As we have seen throughout these chapters, it is usually the case that a problem or perspective in recent and contemporary theology may be associated with a single thinker. Certainly, many may be involved in the discussion of such a problem or the development of such a perspective, but it is often one person that towers over the others as making the most decisive or vivid contribution. In the discussion of religious pluralism, the towering figure has been John Hick.

Like those of many others, Hick’s story, as he himself tells it, is the tale of someone starting out as a young person on a fundamentalist track and ending up on a quite liberal one. Born in 1922 in England, as a child Hick was taken to the local Anglican church services, which he later described as “a matter of infinite boredom.” A law student at the University of Hull and influenced by the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship there, he experienced a religious conversion to a fundamentalist brand of Christianity, as he describes it. Intending to enter the ministry, he joined the Presbyterian Church of England. During the
Second World War he was a conscientious objector. By the time he had received his undergraduate degree at Edinburgh University and his doctorate in philosophy at Oxford and had been through his ministerial training and served for a few years as a Presbyterian minister, he was leaving behind what he perceived as his former theological narrowness. He taught at Cornell University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Cambridge University, the University of Birmingham, England, and the Claremont Graduate School in California. (Upon his arrival at Princeton, there was a stir among American Presbyterians over whether Hick’s ministerial status should be honored.)

During these years he made important contributions to “analytic” philosophy and produced many influential volumes including: Faith and Knowledge, Evil and the God of Love, and Eternal Life. It was already in Birmingham, however, with its large communities of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, that he had begun to be opened to the larger world of religion. This experience, followed by extensive world travels and the study of world religions, led eventually to his culminating contribution—many discussions and books in defense of religious pluralism, most notably An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent.

Upon his retirement from the Claremont Graduate School, he returned to Birmingham England, where is he is a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in the Humanities at the University of Birmingham.

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What’s the Problem?

One of the most pressing issues at the turn of the millennium—and it will only get worse—is the question of religious pluralism. In recent years the spectacular and rather sudden advances in transportation and communication have made the world very small and our awareness of other cultures very large. Perhaps the most obvious consequence of this increased cosmopolitan consciousness, as we might call it, is our growing awareness specifically of the great variety of world religions, with their varying conceptions and stories about the divine, creation, revelation, salvation, the future life, and the like. This in turn has thrown into the sharpest relief an age-old issue that, until now, has largely lain dormant: religious exclusivism vs. religious pluralism.

So our world has gotten smaller and our awareness of other cultures—and other religious traditions—has gotten bigger. What’s the problem? The problem is that many of these traditions have claimed exclusive authority for their teaching—claiming that their teaching is true, and the others, where they conflict with it, are false. More specifically, such traditions maintain that they and they alone provide the means of salvation. Certainly this is the case with the Western traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—at least in their original and traditional versions. Christianity, for example, has insisted in one way or another throughout its history that extra Christum nulla salus, “outside of Christ there is no salvation.” No wonder that such a perspective is called religious exclusivism.4

Of course, in the case of traditional Christianity, as well as other exclusivist perspectives, such a claim could mean various things. It could mean “hard” exclusivism, the doctrine that there is no salvation apart from a knowledge of and conscious commitment to Christ. Or it could mean “soft” exclusivism, sometimes called “inclusivism,” the idea that it is only through Christ that God has effected salvation, though this may include many who have never heard the gospel. And, of course, there are exclusivists who are at the same time universalists—believing that salvation is possible only through Christ, though God will, in fact, save all. In time we will have to come back to these distinctions.

It would seem that, whatever problems may arise, Christian exclusivism is firmly rooted in the biblical teaching. It is, undeniably, part of the very fabric of original and traditional Chris-
Christianity. There are, in fact, several well-known and explicit exclu-
sivistic pronouncements in the New Testament. The two best-known
elements of these are: the statement attributed to Jesus in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and the statement from Peter's sermon in Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." There are many more such claims that directly or indirectly affirm that Christ and Christ alone is the divinely appointed means of salvation. But it is not a matter of toting up a number of biblical passages. As we said above, this is so much a part of the biblical-Christian teaching and vision that it is hardly deniable by anyone reading the text with honesty. However, it is one thing to grant that exclusivism is present in the text, and another thing to grant that it is true. Some, who even call themselves Christian theologians, do not grant that it is true.

Why not? For many, religious exclusivism in any form, with its perceived egocentrism, intolerance, and arrogance, is at best jarring and distasteful—especially so for those enamored with "political correctness"—and should drive us to a more accommodating view, such as religious pluralism. Negatively speaking, religious pluralism is the denial that any one religious tradition has a monopoly on salvific truth. Positively, it is the affirmation that the great religions of the world represent, under the guise of different cultural expressions, essentially the same religious truth and teaching about salvation. As the well-worn image has it: one hand, many fingers.

The pluralistic hypothesis is propelled, largely, by two observa-
vations. First, it is incontrovertible that nearly all of us experience the world as we do, and believe as we do, because of the accidents of birth. Think how different your life and outlook would be if you had been born at a very different time or place. Imagine yourself, for example, having been born in the 1500s in a radically different culture. None of us chose the circum-
stances that have shaped and molded our fundamental beliefs and practices—including religious beliefs and practices. Whether that is good or bad, it is surely a fact of life. Moreover, reflection on this fact may tend to relativize for us our own particular beliefs and practices. The second observation is more controversial. It is the claim that at the center of the world's great religions is found a common or universal core. Those who believe this usually (even predictably) identify this core of authentic religion as an experience with a universal, transcendent reality and a consequent cultivation of selflessness. According to the pluralist hypothesis, this is what all great religions are really about. If that doesn't square with, say, the Bible, then the Bible will just have to be deculturalized or otherwise adapted to our wider and more cosmopolitan awareness.

The conflict of exclusivism vs. pluralism is seen by many, and rightfully so, as cutting to the heart of Christianity, at least as it is biblically and traditionally conceived. Further, it is one of the issues that today divides Christians concerned with what a contemporary version of Christianity should look like. Spearheading one proposed version is John Hick.

Hick's Pluralist Hypothesis

We have already seen that Hick has contributed in many ways to contemporary philosophical, theological, and religious thought. We have also seen that his major—one might even say culminating—contribution lies in his case for religious pluralism. Though the thesis of religious pluralism is very old, Hick has given it a renewed and forceful statement commensurate with the global consciousness that is forcing itself upon us. Hick himself likens his version of religious pluralism to a "Copernican revolution" in theology. He makes this case in num-

 electrocardiogram in the 1930s, one that was designed to recording electrical activity from the heart. The instrument was called the "electrocardiograph." It was used in hospitals to help diagnose heart conditions. The development of the electrocardiogram was a significant advancement in medical technology. It allowed doctors to monitor and measure the electrical activity produced by the heart. This information was crucial in diagnosing disorders such as arrhythmias, heart attacks, and heart murmurs. The electrocardiogram became a standard diagnostic tool in medicine, revolutionizing the way heart conditions were diagnosed and treated. The development of the electrocardiogram was a pivotal moment in the history of medicine, marking a significant advancement in the field of cardiology.
a more popular book with the suggestive title *God Has Many Names*. Far and away the most important, however, is already mentioned *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*.

Several general points need to be made at the outset. First, Hick strikes head-on the culture-centeredness of most religious beliefs—the fact that such beliefs are largely, if not completely, determined by upbringing and cultural environment. According to Hick, we should entertain no illusions about that. He argues that this recognition is the first step towards shedding a religious provincialism that insulates us from the contributions of the wider religious world. “The only reason for treating one’s tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own! . . . let us avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory with the single exception of the particular form enjoyed by the one who is speaking.” Even more pointedly, Hick asks:

Is it compatible with limitless divine love that God should have decreed that only a minority of human beings, those who have happened to be born in a Christian part of the world, should have the opportunity of eternal life? . . . there is nothing to fear in a greater openness to God’s presence within the religious life of all humankind; on the contrary, there is a release from an artificially restricted vision into a greater intellectual honesty and realism and a more mature Christian faith.

Second, we have already used expressions such as “authentic religion” in connection with the pluralist hypothesis. Hick, too, is adamant that not just any old thing that goes under the name of “religion” is worthy of that name. We are confronted on every side by “religions” that thrive on the bizarre or are just plain wacko. These are rejected immediately by the serious religious pluralists, such as Hick. What they have in view, rather, are the great world religions, the religious traditions that for so many centuries have, undeniably, contributed so much to the shaping of religious awareness and the instilling of moral ideals.

Third, Hick thinks that the origins of the world’s great religions was not quite accidental. Rather, there is an identifiable period of human history marked by a kind of concentration or deepening of religious awareness. It’s as if a giant step had been taken on the religious front, more or less at the same time and in different cultures. Hick calls this “the axial age,” signifying a kind of pivot or transition to something new in the religious consciousness. “The axial age was an uniquely significant band of time. With certain qualifications we can say that in this period all the major religious options, constituting the major possible ways of conceiving the ultimate, were identified and established and that nothing of comparably novel significance has happened in the religious life of humanity since.”

The period in question extended roughly from 800 to 200 B.C.E. Associated with it is a panoply of great names, great movements, and great literature. It produced in China—Confucianism and Taoism; in India—Buddhism, the Hindu *Upnishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*; in Persia—Zoroastrianism; in Israel—the great Hebrew prophets and much of the Hebrew Scriptures; and in Greece—Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Hick treats the rise of Christianity and Islam as developments within the prophetic tradition of Semitic religion and Mahayana Buddhism as a development of early Buddhism.

Still more to the point is Hick’s observation that the axial religions represent a shift to soteriology, that is, a concern with personal salvation. Preaxial religions more or less accepted the world as it was. Axial religions realized that something is wrong in the world and recognized that it is our responsibility to fix it.

What is wrong in the world is human self-centeredness; what is called for is a shift—a personal transformation—from a self-centered or egocentric life to a Reality-centered life. This,
says Hick, is what all the great world religions are really about at their core. They all express, in different ways: (1) the recognition of a transcultural and transcendent Reality and Source of all things; and (2) the need to identify oneself with this Reality, to become transparent to it, to be inspired and uplifted by it, and thereby to attain a degree of selflessness or genuine saintliness. The production of saintliness—understood as selflessness or “generous goodwill, love, and compassion”—is, says Hick, the criterion by which we should judge the adequacy and authenticity of a religion. This transformative experience is characteristically wrought over a period of considerable time, requiring the utmost spiritual concentration and self-discipline. In this respect, our models should be the great religious teachers such as the Buddha, Jesus, and other Great-Souled Ones. As for the ultimate end of each of us, Hick advocates universalism, the idea that everyone will eventually be saved, though this may involve a future purgative process and possibly numerous reincarnations.

The transcendent Reality and this transformative experience are, understandably, expressed differently by the great religious traditions. In the attempt to get at the unity-in-diversity of this experience, Hick employs the awkward but instructive expression, “salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.” Such an expression attempts, of course, to draw upon the language of several traditions at once and to suggest that they all come to the same thing. In a remarkably concise way he summarizes his whole project:

I want to explore the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological “spaces” within which, or “ways” along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.12

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One God, Many Faces

It is to be expected, it is natural, and in fact it is inevitable that the world religions’ representations of the Real and their experiences of salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment will differ. We are talking about representations of the Real, for example, that have been molded at the hands of radically different cultures. Surely the most striking difference is between the Real conceived as a personal being and the Real conceived as impersonal. Even here we have variations on both sides. Hick thus uses the plural forms to characterize these as “the personae of the Real” and “the impersonae of the Real.” In this he is reflecting the language of the ancient Roman theater in which the Latin persona meant the mask worn by a performer to indicate his or her role.

Hick examines first the almost universal need or propensity to think-and-experience the Real as personal, that is, as existing as “a center of consciousness.” Clearly, the religious traditions that we are most familiar with do precisely this. We have only to think of Krishna, Vishnu, and Brahma of the Hindus; or Allah of the Islamic tradition; or Yahweh of the Hebrews; or the Heavenly Father taught by Jesus. These are not to be thought of as mere psychological projections, but rather as points at which the Real interfaces different cultural situations. Hick cites Krishna and Yahweh as good examples of how the Real is apprehended as two distinctly different divine personae, each operating in independent cycles of stories. Just as these personae are genuinely rooted in the Real, so the stories that
tell of them and of their deeds are to be distinguished from fantasies and fairy tales. Rather, “the myths of a religious tradition are stories by which the story-telling community lives and in terms of which it understands its existence in the world.”

Likewise with the impersonal conceptions of the Real. We encounter these, for example, in the Brahman of the Vedanta Hindu tradition, the Sunyata of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and the Tao of Chinese religion. Brahman, for instance, is seen as the primordial Reality, the undifferentiated Unity, the “One without a second,” of which everything—including us—is a part. The idea is to overcome the illusion of duality and multiplicity to attain Brahman consciousness. Such impersonal conceptions of the Real, says Hick, are no less stamped by a cultural experience and conceptuality than are the personal ones. In either case there is no such thing as, in Hick’s words, “an unmediated mystical experience of the Real.” More important, whether it be the devout Jew, Christian, Muslim, or theistic Hindu, the Pure Land, Mahayana, Theravada, or Zen Buddhist, what is experienced is a salvific recreation, the dissolution of the ego-boundaries, a liberating transformation. As Hick expresses it:

The spiritual disciplines and the inner resolves and actions through which theists and non-theists change, and the interpretive frameworks in terms of which they understand their own transformation, are very different. And yet the transformation undergone within these diverse forms of the life and systems of self-understanding is recognisably the same. It is this common soteriological process that suggests that the gods and the absolutes that produce it are different modes of presence of the same ultimate transcendent Reality.

Throughout Hick’s development of his pluralist hypothesis and especially here, in his focus on the variety of religious experience, the influence of three western philosophers is apparent. First, he is fond of citing the line from the scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas: “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.” That is, any understanding of any thing is going to be conditioned by and bear the marks of the cognitive faculties—along with their peculiar features and limitations—by which that thing is apprehended. Second, and certainly pervasive throughout Hick’s approach, is his debt to the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant’s great contribution (whether one accepts it or not) was to distinguish between reality as-it-is-in-itself (an sich) and as-it-appears-to-us (Erscheinung). According to Kant, any “theoretical” understanding necessarily takes shape in terms of the intellectual conditions or structures of the intellect that make that understanding possible. Finally, Hick draws upon the well-known insight of the twentieth-century German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: We all “see” and experience things in a way dictated by what we bring to the seeing or experiencing; we are disposed to a certain perspective and interpretation. Clearly all of this provides the philosophical ground for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis.

Hick vs. the Bible

Obviously, Hick has come a long way since his fundamentalist days. Not surprisingly, his Christology—his understanding of the person and work of Christ—has also undergone a radical development.

There is hardly a place in Hick’s global theology for the view that Jesus Christ is the exclusive Son of God, a pre-existent one who enters the world and, through his death and resurrection, effects salvation for those who hear and believe. Hick is greatly
influenced by a rather severe employment of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, which yields a quite different picture of the historical Jesus from the traditional one. In this view, the New Testament portrait of Jesus is the result of early layers of theological development—expansion, embellishment, and strong doses of wishful thinking—superimposed on the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament as we have it provides scant evidence for the divine nature of Jesus, a doctrine that is largely the offspring of early theological speculations and debates, expressed in such formulas and pronouncements as we encounter in the Nicene Creed of 325: “[He is] the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, as the same substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being.”

Such talk seemed like a good idea at the time, and Hick acknowledges that it did in fact serve a purpose. But he argues that it has now become embarrassing excess baggage. The doctrine of Christ’s divinity, along with its exclusivistic corollary, ill-befits our present global awareness and should be discarded.

In 1977, Hick edited a controversial volume of essays by several prominent scholars called The Myth of God Incarnate. The title says it all. Hick holds that it is doubtful from a historiographical standpoint that Jesus ever claimed to be divine, and that such a claim is, at any rate, incoherent from an intellectual standpoint. Thus, it is a myth. But it is important to be clear about the word “myth.” In his own contribution to the volume, “Jesus and the World Religions,” Hick makes his meaning clear: “A myth is a story which is told but which is not literally true, or an idea or an image which is applied to someone or something but which does not literally apply, but which invites a particular attitude in its hearers.” Thus Jesus was, in truth, not even a divine persona. Like so many other great religious teachers, he was one who attained a transparency to the transcendent Reality and taught others to embark on the path of selflessness:

I see the Nazarene . . . as intensely and overwhelmingly conscious of the reality of God. He was a man of God, living in the unseen presence of God, and addressing God as abba, father. His spirit was open to God and his life a continuous response to the divine love as both utterly gracious and utterly demanding. He was so powerfully God-conscious that his life vibrated, as it were, to the divine life; and as a result his hands could heal the sick, and the “poor in spirit” were kindled to new life in his presence.

Jesus was, to say it succinctly, “our sufficient model of true humanity in a perfect relationship to God.” But just because he is our model doesn’t mean that he is the only model.

Questions, Doubts, and Resistance

The issue of exclusivism vs. pluralism is heating up as perhaps the most divisive debate of contemporary theology. Certainly the proposal of a global theology, such as Hick’s, is meeting with fierce resistance. This is hardly surprising. It is seen by many of a conservative and traditionalist bent to be a direct assault on the substance of the Christian proclamation.

The conception of salvation advocated by Hick is, for example, quite different from the traditional Christian one. Talk about “enlightenment” and “liberation from ego-centeredness”—however high-minded and ennobling—is not what many have taken to be the stuff of Christian salvation. Especially for those in the Protestant tradition, salvation is a matter of sin, guilt, grace, and forgiveness. The idea of salvation as a struggle to attain saintliness and, thus, union with Transcendent Reality, appears alien to the New Testament image of
standing before a forgiving God, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me!" The charge is: Pluralism is, quite simply, a radically different idea of what reconciliation with God means and what has been required to bring it about.

Of course, the traditional view is the biblical view, and for someone like Hick that's just the problem. We have seen that Hick is greatly influenced by a style of New Testament scholarship that yields a very different picture of the historical Jesus from the one portrayed in those documents, namely, that the real Jesus, the Jesus of actual history, taught and exemplified ideas similar to those taught and exemplified by the great teachers of other world religions. It would be a mistake, however, to think that such a view has the general support of New Testament scholars. Even if the Jesus of history is different from the Jesus of the Gospels, according to the general perception he is not that different. More specifically, although The Myth of God Incarnate created quite a stir, it made nary a dent in the mainstream consensus about the historical Jesus, his messianic-self consciousness, and the like. Rather, biblical scholars went on believing pretty much as they had before. There are, in fact, good scholars on both sides of these issues, making for a good game of "pick your scholar." Hick has picked his.

Then there is the inevitable problem of competing truth-claims among the religions. Certainly it is true that the great religious traditions share many fundamental teachings. For example, it is well known that every tradition has its own formulation of the Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Nonetheless, the complaint is that in its attempt to make the great world religions come out at the same point—to make them say, at their heart, the same thing—some very important differences must be overlooked. For instance, there is a key difference in respect to soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, in that the ideas of guilt and forgiveness, so central to Christian thought, are not central in Eastern religions. But aren't there many other differences? For one, is the Christian image of the resurrection of the body, judgment, and afterlife even remotely similar to ideas of transmigration of souls, innumerable reincarnations, and eventual absorption into an impersonal Reality? In Christianity are we not dealing with a religion that is, quite simply, a radically different total vision of things? Is not the texture and "feel" of Christianity quite simply different from that of the Eastern perspectives?

These are examples of rather obvious objections to global theology. Some others are suggested by the following questions:

(1) Does the pluralistic hypothesis demand or dictate the denial that Jesus was God-Incarnate, so that even if he was God-Incarnate the pluralistic hypothesizer could never recognize it? Is the rejection of such a conviction the result of scholarly assessments of history, texts, and so on, or is it simply ruled out of court at the start on the basis of the pluralist hypothesis itself?

(2) Given the relative and perspectival character of our representations of the Real, what assurance do we have that any of our representations are relevant? How can we speak of the nature or properties of the Real if, as Hick for example says, the Real is a propertyless "undifferentiated" Reality, devoid of everything that the mind projects upon it?

(3) Even though the production of saintliness is a goal of all great religious traditions, can this alone be taken as a criterion of the adequacy of their claims about God or the Real? Might not a religion be ethically uplifting but conceptually misguided?

(4) In spite of the claim to incorporate the insights of the several great religious traditions, is not pluralism almost always tilted in the direction of Eastern religions and heavily freighted with monistic and pantheistic features?

Of course, not all of these points are relevant to the work of John Hick himself, nor would he be surprised by any of them. In fact, in his A Christian Theology of Religions, written in an engaging dialogue style, he systematically considers what he
sees as the standard criticisms of his “Copernican Revolution in Religion.” His view of Jesus Christ has been treated in a Christological study, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate.*

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**Roman Catholics: Vatican II**

The Roman Catholic tradition has surely been associated historically with the most extreme form of exclusivism. After all, in 1442 the Council of Florence did affirm Cyprian’s assertion that “there is no salvation outside the Church,” where “Church” had long since come to mean the Roman Catholic Church, and elaborated on its meaning:

[The holy Roman Church] firmly believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart “into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels” [Matt. 25:41], unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock.

It may, therefore, be a surprise to some that in recent years Roman Catholicism has in some ways outstripped Protestant traditions in its attempt to be more accommodating of non-Christian religions.

One of the most influential theological events of the twentieth century was Pope John XXIII’s convening of the Roman Catholic Church’s Twenty-First Ecumenical Council, conducted from October 11, 1962, until December 8, 1965. Because it was the second Ecumenical Council to be held at the Vatican, it is known as “Vatican II.” Some dramatic changes were to come out of Vatican II, not the least of which concerned the Church’s stance on non-Christian religions.

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**Global Theology: Hick**

The Council’s “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” asserts:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. . . . The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.

What is involved here is more than an encouragement to the Church and her traditional antagonists to forget past quarrels and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding and cooperation for the betterment of the world, though that is included: “On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom.” The Declaration quoted above includes language extolling the claims and practices of several non-Christian religions: Hinduism, with its fruitful mythology, philosophical inquiry, ascetic practices, and deep meditation; Buddhism, with its stress on the insufficiency of this shifting world and the attainment of supreme enlightenment though one’s own efforts or with a higher assistance; Islam, which adores one God, merciful and creator, is associated with Abrahamic faith, reveres Jesus as a prophet, honors Mary, his mother, and anticipates the day of judgment; Judaism, in whose patriarchs, prophets, and Moses is found the beginnings of the Church’s faith, in whose Exodus from Egypt the salvation of the Church was mystically foreshadowed, and from whom Christianity has received the revelation of the Old Testament.
In none of this does the Roman Catholic Church minimize its own custodianship of salvific truth: "It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained." Nevertheless, the opening up or broadening of the Church’s recognition of what is going on in non-Christian religions is unmistakable. And it is certainly a move in the direction of what we earlier called “soft” exclusivism, or what is sometimes called “inclusivism.”

But of course the Declarations from Vatican II did not just fall out of the blue. The Church has been sensitive for some time to the fate of those who have never benefited from the Christian proclamation. A good example of this was the introduction, at the Council of Trent in the seventeenth century, of the doctrine of “baptism by desire.” The idea was to accommodate those pagans who, though never having heard the gospel, are conscientious in their moral and spiritual lives and thus implicitly desire baptism and union with the Church. They are Christians “in principle,” as it were. Catholic theologian Paul Knitter calls this doctrine the shift from “outside the Church no salvation” to “without the church no salvation.”

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“Anonymous Christians”?

It is not really a big step from “baptism by desire” to the more recent and much-touted idea of “anonymous Christians.” This idea stems from the work of Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84), for many years professor of theology at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and author of *Foundations of the Faith* and the multivolume collection of essays *Theological Investigations*. (The latter was eight thousand pages long in the German edition; his writing was so thick and ponderous that his brother Hugo, a Jesuit theologian, promised some day to translate it into German!) Rahner was regarded by many as the most influential theologian of contemporary Catholicism, and certainly the most powerful theologian at Vatican II.

With his idea of anonymous Christianity, Rahner has probably done more for the shaping of progressive Catholic thought on the topic of non-Christian religions than anyone. Anonymous Christians are religious people who are Christians even though they don’t know about Christianity expressly. In the essay “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” Rahner develops this idea in relation to four theses. First, Christianity is the “absolute” religion, universal and without equal. Second, until Christianity enters on a particular social-historical scene, a non-Christian religion may be a “lawful” religion, containing genuinely supernatural and gracious elements derived from Christ. Third, Christianity must not confront a member of a lawful non-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian, but as an “anonymous” Christian, someone touched by God’s grace and truth. Fourth, the Church will regard itself not so much as an exclusive community, but as the “tangible vanguard” and “explicit expression” of what it hopes is a present though hidden reality outside the visible Church.

All of this is intended to cultivate on the part of Christians a more “optimistic” view of the religious—even salvific—possibilities of non-Christian religions, without denying their distortions and inadequacies. It is intended also to redefine the Church’s missionary enterprise away from proselytizing to informing those in other traditions about the meaning and fullness of their own salvation as revealed in Christ, its ultimate source. Rahner declares:

It is possibly too much to hope, on the one hand, that the religious pluralism which exists in the concrete situation of Christians will disappear in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, it is nevertheless absolutely permissible for the Christian himself to interpret this non-Christianity as Christianity of an anonymous kind.
which he does always still go out to meet as a missionary, seeing it as a world which is to be brought to the explicit consciousness of what already belongs to it as a divine offer or already pertains to it also over and above this as a divine gift of grace accepted unreflectedly and implicitly.\(^\text{14}\)

Not everyone has greeted Rahner’s proposal of “anonymous Christianity” with unmitigated approval. A significant example is another German-speaking Catholic theologian, the University of Tübingen professor Hans Küng. Like Rahner, Küng seeks to be thoroughly rational in his theological approach. But he goes much further in his advance beyond standard Catholic beliefs. This is evident from the fact that, after too many controversial (not to say heretical) claims, in 1979 his privilege of teaching Catholic ministerial students was denied; he ceased to be, officially, a Catholic theologian. Though originally enamored of Karl Barth, he was eventually characterized by Rahner as being more liberal than even liberal Protestants.

In his early and most influential book, *On Being a Christian*, Küng trenchantly remarks:

> It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim, or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an “anonymous Christian” as presumptuous. To bring the partner to the discussion into our own circle in this way closes the dialogue before it has even begun. This is a pseudo-solution which offers slight consolation. Is it possible to cure a society from a decline in membership by declaring that even non-members are “hidden” members? And what would Christians say if they were graciously recognized by Buddhists as “anonymous Buddhists.”\(^\text{15}\)

According to Küng, the rich variety of religious expression should not be addressed with a supercilious shrug of the shoulders—this shirks the responsibility of tough thinking about an urgent and difficult matter. Nor is it possible to flatten out the great religions to a least common denominator—the important differences must be frankly admitted. We have to bite the bullet and acknowledge that these religions are, in their own right, different but legitimate salvific paths.

For Küng, this means a shift from *ecclesiocentrism*—an emphasis on the centrality of the Church—to *theocentrism*—an emphasis on the centrality of God. Salvation is rooted in God, not the Church. It also means a shift from a patronizing accommodation of other religions to a recognition of the genuine insights to be found in non-Christian religions, and to a genuine dialogue that would be to the advantage of all honest truth-seekers, Christian and non-Christian alike.\(^\text{16}\) But, for Küng, what this approach does not mean is an abandonment or even minimizing of Christian *uniqueness*. We have already mentioned some of the real differences among the great religions and thus the uniqueness of each. But for Küng there is a special uniqueness about Christianity. This is where Christology comes in. What is the role of Christ in all of this? Küng answers that Christ is not the “constitutive” but rather the “normative” mediator of salvation. This means that though salvation can come independently of Christ, he is nonetheless the model of salvation, for everyone. Jesus of Nazareth is “ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man’s relations with God, with his fellow man, with society.”\(^\text{17}\) In this respect, Küng has to concede that Christians have an edge.

It is really nothing new to insist, in one way or another, on the centrality, uniqueness, or normative character of Christianity, while at the same time acknowledging a means of salvation for those outside the geographical, historical, or social reach of the Christian gospel. Such a formula is nearly as old as Christianity itself. Neither is its present expression limited to current discussion within the Roman Catholic tradition. When Karl Rahner was writing, so was C. S. Lewis, an Anglican of somewhat conservative inclinations, who nonetheless entertained his own version of anonymous Christianity: “There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in
agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it."

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Intolerance or Arrogance?

We have seen that Christian exclusivism comes in two forms: what we have called "hard" exclusivism, which is the claim that those are excluded who have not heard the Christian gospel or who have heard it but rejected it; and "soft" exclusivism or "inclusivism" — the claim that even those who haven't heard may enjoy the salvation made possible in Jesus Christ. Many, however, would object to any form of exclusivism on the grounds that it is an arrogant, insensitive, chauvinistic, and intolerant stance.

But the exclusivist might respond in this way. Surely, just because religious exclusivism is out of step with some peoples' political sensibilities does not mean that it is therefore wrong. Furthermore, biblical Christianity has never been interested in accommodating the world's agenda, though it has claimed to stand in judgment on that agenda. In any event, doesn't the oft-repeated charge of intolerance misfire? There is nothing wrong with intolerance as such. We are all intolerant of many things, and rightfully so. Even the pluralist position is intolerant of the exclusivist position insofar as it judges it to be mistaken and to be repudiated. In fact, because the pluralist position rejects all religious claims except those that it espouses, it itself is just another example of religious exclusivism! People of any religious tradition must always be on guard against arrogance, insensitivity, and chauvinism. But intolerance — in the sense of evaluation, judgment, and rejection of ideas and practices perceived to be wrong — would always seem to be in order in any meaningful debate. The pluralist will have to do better than simply accuse the exclusivist of intolerance.

Further, one grows weary of the complaint that if we had been born and raised in a different cultural setting we would think entirely differently about things like religion. Surely that is true, but it is true for the pluralist too, whose pluralistic view is molded by circumstance, education, and so on. In this respect, should we not be glad for an upbringing that has taught us that $2 + 2 = 4$, that racial discrimination is wrong, and all sorts of other useful, important, and true things? Finally, no one is scandalized by the fact that only one (if any) of the many competing theories in science, politics, philosophy, and the like can be true. Why, then, do some pluralists exclude out of hand the possibility that one religious position may be true to the exclusion of the others? Is there something more, such as a strong dose of personal preference, than biblical studies, theology, and philosophy going on here?

Be that as it may, the question of the finality of Christ — whether Christ is the criterion of all religious and theological truth or but one criterion among many — will be a dominating question, and maybe the question, of Christian theology for a generation to come.
20. Ibid., 173.
21. Ibid., 178.
22. For a discussion of the sources for feminist theology, see Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 21–33.
25. Ruether is convinced that male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected. See Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 2, 258, 201; Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 32.
30. See, for example, Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 72–92, 112.
35. Ibid., 71.
38. Ibid., 137–8.
41. Ibid., 9.
43. See, for example, Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity. The Debate Over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1985), 84–5. This is likewise the essence of the several criticisms found in Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, “The Socialist Feminist Vision of Rosemary Radford

44. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 74.
45. Ibid., 77.

**Chapter 12**

3. The actual, and narrower, traditional expression, enunciated by the Church Father Cyprian is: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “Outside the Church there is no salvation.”
4. It is sometimes called “particularism” in an attempt to sidestep the harsh tone of “exclusivism.”
5. This last title won the 1991 Graveney Award for the most significant new thinking in religion.
8. Hick borrows the expression from previous thinkers. He cites, for example, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who spoke of the cultural *Achsenzeit*.
10. Ibid., ch. 18.
13. Ibid., 268.
15. Ibid., 279.
16. Aquinas is quoted, for example, in a chapter subheading in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 153.
17. The appeal to Kant is found everywhere in Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, but see especially the section on “Kant’s epistemological model,” Ibid., 240–6.
19. The “Nicene” Creed, familiar in today’s church services, is actually the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, a refined version of the Creed of Nicea, 325.


22. Ibid., 178–9.


27. Ibid., 663.

28. Ibid., 661–6.

29. Ibid., 659.

30. It goes without saying that an even more emphatic opening has occurred also in Roman Catholic relations to Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

31. This doctrine was formulated in response to the discovery by Columbus and others of vast numbers of people untouched by the Christian proclamation.


34. Ibid., 133.


Chapter 13


2. In the words of one student of liberalism, adherents of the movement "would have agreed on the necessity of giving renewed strength and cur-rency to Protestant Christianity by adapting it to the spiritual wants of the modern man, even if much that the past had accepted without demur would have to be discarded." Bernard M. G. Reardon, Liberal Protestantism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 10.


5. Lindbeck, Nature of Doctrine, 16.

6. This crisis is presented in George W. Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 21–38. See also Hauerwas's critique of the misuse of sola Scriptura. Stanley Hauerwas, Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 27.


10. Michael Goldberg finds this to be Frei's basic thesis. Theology and Narrative (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 162.


13. See, for example, Stroup, Promise of Narrative Theology, 249, 252.


15. Nelson, for example, describes Hauerwas as "the most significant and influential exponent of narrative among contemporary Christian ethicists." Narrative and Morality, 109.

16. That Hauerwas saw himself early on as loosely associated with Lindbeck as well as in some sense a postliberal is evident in the manner in which he appropriates Lindbeck's The Nature of Doctrine. See Stanley Hauerwas, Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society (Minneapolis: Win-