is God, the social dynamic of Hinduism is acceptance of all that is.

Hindu philosophy has an impact far beyond the shores of India. Joseph Campbell's popular writings on myth well illustrate the social dynamic of Hinduism. He writes:

> People ask me, "Do you have optimism about the world?" And I say, "Yes, it's great just the way it is. And you are not going to fix it up. Nobody has ever made it any better. It is never going to be any better. This is it, so take it or leave it. You are not going to correct or improve it." . . . James Joyce has a memorable line: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." And the way to awake from it is not to be afraid, and to recognize that all of this, as it is, is a manifestation of the horrendous power that is of all creation. . . . One of the problems of life is to live with the realization of both [good and evil], to say, "I know the center, and I know that good and evil are simply temporal aberrations and that in God's view there is no difference."[8]

Buddhism, as a reform movement built on Hinduism, has the same basic worldview. Nevertheless, the social project of Buddhism is changed by its greater emphasis on individual personal enlightenment. Caste, karma and reincarnation are less central. Anyone may escape the wheel of suffering. In theory the most individualistic of the world religions, Buddhism does promote a compassionate and tranquil society through the eightfold path of morality. But the goal remains individual release from a life characterized by suffering. Thus the Buddhist social dynamic that promotes enlightenment is tranquil detachment from an illusory world of pain.

While the preceding analysis is vastly oversimplified and inevitably includes a Western and Christian bias, it should be sufficient to show

The compassionate, tranquil detachment of Buddhism contains aspects of truth urgently needed by Westerners addicted to greed and power. While Christianity tries to curb the ego with the tools of love, repentance (guilt) and forgiveness, there are additional Buddhist tools (practices) needed for balance. Buddhist detachment may add depth to Christ's teaching about dying to the self. The Thai social structure, in which a large proportion of the population shave their heads and become penniless monks for at least a couple of years of their life, may have some important lessons for us. (Perhaps a mandatory two-year Peace Corps program is a better idea than universal conscription into the military.)

This chapter cannot embark on a full-fledged analysis of comparative religious social virtues. Here I can only suggest a few avenues for mutual ethical enrichment. The acknowledgment of rich values in non-Christian social practices does not require acceptance of the religious doctrines they express. I suspect that religious doctrines are abstractions from narratives that attempt (often mistakenly) to explain or rationalize the existence of social practices. The narratives and the practices are a seamless web that support each other. In any case there are aspects of truth, insights and mythic wisdom in most religious narratives, as well as in religiously based social practices.

There is no Archimedean point of objectivity from which the social practices of other religions can be evaluated. As a Christian, I am to take my critical standard for ethical analysis from the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus. My understanding of biblical Christianity is influenced by my American, white, middle-class, male, intellectual, experiential interpretation of biblical Christianity. Thus I would be wise to listen to other views, not in order to shed my own perspective but to enrich it.

The Christian critique of the Western empire. A particular moral

standpoint is needed for an adequate critique of Western civilization. The declarations of the fall of the Western empire have been premature. Certainly assumptions of Western superiority have taken a beating since World War II. Nevertheless, neocolonialism is alive and well in the form of a Western- (and Japanese-) dominated international economic and cultural order. Viewed from Indonesia, America appears both more powerful and less just than it does to many Americans. The growing gap between the rich and poor of the world belies the powerful Western myth of economic development.

The irony is that the impetus for a critique of the old colonialist world order grew out of a Western, essentially Christian, world-transformative social dynamic. The same dynamic that led to an imperialist drive to make the world over in the image of the "Christian" West also provided the foundation for its critique. Nationalist leaders who led the drive for independence and freedom were almost invariably Western-educated. Marxist theory, which played a significant part in this process, is a Western product and arguably a Christian heresy.

Social movements aimed at overthrowing a powerful social order that had been dominant for hundreds of years were unlikely to stem from non-Christian social dynamics. Social projects that stress submission to God (and fate), acceptance of reality (and caste) as karma, or tranquil detachment from the illusory world of suffering could not provide a narrative capable of fomenting revolution. For that you must turn to the exodus. The tragic fact that "Christian" nations did not live up to their vision of a kingdom of righteousness should not be surprising, given a biblical perspective on sin.[9]

The best hope for a sustained critique of the current international order also stems from a Christian social dynamic. But it is unlikely to come from the West. The center of gravity for a vital Christian social

critique has passed from Western Europe and North America to the Third World. The Bible and the West and God and society all look incredibly different when seen from Latin America, Asia or Africa. The social dynamic of Christianity is no longer primarily Western. The center of vital Christianity is in the Third World, and that is where the vision of the kingdom is best understood. Indeed, crosscultural social ethics may soon be the only ethics worth studying.

Shall we conclude that the Christian social project is the right one and the other religions are all wrong? By no means! Even if we believe a transformational Christian social project is best, there is still much to be learned from the social projects of other religions. The preceding analysis has been vastly oversimplified. The complexity and richness of an ideal Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist social project have hardly been treated justly in these few pages. I have given caricatures to make a point. In order to feel the power of other religious social visions, we must listen directly to the followers of another way.

I am convinced that the biblical narrative is true. The world needs to know Christ. But I am also anxious to hear other narratives that can enrich the practices that grow out of biblical faith. Not all Christians have a "world-transformative" faith.[10] Not all who do agree on what it entails. The massive injustices perpetuated in the name of world transformation should be sobering enough to induce us to listen to other ways of reading the world.[11]

Theological Perspectives on Religions

A common typology of approaches to the plurality of religions uses the categories "exclusivist," "inclusivist" and "pluralist." From a pluralist perspective these three categories represent a trajectory of enlightenment from infantile exclusivism through adolescent inclusivism to mature pluralism. For the exclusivist it is the slippery slope of

apostasy.

I am unhappy with this definition of the debate. There are many different variations of each "type" which are not easily grouped. Moreover, the same person may inhabit different groupings depending on whether the focus is on doctrines, narratives, ultimate salvation or social praxis. *Pluralism* used to refer to the fact that one society contains multiple religions. Recently it has come to be used as a normative term for a particular theology of religions.

"Pluralism" and its variations. John Hick, Paul Knitter and others argue that we need a "Copernican revolution" in our concept of our faith such that "God" or "Ultimate Reality," rather than Christ, is the center. Because of differences in geography and culture, they say, the "One Real" is differently named in different places. The Incarnation of Christ is true only in the truth of the attitude it evokes in the believer. The result is a new theology of pluralism that denies the existence of absolute truth in other theologies. Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Stanley J. Samar- tha and others suggest that mystical experience is the unifying core of all religions.

Langdon Gilkey suggests that the logical conclusion of pluralism is complete relativism. But he wants to retain ethical criteria for judgment. In contrast, Raimundo Panikkar affirms an ontological pluralism: there is no unifying principle between the religions, because ultimate reality is diverse. Different religions may all be ontologically true, because there is more than one ultimate reality.

These various versions of pluralism need to be recognized for what they are: not the enlightened toleration of all religions but the creation of various new (or old) theologies that are at least as competitive with the world religions as they are with each other. Some versions of pluralism have accepted an essentially Hindu perspective on reality. The view of different paths up the same mountain predates the

Christian era. Hindus acknowledge different paths, but they believe only they know what the mountain is all about.

Ethical problems with pluralism. A critical appreciation of wisdom in the social practices of non-Christian religious cultures includes the recognition that from a Christian perspective there is much that must be rejected. Muslim intolerance, Hindu caste and Buddhist moral relativism are incompatible with a transformative Christian standpoint. This is deeply problematic for the moral relativism incipient in pluralism. If all religions are equal and truth is equally unknown by all, then there is no standpoint from which to condemn any religious practices.

This dilemma is vividly recognized by Langdon Gilkey. He comments,

> For in our century intolerable forms of religion and the religious have appeared: in a virulently nationalistic Shinto, in Nazism, in aspects of Stalinism and Maoism, in Khomeini—and in each of these situations an absolute religion sanctions an oppressive class, race, or national power. These represent the "shadow side" of religion, and they are radically destructive. When faced with one of them, we *must* resist, and we must liberate ourselves and others from them.[12]

This is a problem for which Gilkey admits he has no rational answer, since he has already accepted a radical pluralism. He recognizes that

> in order to resist . . . we must ourselves stand somewhere. That is, we must assert some sort of ultimate values . . . the values of persons and of their rights, and correspondingly, the value of the free, just, and equal community so deeply threatened by this theocratic tyranny. And to assert our ultimate value or values is to assert a "world," a view of all of reality. For each affirmed political, moral, or religious value presupposes a certain understanding of humankind, society, and history, and so a certain understanding of the whole in

> which they exist. Consequently any practical political action, in resistance to tyranny or in liberation from it, presupposes ultimate values and an ultimate vision of things, an ethic and so a theology. And it presupposes an absolute commitment to this understanding of things.[13]

Gilkey rather lamely proposes a "relative absoluteness" based in praxis, although he admits that such a solution "both stuns and silences the mind."

Can social praxis unify all religions? Other writers in Hick and Knitter's *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* attempt to find in praxis a unifying point at which pluralists from various religious traditions can work together. The problem is, of course, that there is no unifying praxis that unifies radically different religious narratives. Praxis unifies theory and practice. But in fact neither the theories nor the practices of the different religions are the same. A karma praxis is unlikely to fight for the rights of "untouchables" in India. A Muslim praxis of obedience will probably not struggle for the human rights of non-Muslims in Iran.[14] A Buddhist praxis that expresses detachment is not the most likely source of opposition to torture and political oppression in Myanmar (Burma).

Pluralists also have a narrative that employs universal categories such as "the human community" and "the truth of us all." Such a narrative includes a social project (dialogue and harmony) and a social dynamic (acceptance of all that is as good). But a contradiction arises when someone like Paul Knitter moves from a pluralist conception of doctrine or ultimate salvation to a focus on praxis. When Knitter turns to social ethics, the pluralist turns into an exclusivist. Justice, equality, freedom and peace must exclude injustice, oppression, domination and war. No "rough parity" is acceptable.

Pluralism as a new form of colonialism? In a thoughtful and polemical

essay Kenneth Surin (from Malaysia) suggests that the homogenizing thought of the global theorists of pluralism renders the various religions into a kind of McDonald's hamburger.[15] The specificity of the various religions, as well as their concrete location in particular sociopolitical contexts, is ironed out. Religion is turned into a commodity to be consumed. The choice of which one is "merely cultural." Surin comments, "This liberal subject ranges over the globe only to conclude that, although everything is different everywhere, in the end things are perhaps not all that different after all." [16]

Surin's most provocative thesis is that globetrotting pluralists are actually (though perhaps not consciously) part of "Western cultural hegemonism."[17] Pluralists are drawn from Western and Western-trained Third World elites. Their identity and power are linked to Western cultural and economic dominance. By erasing the deep divisions between different religious perceptions of reality, the pluralists promote their own, Western, "enlightened" view as the standard by which all others are judged. The real issues of conflict and domination are smoothed out. The essential "equality" of religions is demonstrated by how well they measure up to Western ideals of liberal, enlightened modernization. Surin suggests that there is no grit in pluralists to really fight Western domination because they are a part of it.

"Inclusivism." Inclusivists believe that Christian faith is uniquely true but the God of Jesus Christ also works through other religions. Other religions are true in a lesser way. Though pluralists believe they have decisively "crossed the Rubicon" away from the parochial ethnocentrism of inclusivist Christianity, which assigns second-class citizenship to other religions, pluralist perspectives actually shade into the inclusivist grouping. Some writers could appear in either category.

Some inclusivists maintain a respectful agnosticism regarding other religions. Charles F. Andrews, a highly respected missionary who

worked closely with Gandhi for Indian independence, suggested that while for him Christ is the ultimate expression of God, he is unable to judge other religions. Andrews is often fulsome in his praise of Hinduism. In this he sounds just like a pluralist. But when engaged in polemics with Hindus he insisted that Vedantist *advaita* and Christian faith could never be reconciled. Andrews wrote that a Christian could "never accept as finally satisfying a philosophy which does not allow him to believe that love between human souls may be an eternal reality."[18] Thus for ethical reasons he slips into inclusivism.

Charles McCoy, the early Robert Bellah and others suggest we need a "second naiveté" that affirms Christianity as our tradition while remaining agnostic about other traditions. [19] This may sound close to pluralism, but both McCoy and Bellah are deeply attached to the basic assumptions of Christianity in their social thought, such that inclusivism is a better label for them.

Some inclusivists, such as J. N. Farquhar and Teilhard de Chardin, had an evolutionary view of religion with Christianity at the top. Their focus was the relativity and development of truth. Such thinking seems fatally linked to the ethos of the colonial era and finds few theological supporters today. It lives on, however, in some functional approaches to sociology of religion.[20]

More common is a focus on the efficacy of all religions as a means of ultimate salvation. Many writers seem to have a utilitarian view of religion—that different religions serve the same function. Bishop David Brown believes that many followers of other religions

> have a living relationship with God and know the power of his grace in their lives. . . . They worship God as he has been made known to them, in spirit and truth. . . . The God whom they worship is he whom Christians know as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, even though their understanding of his relationship

with the created universe differs from that of Christians.[21]

Brown is an inclusivist in that he believes a true knowledge of God only comes through Christ. Other religions may, however, be a means through which God in Christ saves the followers of other paths.

Panikkar, who speaks out in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* as the most radical of pluralists, sounds just like an inclusivist in some of his writings. He argues that God uses all religions as *instruments* of Christian salvation. All religious practitioners may be saved by Christ through the practices of their own religion. Panikkar writes, "The good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and the good life, through the Mysterion that comes down from him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally."[22]

Most inclusivists are primarily concerned about how to get non-Christians into heaven. Hans Küng has suggested that the non-Christian religions are an ordinary way of salvation, whereas Christianity is a "very special and extraordinary" way to salvation. Paul Tillich and the Niebuhr brothers represent "liberal" and "neo-orthodox" writers who affirm the finality and uniqueness of Christian revelation but believe that God might also work through other religions. Perhaps Karl Rahner is the most cautious example in the inclusivist grouping. Rahner is well known for his acknowledgment of the possibility of "anonymous Christians" in other religions.

Even C. S. Lewis may be grouped among the inclusivists, if his fictional portrayals of the good atheist in *That Hideous Strength* and the good follower of Tash in *The Last Battle* are taken seriously. Of course all universalists—including Karl Barth, whose polemic against "religion" is well known—must be considered inclusivist if belief in ultimate salvation is the defining criterion of the position.

Recently, several evangelical theologians have argued for an inclusivist

approach to the fate of the unevangelized. While rejecting the term "anonymous Christians," Clark Pinnock suggests that followers of other religions may include "pre-Christian" believers in God who are already saved by grace through faith.[23] Similarly, John Sanders rejects both "restrictivism" and universalism and provides a carefully nuanced biblical, theological and historical argument for a hopeful view of the destiny of the unevangelized.[24]

"Exclusivism." The so-called exclusivists also occupy a range of positions. Usually exclusivists concentrate on doctrine and truth issues. They argue that there is an absolute contradiction between Christian faith and other religions. Non-Christian religions are not only inadequate but indeed false. They are going in the wrong direction. If you want to go to New York but set off in the opposite direction, you are not merely taking a different path. It won't help to go faster or find a nicer car. You need to turn around and find the right road.

Fundamentalists frequently see non-Christian religions as vehicles of damnation. Demonic forces use non-Christian religions as a means of holding people in darkness. Religions are just so many roads to hell.

Barth is often identified with the exclusivist position because he saw a radical contradiction between the revelation of God and religion. Barth was keenly aware of the idolatrous tendency of all religions, including Christianity. Religion is the human attempt to grasp and control God. Through religion, according to Barth, "we lock the door against God, we alienate ourselves from him, we come into direct opposition to him."[25] Barth's rejection of all natural theology is well known. What is puzzling to many is the dialectical tension in his thought which led him to an inclusivist position in regard to the ultimate salvation of all.

One of the most outstanding followers of Barth's negative assessment of religion was Hendrick Kraemer. Kraemer's theology avoids Barth's

dialectical extremes. He neither followed Barth's total rejection of natural theology nor accepted his universalism. While the harshness of his condemnation of all religion moderated as he got older, Kraemer maintained the sharp Barthian division between God's grace and all human efforts.

> The cross and its real meaning—reconciliation as God's initiative and act—is antagonistic to all human religious aspirations and ends, for the tendency of all human religious striving is to possess and conquer God, to realize our divine nature (*theosis*). Christ is not the fulfillment of this but the uncovering of its self-assertive nature, and at the same time the rebirth to a completely opposite condition, the fellowship of reconciliation with God.[26]

An Indian evangelical, Ken Gnanakan, is critical of the Barthian exclusivist position for its confusion of the absolute claims of the Bible with a Christian's relative relation to a non-Christian.[27] Such absolutism, according to Gnanakan, leads to a colonial Christian mentality. Exclusivism projects an attitude that is hard to square with the example of Christ. The harshest criticisms of Christ were directed at the exclusivist Pharisees. Barth's style of exclusivism, perhaps in reaction to optimistic evolutionary liberal theology, posits too extreme a discontinuity between the Word of God and natural human understanding. To see *no* continuity between the revelation in Christ and human religious strivings betrays a peculiar kind of blindness.

Regarding eternal salvation, some evangelicals and fundamentalists argue that any compromise with the stark fact that only in Christ is there escape from eternal damnation undermines the imperative for evangelism. It is a capitulation to creeping relativism. But some prominent evangelical leaders have warned that while the Bible is clear that forgiveness and redemption come only through the blood of Christ, it is less clear regarding how God will judge those who do not

know Christ.

There is much we don't know. Clark Pinnock reminds us that according to Jesus, on Judgment Day there will be some major surprises (Mt 25:31-46). While rejecting the suggestion that some do not need to repent and believe the gospel, Pinnock speculates on the basis of 1 Peter 3:19 that those who have never had the opportunity to know Christ may be given a second chance after death.[28]

John Stott also urges caution against Christians' usurping God's prerogative of judgment. Stott reminds Christians of the incredible mercy of God revealed on the cross and that we are never definitively told how God will judge those who do not know Christ. Stott even cherishes "the hope that the majority of the human race will be saved." He says,

> But we need to remember that God is the Creator of all humankind, and remains infinitely loving, patient and compassionate towards all whom he has made. Yes, and he is also everybody's "Father," both in the sense that they live and move and have their being in him, deriving the richness of their human life from his generosity (Acts 17:25-28), and in the sense that he continues to yearn for his lost children, as in the parable of the prodigal son.[29]

This chapter is not intended to explore the complex theological and ethical issues involved in an understanding of judgment, heaven and hell. Suffice it to say that along with Pinnock and Stott, I am happy to acknowledge my ignorance of exactly who will be saved through the death of Christ. I trust in the mercy and justice of God. The New Testament is clear that only through the death and resurrection of Christ is there forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. There is no other way to earn salvation. If this were not so, the incarnation and crucifixion would be unnecessary. Evangelization would lose all urgency. But nowhere in the Bible are we given definitive information

on who will be saved and who will be damned. In our ignorance (and hope) we may leave the last judgment to God.

Dialectic: Good and Evil in All Religions

In this chapter I have tried to maintain a dialectical stance toward other religions. On the one hand, non-Christian religions are good and filled with truth and beauty. Many of the greatest achievements of humankind have come through religious devotion. Religions also mediate many of the ordinary everyday virtues that sustain a decent society. On the other hand, they are idolatrous vehicles of demonic oppression and darkness. Not only do religions lack truth, but they're also the source of some of the greatest evils in history. On the everyday level, religions constrict and tyrannize life in petty and large ways.

Pluralistic appreciation. In one sense I am a pluralist. I am not comfortable with the idea of a "rough parity" in the achievements of religions, because it suggests the comparing of apples and potatoes. But in regard to cultural and social achievements I am unable to claim Christian, much less Western, superiority.

An Indonesian pastor asked me if Western culture, because of its Christian foundations, was superior to Javanese culture. I found it a very complex question. But it was clear to me that the answer was no. Not only the great social evils associated with Western culture but also the current quality of life in Western countries make it difficult to affirm the superiority of Western culture. I am not at all sure that an inhabitant of a small fundamentalist Christian town in America has a better life than a Muslim inhabitant of a village in Java.

The two cannot be objectively compared. But it is safe to say that each setting has some great advantages over the other. There are villages in Indonesia where locks and burglary are unknown, police do

not exist and crime is negligible. Families are very tightly connected, the weak are cared for, and the whole village works together for survival. People are poor, but they have time for each other and live in close contact with nature.

Western culture, including that fundamentalist town, is far from being primarily structured in ways consistent with biblical faith. There are many other streams of influence that often overpower Christian ideals. But even if Christianity were the only major influence, human beings have a way of twisting power structures to their own personal benefit. In contrast, it is one of the mysteries of the human spirit that people with very few resources and very little freedom sometimes construct very rich lives.

There are many wonderful aspects of Western social life that systematically structure Christian social morality. The rule of law, social equality, individual human rights, democratic institutions and a decent telephone system (just kidding) are things to be treasured. Writers as diverse as Max Weber, Basel Matthews and Francis Schaeffer have argued that Christianity is the basis of most of the world's greatest cultural achievements. Such claims may be true, but they are no easier to prove than the pluralist assumption of a "rough parity" in religious achievements. More troubling is the equally unprovable claim that Christianity is the source of all the greatest evils of the modern world.[30] It seems quite likely to me that Christian ideas are *one* of the sources of both the greatest evils and the greatest goods of the modern world. It is very unlikely that Christianity is the only source of either.

In my ultimate epistemology I am a pluralist. Christians do not have a greater natural capacity to know the truth than anyone else. Faith is a gift not based on intellectual ability.[31] We believe God's Spirit illuminates the understanding of those with faith. But we cannot prove that this spiritual illumination is truer than that of a Zen master in his

cell. If I know the God of the universe and others believe in radically mistaken narratives about "life, the universe and everything," in a sense it is an accident of geography. They were born in Hindu India while my parents are Christians. Ultimately we cannot prove beyond the possibility of reasonable doubt that Jesus was God incarnate. Only on the "last day" will our faith become sight.

But I *believe* Christianity is true. Through intellect and experience I have many reasons to *think* it is true. When I live by its premises I *experience* its truth. I am *committed* to the God of Jesus Christ, before whom I bow. My whole life is structured by the central convictions of my faith. Through the eyes of my faith I *see many evidences* of its truth (Heb 11:1). Faith is the substance that ties me to the community into which I was born. Our decision to be loyal to God in Christ is not just an individual decision based on an exhaustive examination of evidence. It is a personal and communal response to the concrete actions of God in history. Our faith does not rest on individual judgment alone, but on our acceptance of a "great cloud of witnesses" recorded in the Bible and in the past and present history of the church.

Nevertheless, by my own premises we are all finite sinners. Both our limited wisdom and our sin make us poor judges of the ultimate meaning of life. There is no proof that all Christians are not living a dream. Such a position is different from simply affirming one's tradition from a stance of basic agnosticism. I cannot prove justice or love exist. I cannot prove that my wife and children love me. I cannot prove any of the things I would stake my life on. That does not make them any less true.

But if I cannot prove the truth of what I believe, still less can I prove the falsehood of what millions of others believe. Nor do I have to. I am not their judge. I am just a fellow sinner on the way.

Inclusive acknowledgment of the mystery of grace. There is a sense in which I am an inclusivist. Christianity is the lens through which I view other religions. Neither the primary narratives of the major religions nor the pluralist narrative gives an adequate account of human life. The incarnation of God in Christ is the key for understanding both God and history. It is also the definitive event through which God offers forgiveness and new life to humankind. The social project of Christianity, which anticipates the coming kingdom, is the only hope for all humanity.

Nevertheless, I believe God works through other religions. Other religions may be vehicles of grace, both for individuals and for societies. Wherever Buddhists succeed in restraining evil through promoting detachment from egoistic impulse and the result is a tranquil society, God may be at work. Wherever Hindus promote a celebration of the goodness of all created life and the result is a society that reverences all creation, God is glorified. Wherever Muslim law results in a society structured by worship and moral discipline, we may see hints of the kingdom.

Exclusivist focus on truth. Different religions contain aspects of truth that render them capable of becoming means of grace. But taken as a whole, they are not merely incomplete but indeed false. They point in the wrong direction. Therefore there is a sense in which I am an exclusivist. All human beings need Christ, not just for personal and ultimate salvation but because their societies need to be transformed by the values of the kingdom of God. Evangelism is morally imperative. Opposition to slavery, sexism, poverty, human-rights abuses and racism is a fundamentally Christian value needed by all cultures.

At issue is not just different cultural ways of relating to an unknowable ultimate reality. The issue of truth is fundamental. It is self-deluding, flabby thinking to suppose that all religions are equally

true. Material and social reality are radically different if there is a loving, just and personal God rather than an impersonal ultimate reality that contains both good and evil. If evil is a reality hated by God, a reality that must be combated, it implies a very different society from one in which evil is illusory and suffering is fated by karma or God. False narratives give rise to unjust social institutions.

The most basic truth question of all is whether the God of the universe was uniquely incarnated in Christ. If Jesus is the Son of God who died for the world, then any conception of a "rough parity" of religions is literally nonsense. It is simply a fancy way of saying no religions are true. If the Christian story is the revelation of God's actual action in history, then the kingdom of God is really coming and we had better get ready.

Dialogue, Humility and Conviction

Interreligious dialogue. Of the many good reasons for relating to believers in other religions, the most compelling is necessity. Most countries of the world are multireligious. Believers in different traditions have to get along with each other for everyone's benefit. Formal interreligious dialogue sponsored by multinational ecumenical groups is only a small part of the interchange that is taking place every day. Dialogue is necessary for survival.

Living in the largest Muslim country in the world, I can well understand the Marxist who remarked in the context of a Marxist-Christian dialogue, "If we do not speak with one another now, we will shoot one another later."[32] In many parts of the world relations between Muslims and Christians are very tense. Violence lies just under the surface.

Religions do not actually dialogue, people do. The interchange is more often in an office, in the street or at a school function for the kids

than in an impressive conference room. When you cross cultures, everyone you meet may be the follower of a strange tradition. Each meeting is an opportunity to increase mutual understanding, defuse potential conflict, enrich perceptions and, of course, pass on the good news.

Certainly evangelism and conversion are one of the goals of dialogue. How primary they are depends on the situation. There are two (or more) parties in a dialogue, and both of them influence why they are talking to each other. It may be because they like each other. Or because one is lonely. Or because they work together. Or because they are curious about each other. What each party wants from the relationship will, through negotiation (usually unconscious), determine what happens. Evangelism should not be a unilateral activity. Nor should good news be withheld from those who are ready to hear it.

When I started going to San Quentin Prison once a week to visit with prisoners, I had no intention of doing evangelism. I wanted to learn from the prisoners how they saw the world. And I wanted to be friends with people, some of whom have not had a visitor or a letter for years. But something about the situation turned me into an evangelist. It's pretty hard not to talk about the good news with men who are so used to bad news. The love of God and the possibility of forgiveness were like water in the desert to some of my new friends. Some wanted badly to be converted.

Often dialogue may take place because Christians share goals with people in other religions. In September 1993 we held a conference cosponsored by Christian, Muslim and Buddhist universities on religion and the environment. Papers with different religious perspectives on the same problems were presented. The purpose was not dialogue per se, but to find ways to work together on a problem bigger than any of our communities.

In relating creatively to people from other religions, praxis is crucial. By our actions people have a chance to see what we mean. Relationships with people in other religions is a part of praxis.

Two dispositions toward knowledge and truth make interreligious friendships possible. Dispositions are settled attitudes or orientations. The two are epistemological humility and ontological conviction.

Epistemological humility. Epistemological humility means a humble attitude toward what we know and do not know. Everything we know, including the story of our faith, we know through the particular eyes of our culture, age, sex, social position and so on. Much that we think we know we actually misunderstand, are confused about or know imperfectly. "Now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor 13:12). We can see only a little bit of reality, and none of it perfectly. All that we do know is a gift.

Much that we know best about our faith we know through our experience. That provides a starting point for dialogue with someone from another religion. We can tell him or her our story. But my experience is finite and "peculiar," even if I happen to be the most experienced person in the world. Anyway, I happen *not* to be the most experienced person. We need to be humble toward someone from another religion because we don't actually know much about infinite reality. And our vision of what we have been given (revelation) is distorted by sin.

Epistemological humility is also necessary because we do not know what the other person knows. One thing is sure: followers of another religion know many things of which their Christian friends have no idea. They have narratives, practices and experiences that will remain a mystery to us until they are willing to share them. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit has been working in their lives. I believe the Holy Spirit is actively seeking every person on earth.

Epistemological humility means an openness to the other, a willingness to learn and a respect for the other's right to speak or remain silent. It means a willingness to listen and not rush in with a prerecorded answer before we understand the other's question. It may be that God wishes to speak *to you* through the other, rather than vice versa. In the stranger we may meet the face of Christ. If Christ should address you, it would be a shame if you didn't listen because you were too busy doing evangelism!

Epistemological humility makes possible true dialogue between committed followers of different faiths. It allows you to accept the other as strange and not require her or him to be like you before you speak with each other. A Muslim student who studied in our program was a great example to me of this. His ears were open and his senses wide to understand a Christian perspective on social reality.

Epistemological humility is not to be confused with theological pluralism. Some pluralists have it and some don't. Some only want dialogue with other pluralists. If only people who agree that all religions are equally valid talk to each other, it may be questionable if real interreligious dialogue has taken place.

With sufficient epistemological humility, people with extreme differences in opinion can learn from each other. In fact, the greater the differences, the greater the potential benefits of dialogue. Those about to pick up stones against their enemies most need to talk with them. One of my most fruitful academic friendships is with an agnostic Jewish scholar of religious phenomenology who blames Christianity for most of the evils of the world. We have great arguments! We both find each other's views fascinating, in part because they are so strange to us.

Ontological conviction. The necessary dialectical partner to humility is ontological conviction. Without conviction about what you believe,

humility regarding the limitations of knowledge easily degenerates into intellectual flabbiness. Epistemological humility can become an excuse not to be committed to anything at all controversial. Humility by itself can be cheap. It requires no commitment to that which is costly. Ontological conviction requires the courage to commit yourself on issues that really matter.

There is something disturbingly weak about some liberal Christianity. Epistemological humility has been taken to such an extreme that good Christians are afraid to admit they believe anything for fear of being seen as arrogant! What they *do* believe about ultimate questions (such as the Incarnation) is categorized as personal, purely subjective religious truth. Such truth is difficult to talk about and hardly worth dying for.

Often epistemological humility is assumed to *require* lack of conviction about ultimate reality. After all, who are we to say we know the Truth and everyone else is wrong? It is much safer to simply say, "According to my tradition there is a loving God." This avoids any public appraisal of the truth of the claim. Whether there really is a loving God of the universe becomes incidental. It is "religious truth" and therefore beyond rational discussion. It is a matter of belief, not reason.

But why believe it at all if you do not think it is true? Despite "Pascal's wager,"[33] I think it is better not to believe in that which is not true. If there is no ultimate reality, or if ultimate reality is radically different from the one portrayed in the Christian narrative, I would prefer to know it and deal with the consequences. I doubt that in the eyes of God a purely utilitarian "faith" would appear preferable to an honest atheism.[32]

Some people are content to have little conviction but simply to "follow their tradition" because of its emotional, aesthetic or social value. Such religion is just waiting to be buried. A living faith capable

of inspiring the costly struggle to see God's will done on earth must be based on deep convictions about the nature of reality. Jesus urged his followers to daily face the possibility of death by torture (Lk 9:23). They were urged to care not for their lives in comparison to seeking first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). You have to believe something is true in the real world before you will die for it.

Real convictions, if accompanied by humility, make dialogue possible. Because I really believe in Christ, I can respect someone who really believes in Buddha. I do not reduce her beliefs to cultural, symbolic categories but am willing to address them as real, legitimate claims about the nature of the world. I also have convictions about the ultimate.

Convictions also make dialogue *desirable*. I want to talk to someone in a strange tradition because I believe truth matters. Christian convictions impel the believer to care enough about the other to tell him the truth. Humility requires that I respect him enough to listen to his convictions and openly consider their truth claims.

Convictions are not based on logical or empirical proof. No knowledge is based on such proof. All knowledge must begin with assumptions or beliefs. Christian convictions are rooted in God's self-revelation. Like all other important matters, they are subject to reasoned discussion. They are not private. They have been publicly debated, defended, preserved, developed and interpreted by a continuous community for thousands of years. They are part of a narrative that makes sense of life. Christian convictions entail participation in the social project of the community that is formed by the Christian story.