CHRIST FOR ALL: TOWARD A LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

by

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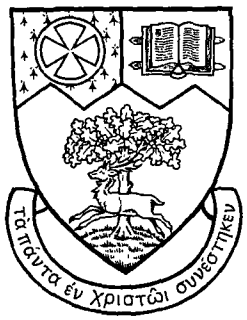

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ABSTRACT

" Christ for All: Toward a Lutheran Theology of Religions"

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Lutherans have, from the earliest days of the movement, expressed evangelical concern for all human beings, Christian and non-Christian alike. Martin Luther had little contact with the religions, and produced no systematic theology of religions, but his many writings on the converting power of the Gospel indicate that he was profoundly interested in mission for the sake of bringing all persons to Christ. Luther's legacy continues to inform Lutheran outreach in a religious milieu that is characterized by remarkable interreligious awareness. Unfortunately, Lutherans have throughout their 500-year history existed in relatively homogeneous Christian contexts, meaning there was until recent decades no practical necessity to ruminate on the religions and their distinctive beliefs and practices. What is by no means clear is the degree to which Christian witness is required so that salvation among the non-Christian traditions may be experienced.

As each religious tradition has a theology of religions, whether implicit or explicit, the task of this dissertation is to develop and articulate a Lutheran theology of religions, using Lutheran categories (natural and supernatural theology, atonement

theory, and the theology of religions) and premises (*sola gratia, sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola Christus,* Law and Gospel) to assess the relative value of the religions. A Christian theology of religions must be concerned not only with the Gospel as preached, but also with the implications of living as followers of Christ in a religiously plural world. To this end, Lutherans, by virtue of their commitment to confessionalism and ecclesiology, can give colour and definition to the role Christianity should play in interreligious dialogue.

The position confessional Lutherans hold with respect to the religions is a "soft exclusivism," a Christocentric emphasis that rejects inclusivism and pluralism as reductionistic with respect to Christ and the Gospel, and relativistic with respect to the non-Christian traditions. Only when Christ is the unique and exclusive Saviour, revealed by the Spirit and acknowledged, does the Gospel, grace, and the righteousness of God take precedence and build faith. A Lutheran theology of religions requires faith, but should not limit the manner in which it is offered, or God's hand in preserving it. The institutional church is the ordinary vehicle for dissemination of the means of grace, but salvific grace can exist and be attained outside of her, at the behest and discretion of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the sacrifice of Christ, divine righteousness on behalf of human righteousness, can have universal implications (substitutionary and participatory) which demonstrate infinite divine love. This is the essence of a Lutheran theology of religions.

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Introduction

Lutherans share and articulate evangelical concern for the eternal welfare of all persons. Martin Luther (1483–1546) focused much of his energy on doctrine in parallel with and on occasion in contrast to that of the Roman Catholic Church of his age. He felt compelled to not only summarize and explicate the faith, but also to exhort Christians of all stripes to share Jesus Christ with the entire world. That Luther did not produce a completed missiology before his death in 1547 should not elicit the charge that he was not interested in sharing the Gospel with non-Christians. His many writings on the converting power of the Gospel militate against that reductionist view. Luther did not write extensively on "religion" or "the religions," owing most especially to his lack of engagement with them. He did direct polemics toward the Jews and "the Turks," and while these may sound intolerant to modern ears, they were consistent with the conventional wisdom of the day.

After the passing of the first generation of Lutheran fathers, Christians that called themselves "Lutherans" showed interest in evangelism, to a greater or lesser degree. The Thirty Years War (1617–1647) devastated Europe, and decimated two generations of western European Christendom. In the war years, sharing the Gospel was seen by very few as a priority. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Lutherans could once again look beyond themselves toward the unchurched. Lutheran Pietists re-ignited an evangelical flame in the hearts and minds of the Lutheran faithful.[1]

[1] Spener, *Pia Desideria*; Matthias, "August Hermann Francke (1663 –1727)," 100–114; Vogt, "Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760)," 207–23.

Today, to state that *inter*religious awareness is essential to Christendom is to understate the case. North America, and in particular the more populous Canadian cities, is now home to dozens of cultures and people groups, each of whom possesses a unique religious understanding of the world. The "mission field" spoken of in Scripture is now present in historically Christian contexts, and Lutheran Christians are increasingly called upon to give witness to their faith among those non-Christians in their midst. There exists no question as to the need for such witness.

What is by no means clear is the quantity or quality of Christian witness required so that salvation among non-Christians may be experienced. In other words, how should Christians balance Christ as particular Saviour and Lord with the declaration that God "wills that all persons would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth?" The question has spurred a great debate of scholarship and discussion in recent decades, all of which has been subsumed under the quest for a workable "theology of religions." In the decades prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the status of the non-Christian religions was discussed at some length by theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch,[2] Karl Barth,[3] Karl Rahner,[4] and Paul Tillich.[5] Vatican II gave new vitality to the debate, as well

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[2] "Christianity, like all great religious movements, has from the outset possessed a naïve certainty as to its normative truth. Apologetic reflections have fortified this confidence since the earliest times by contrasting Christianity with every non-Christian as a whole." Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, 47.

[3] "Even outwardly, in its debate with non-Christian religions, the Church can never do more harm than when it thinks that it must abandon the apostolic injunction, that grace is sufficient for us." Barth, *CD* 1/ 2, 332.

[4] "Until the movement when the Gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely *contain* elements of a natural knowledge of God. . . . It contains supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ." Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 121.

[5] "What in the idea of God constitutes divinity? The answer is: it is the element of the unconditional and of ultimacy. This carries the quality of divinity. If this is seen, one can understand why almost every thing 'in heaven and on earth' has received ultimacy in the history of human religion." Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith,* 57.

as the seeds of a unique nomenclature that theologians like Alan Race,[6] Jacques Dupuis,[7] Clark Pinnock,[8] Lesslie Newbigin,[9] and Gavin D'Costa,[10] developed and categorized. Today an entire arena of scholarship exists whose primary concern is the eternal welfare of adherents of the non-Christian religions; that is, this field of scholarship seeks to construct a theology of religions applicable to all.

My interest in this subject was piqued initially by an inability to resolve a dogmatic and hermeneutical conundrum, that being the tension between God's perfect will to save all men and women that they may come to the knowledge of the truth, and the biblical truth that some, if not many, are not saved because persons come to the Father only through faith in the Son. The Bible makes it clear that God is a loving, caring Father Who wishes all of creation to be saved, and live in communion with Him. There is in this a perfect optimism for salvation, or to use Hans Urs von Balthasar's famous

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[6] "The future of the Christian theological enterprise is indeed at stake in the attitude the Christian adopts to the newly experienced religious pluralism." Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism,* 4.

[7] "Faith in Jesus Christ as traditionally understood by mainstream Christianity and church tradition, would at the same time integrate, in their differences, the religious experiences of the living religious traditions and assign to those traditions a positive role and significance in the overall plan of God for humankind, as it unfolds through salvation history." Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 1.

[8] "One could say that my proposal is exclusivist in affirming a decisive redemption in Jesus Christ, although it does not deny the possible salvation of non-Christian people. Similarly, it could be called inclusivist in refusing to limit the grace of God to the confines of the church, although it hesitates to regard other religions as salvific vehicles in their own right. It might even be called pluralist insofar as it acknowledges God's gracious work in the lives of human beings everywhere and accepts real differences in what they believe." Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 15.

[9] "However grievously the Church may have distorted and misused the concept of dogma in the course of history, and it has indeed done so grievously, the reality which this word designated is present from the beginning and is intrinsic to the gospel. Something radically new has been given, something which cannot be derived from rational reflection on the experiences available to all people." Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 6.

[10] "The traditional 'exclusivist' (in Hick's terms) fares better (on Hick's criteria), for he or she at least is faithful to the self-description of *one* of the religions (their own), rather than undermining all the religion's self-descriptions." D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 47.

phrase, "dare we hope that all persons would be saved, and come to a knowledge of the truth?"[11]

God is eternally and boundlessly merciful in making salvation possible for all, but that possibility is contingent upon an individual's contact and relationship with Jesus Christ. In this way, salvation is indeed universal and particular. Of course, how one reconciles the universal and the particular will determine one's theology of religions. If one emphasizes universality, then inclusivism and pluralism will be most consistent. If particularity is given priority, then exclusivism will most likely be affirmed. It is my view that the Scriptures unambiguously portray Christ's Messiah-hood as both universal and particular, for all and for one, so that no one can be excluded outside of personal will. Thus, my theology of religions is exclusivistic, but Christ-focused, not ecclesiocentric. It is decidedly a theology of religion born of the Gospel, rather than the Law.

Lutherans are relative neophytes in this area of Christian scholarship. There are various reasons for this. For one, Luther did not leave a fully-developed theology of religions, or even the framework of one for reference. For another, Lutherans have throughout their 500-year history existed in relatively homogeneous Christian contexts, where there was little or no practical need to ruminate on the religions in this manner. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and its member church the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), have of late shown interest in interreligious dialogue and

[11] "Are we therefore quite untroubled in the certainty of our salvation? Surely not, for which man knows whether, in the course of his existence, he has lived up to God's infinite love, which chose to expend itself for him? Must he not, if he is honest and no Pharisee, assume the opposite?" Balthasar, *Dare We Hope that All Men would be Saved?*, 13.

the theology of world missions. ELCA theologians Carl Braaten[12] and Ted Peters[13] have produced useful texts on the subject, while doctoral dissertations by ELCA theologians have appeared since 1992.[14] Yet the LWF and the ELCA, despite their contributions, cannot speak for all "Lutherans," any more than members of my own Lutheran Church – Canada (LCC), or our sister church the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), may do so. Thus, a key motivating factor for this project is that LCC and her sister churches do not yet possess a clear theology of religions.[15] My hope is that this project will help fill this need and make a contribution in this respect for all Lutherans, yet I harbour no illusions that this work may or will become LCC's definitive statement on the subject.

My own tradition, Lutheran Church – Canada, is sympathetic to the human condition of all, but exclusivistic with regard to sin's ultimate cure. We contend that theology is the teaching of the faith that cannot be conducted independent of the Word of God. A "theology of religion" is an examination of individual religious observance, resulting in systematic summaries of a factual nature alone.[16] A "theology of religions," in contrast, is a comparative exercise that attempts to assign a relative value of one religion over against all others. As each tradition possesses a theology of religions, whether implicit or explicit, the task of this dissertation is to make a substantial contribution to a Lutheran "theology of religions," and therefore will use uniquely Lutheran categories, language, and premises to weigh the relative value of the religions.

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[12] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!, The Apostolic Imperative,* and *The Flaming Centre.*
[13] Peters, "Reframing the Question," 328.
[14] Martin, "Interreligious Dialogue and Natural Revelation," and Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions."
[15] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*
[16] Kunin, *Religion: The Modern Theories*, 149–70.

For Lutherans, "theology" can be subdivided into two streams, namely natural theology (general revelation) and supernatural (or revealed) theology. God communicates His gracious will to humankind supernaturally through the proclaimed Word and valid sacraments, and naturally through creation and the world. Saving grace, however, is available through supernatural means alone. Natural theology is the ordinary manner by which God corresponds with humankind, and may be acquired through observation and meditation. It may also be an innate quality, an *a priori* word hidden in the mind.[17] The question this raises concerns the existence, or absence, of a natural theology by which humans could, unaided by special revelation, gain knowledge of God and His gracious will.[18]

Luther believed that the Holy Spirit works in the mind and the heart to regenerate the sinner through God's appointed means of grace, meaning the revealed Word of God and the sacraments. If this is the extent to which the Spirit acts, then it can safely be assumed that only those persons who are members of the Lord Christ in His church are recipients of divine favour and salvation.[19] Natural theology, however, implies that persons may attain non-salvific knowledge of God without the "direct" supernatural means. This assumption of natural theology means that since there is no unambiguous method to determine the limits of the Holy Spirit's actions, there is also no infallible method to ascertain the eternal status of those outside the pale of the Christian Church. Historically, Lutherans have taken a *via media* on these topics, acknowledging the

[17] Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and Scripture*, 33.
[18] Barth and Brunner, *Natural Theology.*
[19] Luther, *Large Catechism* II, III, 34–62. Hereafter *LC.*

existence of natural theology, without assigning to it salvific value—natural theology can do no more than prepare people for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.[20]

The concrete, historical articulations of the religions are primordial representations of humanity's innate thirst for the infinite, and thus cannot hope to contain the universality or the fullness of the divine. No single contingent form of religion, even Christianity, should claim for itself an uncritical universal validity, nor should concrete forms of religion be viewed as superfluous, in favour of a pluralistic "world theology." Vatican II saw the Roman Catholic Church publicly declare at least the possibility that non-Christians could have saving grace that is permitted outside of the church.[21] If it should be conceded, however, that *extra ecclesiam conceditur gratia* (grace is allowable outside the church), how can it be consistent to claim that no salvation can be achieved *extra ecclesiam*? If these two statements were to be reconciled, the simplest solution would be to re-interpret the *extra ecclesiam no salus est* (no salvation outside the church) doctrine in a non-exclusive manner.[22] Vatican II ventures beyond the theology of religions ambit with which Lutherans would be comfortable by implying, if not declaring, the universality of salvation. Yet the Council does offer much-needed recapitulation of some key elements, particularly the possibility of salvation independent of confession, the role of the church's mission in conversion, and the implications of pneumatology not artificially limited by ecclesial dogma and the "traditional" means of grace.

Has traditional, confessional Lutheran theology been hasty in pronouncing non-Christians damned by necessity? Yes, if the earthly church is depicted too starkly as the

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[20] See chapter four.
[21] "Lumen Gentium" II, 16, 367.
[22] Pope Pius IX, *Singulari Quadam (1854).*

sole locus for saving grace. In order to move closer to a Lutheran theology of religions I appeal directly to foundational Lutheran doctrinal categories, namely the four *solas* (*sola gratia, sola Scriptura, sola fide, and sola Christus*), as well as the unique Lutheran attitude toward Law and Gospel, natural theology, atonement theory, the theology of the cross, and the role of missions. Specifically, I argue that the grace of God that redeems and atones is universally available, but cannot be attained through non-revelatory sources such as observation of the created order. Salvation or liberation comes to all through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone, Who is made manifest by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Whose benefits are grasped by faith. Thus, salvation must be possible for the individual without involvement with and adherence to the institutional, visible Christian church; Christ is and remains common Saviour for all.

In this dissertation I supply an alternative construction to traditional Lutheran ecclesiocentrism, namely 1) that Christians should look at natural theology of the transcendent through the lenses of the supernatural theological truism that God is always and everywhere gracious; 2) salvation is available to all through Jesus Christ, Who is the universal Saviour of all; 3) humanity harbours a burden of sin that threatens to separate all persons from God eternally; 4) the Gospel can be resisted, and resistance is common, especially among those for whom justification is a strange or meaningless term. For these reasons, as well as my objective knowledge of the conversion of many non-Christians to Christ, I argue in favour a "soft exclusivist" theology of religions.

Christians engaged in the theology of religions a decade after Vatican II began to use a paradigm, or some version thereof, which was developed in part by Alan Race, and which with broad strokes placed a person or tradition's theology of religions under one of

three general headings.[23] *Exclusivism* is the general claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and Jesus Christ alone is universal Saviour. Confession of faith, either public or private, is required.[24] *Inclusivism* agrees with exclusivism that salvation, insofar as it occurs, does so through Jesus Christ. God's saving grace, however, may be present universally, or at minimum in places where the Christian church is present, and thus salvation outside of Christianity is a possibility. *Pluralism* goes well beyond inclusivism, to hypothesize that salvation is not restricted to a particular religious tradition, saviour-figure or way of salvation. Jesus Christ is most certainly a means of salvation, but He is not the only means.

As I have interacted with the paradigm, I have found it to be valuable as a general tool, but it is unfortunately restrictive. Theologies of religion tend to defy neat categorization, since they often straddle the zone between two positions. The exclusivist position that I and confessional Lutherans purport varies from the one above, in that I affirm Jesus Christ as the exclusive source for salvation, but do not require that anyone that would be saved must be a participatory member of the Christian church. I contend that a Lutheran theology of religions, as it matures, should focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, *Christocentrism,* with or without ecclesial contact, i.e. a "softer" exclusivism. Confessed faith in Jesus Christ is the true *shibboleth* in my theology of religions, whether that confession occurs in the church or beyond it (*sola Christus*). For Lutherans, Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God in the flesh, and as such is the ultimate representation and activity of divine grace (*sola gratia*). To have "faith" in Jesus

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[23] Race, *Christians & Religious Pluralism.*

[24] Exclusivism is not restricted to Christianity, but for the purposes of this discussion I will confine my comments to Christian exclusivism. Many of the positions to be outlined may be applied without reservation to other traditions, most especially the monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism.

is to participate in actuality with God's eschatological life and salvation (*sola fide*). The primary function of the church on earth is to proclaim Jesus Christ as sole Saviour and Lord, and to be the principal, but not singular, locus for His ongoing presence in creation. God's will is for all persons to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, with Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's gracious will both in time and in eternity (*sola Scriptura*).

I have stated above that the formulation of a Lutheran theology of religions must be based upon the categories which are uniquely Lutheran—the *solas*—as well as those for whom Lutherans have applied a special emphasis—the theology of the cross, natural theology, and others. In addition, a theology of religions becomes distinctly "Lutheran" when it takes the best of available scholarship on the relative value of the religions and scrutinizes it through the lenses of foundational Lutheran dialectics such as Law and Gospel, reason and faith, sin and grace, and divine and human righteousness.[25] It is my belief that at the root of all inclusivist and pluralist systems is the priority of Law, sin, and human righteousness.[26] Only when Christ is the exclusive and unique Saviour, revealed and acknowledged, does the Gospel, grace, and the righteousness of God take precedence, and remove the terror of life governed by human works of a religious nature, which attempt to earn favour with God and humankind.

To develop a Lutheran theology of religions, this dissertation has two parts. The first part lays the context, both in respect to the contemporary and the historical issues, for a Lutheran theology of religions. The second part is the constructive piece of the

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[25] *Formula of Concord: Epitome* V, VI (hereafter *FCE*); *Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration* II (hereafter *FCS*); *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* V (Hereafter *Ap.*); *Ap.* XX. Fundamental Lutheran doctrines are codified, for the most part, in the *Book of Concord* (1580). Other significant contributions by Lutheran divines will be documented separately.

[26] Race, *Christians & Religious Pluralism.*

dissertation that proposes a Lutheran theology of religions must be consistent with Lutheran sensibilities on natural and supernatural revelation, the necessity and quality of the atonement, the theology of the cross, and the ongoing necessity of mission in an increasingly pluralistic sphere. More specifically the first section consists of three chapters. In chapter one, I construct a Lutheran paradigm to assist in explaining the various theologies of religion held, and how the various religious traditions relate to one another. Alan Race offered a useful paradigm for Christians when he suggested a tripartite division based upon three fundamental perspectives—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism, as expressed by Karl Barth and Carl Braaten, makes the theological claim that no one may be saved without making an explicit, conscious confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Such confession may or may not occur within the visible church on earth. Inclusivism, as portrayed by Karl Rahner and Clark Pinnock, rejects the demand for explicit Christian confession, but does claim that the salvific process, be it juridical or cognitive, always implies Christ, and therefore explicit Christian faith is the ultimate fulfillment of every religious system. John Hick[27] and Paul Knitter,[28] leading proponents of pluralism, view salvation as possible in and through what are loosely defined as "equal" or "valid" religious traditions. Further subdivisions of the tripartite paradigm have in many cases produced greater clarity and precision in the theology of religions debate. As mentioned above, Luther should be considered a "soft exclusivist," requiring explicit confession of Christ with or without church affiliation.

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[27] Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths.*
[28] Knitter, *God has Many Names,* and *Introducing Theologies of Religion.*

Chapter two serves as a glossary for the purposes of defining the scope of the theological inquiry. First, the distinction must be made between a "theology of religion" and a "theology of religions," since they are often used interchangeably. The former seeks to affirm what may be said about "religion" broadly considered, and what paths, if any, may exist to bring about agreement in doctrine and practice. In this scheme, interreligious dialogue offers no possibility of conversion, since the participants are attempting to attain understanding, not truth. The latter declares that pluralism among the religions is undeniable, but since a modicum of truth in religion exists, the foundational differences between the religions should not necessarily be celebrated, since difference would imply one religion is correct (at least on that issue or doctrine), while the others must be incorrect, or deluded. What is most helpful in defining the religions is not necessarily what they share in common, but rather what distinguishes them. To this end I assemble a workable "theology of religions," with the terms "theology," "religions," and "religion" clearly defined. Also, in order to more clearly articulate my position, I outline the key elements that distinguish my conservative Lutheran tradition (Lutheran Church – Canada, in altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod) from the other mainline North American Lutheran denominations (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada). Attitudes toward the religions are often established and maintained along denominational lines.

Theology of religions, from the perspective of historic Lutheranism, begins and ends not with apologetics, but with the doctrine of mission. From his study of the Scriptures, Luther would not allow for the possibility that non-Christians could be saved, yet he advised, for the most part, that practitioners of "the religions" should be afforded a

modicum of respect as sinners in search of the true God.[29] Chapter three, then, traces the history of Lutheran missions, and outlines the unique Lutheran contribution to missiology and ultimately to the theology of religions. Martin Luther maintained that God carries forward in the world a history replete with promise and salvation, and that grace which is the wellspring of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ must be proclaimed to all people.[30] If salvation is not preached, it cannot be known. To this end, Luther offers two categorical theses regarding the religions: Christ is the only revealer of God, God's heart, and God's will to save; and Christ must be preached for the Gospel to create faith and be received in faith. European Lutherans of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those from Lutheran Pietist movements, took Luther's mandate and carried the message of salvation as far as their resources would provide. Luther's missiology did not allow for grace to exist independent of the kerygma, but did not restrict the presence of Christ to the institutional church.

Chapter three is also an assemblage and distillation of the preceding material into an incomplete, but cohesive and unique Lutheran theology of religions. To this end, the following issues must and will be addressed: first, Holy Scripture declares that God is merciful, and His grace is offered freely to all. This implies that grace must be, in some sense, available to those who are not component parts of His earthly Body, the church. Second, salvation is available to all through Jesus Christ as universal Saviour. The reality of Christ as salvation's sole conduit is the limiting factor militating against pluralism and universalism. Third, humanity is stained by sin that separates all persons from the merciful God. For Lutherans this removes all claims of self-righteousness that would

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[29] Luther, *LW* 26, 205.
[30] Luther, *Smalcald Articles,* IV, 13. Hereafter *SA.*

have humanity claim favoured status that does not exist with God. Christians, therefore, should not declare themselves especially sanctified, but rather as those who are spiritually dead but made alive in Jesus Christ. Fourth, the Gospel brings life, but can also be resisted. Here resides the impetus for ongoing mission and interreligious dialogue activities, since radical pluralism, and many forms of inclusivism, would render such Scripture-mandated activities redundant.

The second section also contains three chapters, which further contribute to the Lutheran view of the religions. The Lutheran view of natural and supernatural theology, and its implications for theology of religions, will form the basis for chapter four. Luther was correct in giving priority to the direct revelation of Christ to the individual over revelation in a strictly institutional setting.[31] There must exist, therefore, a mode by which God communicates salvation to humanity independent of the church. General revelation is a revelation of the works of God, but without a revealed "supplement" these works remain abstract and unclear (Rom 2:14–16; 10:9, 14–18). Unlike Barth, Lutherans do not denigrate general revelation by making such an observation. As Emil Brunner and Wolfhart Pannenberg have observed, God's works have always required God's words to unmask them. Furthermore, sinners need the regenerating power of the Gospel in order to know God as Creator and Redeemer, and general revelation is an inappropriate vehicle for such power because knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not contained in it. General revelation may offer direction toward the saving Gospel, but special revelation is needed because special grace is needed. An intense knowledge of one's own unworthiness and a determination to do better, even with the Gospel, is not salvific. Faith must be consciously placed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At issue here is the difference

[31] Luther, *LC* II, II.

between knowing the standard for which human beings were made and receiving God's provision for the one who breaks that standard. This is the difference between Law and Gospel (see below, chapter 5).[32]

Atonement, salvation, and the theology of the cross are the major subjects of chapter five. One of the important questions that has informed the theology of religions and mission over the centuries has been: why are there so many religions? If God is one, as monotheists such as Christians, Muslims and Jews profess, then why would God allow personal revelation to be appropriated in so many discontinuous ways? Christians have lived among religious plurality from the beginning of the movement, but now Christian contact with "the religions" is not simply by photograph and telephone conversation. Today Christians live with a daily regimen of broad ecumenism and interreligious encounter. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged that plurality would be the greatest single challenge the churches will face in the twenty-first century, particularly since the Christian default position on the religions has, for the most part, been *extra ecclesiam non salus est*: no salvation outside of the church. Luther, however, was not at all certain that salvation exists only for those with physical and emotional contact with the Church. His position, and the one from which I work, was that God reveals Himself as He sees fit in His own time frame. When God reveals Himself, that revelation is universal, available to all without qualification. Yet God allows human beings to appropriate or put off His revelation, so that salvation is universally available, but not universally attained.[33] This view is exclusivistic (see below, chapter 2), but in a "soft" manner which potentially places God's gifts in the hands of those who are not visible

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[32] Scaer, *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace,* 20–42.
[33] Luther, *LC* II, 66.

members of a Christian fellowship, but can still be beneficiaries of God's grace and mercy.

The distillation offered in chapter five leads directly to chapter six, which details the Lutheran attitude toward interreligious dialogue, with a special emphasis on what, if any, role Lutherans should play in religious discussion broadly considered. For example, should Lutherans come to interreligious dialogue in order to proselytize and convert, or rather to listen and learn without preconditions or prejudice? Can religion be discussed honestly from a suppositionless position? Luther himself showed interest in interreligious debate, as did several of his theological descendants. I maintain that (conservative) Lutherans have much to contribute to broadly ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, provided that Lutherans are allowed to maintain Christ as universal Saviour, and the Holy Spirit as Christ's earthly Advocate. Chapter six fleshes out the details of such a contribution.

To summarize, my position, and the position of my Lutheran tradition that I will articulate in this dissertation, with respect to the salvation status of non-Christians, is softly exclusivistic, or Christocentric, and looks with hope for the possible salvation of all persons in a manner known only to God the Father. Jesus Christ is the universal Saviour, the conduit through which all persons may come to the Father, and humanity is saved by grace through faith, but no absolute churchly adherence is required of any person. This vision of Christocentrism can and must shape Lutheran Christian contributions to apologetic debate between religions, as well as interreligious dialogue now and in the future.

Chapter 1: The Taxonomy of the Theology of Religions

The horrific events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent ecumenical drama of "A Prayer for America"[1] have led North American Lutheranism into a position it could not have foreseen a generation ago, namely in what ways do the religious belief of individuals affect their behaviour both inwardly as people of faith and outwardly as members of the international community. There are those, particularly in the various media and government agencies that contend that religion does little more than incite intolerance and will eventually lead to confrontation and bloodshed, as witnessed most graphically in Manhattan and the Middle East.[2] Practitioners of exclusivistic religion, those whose lives are informed by the faith they propound, say that true religion practiced with integrity and compassion, can benefit humankind in ways that materialism and individualism cannot. Those who favour a more inclusive attitude to religion and its performance, call for a moderate middle ground that respects religious diversity and preaches tolerance of those whose experiences of the sacred differ. In recent years much ink has been spilled by so-called religious inclusivists in an attempt to demonstrate the benefits of this third option, including pleas that since all religions can be considered valid insofar as they are held to be true, no one person should presume to speak with authority above another and certainly no person should be engaged in proselytization of

[1] Held on September 23, 2001, organized by Oprah Winfrey and carried out in Yankee Stadium, New York City, the Prayer for America was an ecumenical "service" at which celebrities and clerics from various religions came together to offer prayers on behalf of and encouragement to the families of the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.

[2] See recent writings of the so-called New Atheists such as Hitchens, *God is not Great*; Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; and Harris, *The Moral Landscape*.

others. If the religions can be convinced to live in harmony, then they can be trusted to share their religious fervor only as a means to show the uninitiated that religious commitment can garner positive benefits, both in the present age and in the eschatological future.

In North America, where religious freedom is entrenched in constitutional law, the religious diversity of the population is evident. As urban and rural settings become more culturally diverse through immigration, religions have been able to coexist in relative harmony. Christians in particular, as per the Second Vatican Council, have been forced to reexamine what might be termed a "proper attitude" toward those who adhere to different faith systems. While there appears to be no current consensus among Christian traditions concerning how this attitude might be exercised, all of the churches seem to agree that the North American population is no longer homogeneous, and discretion and tolerance must be displayed concerning the religions. In other words, the question of "can non-Christians be saved" is for all intents and purposes moot, particularly as it pertains to the multicultural and pan-religious communities in which most North Americans now find themselves. Rather, assessing the role non-Christians can play *alongside* the religions in the fulfillment of God's eternal plan for humankind is the more pressing issue.

1.1 The Lutheran Attitude to the Religions

What does God think of non-Christians? On the surface this query might smack of Christian tribalism, a relic of a long-passed era when the church ruled most of the globe and the religions were practiced in far-flung areas abandoned by God. Yet my study of

world religions and my own Lutheran Christian preconceptions have driven me to conclude this question is by no means a fig leaf for intolerance, but rather the heart-felt concern of those who truly desire to know what our attitude as Christians should be toward the religions and their members. One cannot "do theology" in the current situation without formulating some kind of rational theology of religions, particularly as globalization continues to strip away the natural boundaries between people groups and demands cooperation in every facet of life essential to survival in the world community. Christian churches in general, and Lutheran churches in particular, that ignore the necessity of dialogue rather than conversion will inevitably find themselves marginalized and unable to communicate their message, no matter how impressive that message may be.[3] The choice is clear: acknowledge the changed reality or be left behind.

Of course, to make such assertions independent of thoughtful attention to the history of the church with regard to the religions, and to the often poorly nuanced but heartfelt objections to dialogue over conversion posed by many evangelical Christians is neither fair-minded nor useful. One cannot simply discount faith-based contrarian views because they seem hopelessly out of step with current perceived realities. In other words, the *telos* of any attempt to articulate a useful theology of religions must be to give proper respect to the religions whose *modus operandi* is motion toward spiritual truth, while at the same time respecting the variously held and justifiable objections to dialogue over conversion from the evangelicals and fundamentalists of various religions. This *via media* is by no means a simple construct; it must uphold the fundamentals of the

[3] It is my judgment that my own Lutheran church, the Lutheran Church-Canada, has in recent years allowed esoteric internal discussions to move us away from effectiveness and the ability to influence public opinion. We must acknowledge that the presence of many religions will be a permanent quality of the Canadian landscape and be prepared to engage those religions on a respectful and productive level.

Christian religion, those dogmas that cannot be waived without deconstructing an elaborate edifice, while at the same time allowing the prospect of theological development to perform internal renovations that must result in a stronger structure. Its internal theological rationale must maintain the essentiality of *fiducia cordis* in the incarnate Son of God Jesus Christ for salvation, but also admit that pathways to that incarnate Son are by no means restrained by limited human perceptions of revelation, epistemology and eschatology. It must approach the religions with genuine concern informed by an evangelical heart, but not assume to hold all possible answers. This *via media* ought to be faithful to the religion of our forefathers and foremothers, and open to the promise of diversity as it makes its way into God's eschatological future.

The attitude of Christians toward those of other religious traditions has moved along a continuum of outright disdain on one pole to unqualified acceptance on the other. Those who look upon the religions with jaundiced eyes use pejorative terms such as "pagan," "infidel," or "heathen," to address adherents that do not worship as their cultures or choices have wrought within them. Conversely, those who purport a relatively amorphous God without proper name have been so charitable towards other religions that distinctives which are held in the highest regard, are reduced to utter meaninglessness. These positions represent extremes, yet it would be inaccurate to suggest the Christian church has made either extreme *de rigeur* in its theology over the centuries.

1.2 The Impact of the Second Vatican Council

In the wake of the twentieth century's ecumenical ruminations came The Second Vatican Council which codified and clearly defined the parameters for relations between

the Roman Catholic Church and the non-Christian religions. The Church wished to enter into a period of respect and cooperation with the religions, but it was not yet willing to relinquish its own primacy or understanding of the *missio Dei.* The Holy See seemed open to discuss what it viewed as peripheral matters, but would not give up on the so-called "non-negotiable" matters of the faith: the utter uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus Christ to whom all persons must come to receive grace from the Divine, as well as the centrality of the church and its sacraments as the only certain means by which God communicates His blessings to humankind.

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5: 18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.[4]

It cannot be denied that Vatican II represented a palpable shift in position and attitude, and yet the unyielding position it espoused concerning these central Christian doctrines left little room for negotiation on the possibility of salvation outside the church and restricted future inter-religious ecumenists in their efforts. Still, it must be admitted that Vatican II excluded a rigid interpretation of *extra ecclesiam non salus est* (no salvation outside the church), and left much room for theological debate. A further expansion of this proposition will be made in future chapters.

Of course, theologians had been engaged in debate concerning the religions prior to Vatican II. In fact some had approached the subject in terms much broader in soteriological scope than the council would have even considered. From the beginning of the twentieth century until Vatican II, if one were to look beyond the positions of Roman

[4] *Nostra Aetate* 2, 739.

Catholic theologians, the potential for broad ecumenical dialogue was informed by either the dialectical theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968) or by the liberal theologies of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872)[5] and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834),[6] which placed Christianity alongside all other religions, a claim to which Barth had reacted so strenuously. These "poles" present in the inter-religious ecumenical debate have not shifted overly much in the last century. Yet as we shall see the theology of religions has come to occupy a prominent place in the theological agendas of most religious systems, and this shows no sign of abating.

1.3 The Typology of the Theology of Religions

In recent years scholars of religion have attempted to construct paradigms to help explain the various positions held and how the various traditions relate one to another. Alan Race offered the first useful paradigm when he suggested a tripartite division of opinions based upon three fundamental perspectives—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.[7] These distinctions imply that if a paradigm shift has occurred it is from a position which places all hope of salvation in the vivifying action of Jesus Christ through His chosen instrument, the church on earth. *Exclusivism* is the theological claim that no one can be saved without making an explicit, conscious confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Since Christ has promised to be present in His church on earth, this would then be the most appropriate location for such a confession to take place, although this is not an absolute requirement. *Inclusivism* rejects the demand for explicit Christian faith

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[5] The classic text would be Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity.* See especially chapters on "The Essence of Religion" and "The Mystery of the Incarnation."
[6] Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers.* See especially chapter on "The Nature of Religion."
[7] The typology can be found in Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism.*

and some affiliation with the church on earth, but does claim that the salvific process, be it juridical or cognitive, always implies Christ and therefore explicit Christian faith as the ultimate fulfillment of every religious system. *Pluralism* makes no particularized faith demands nor connects faith to Christ. Rather pluralism views salvation as possible in and through what are loosely defined as "equal" or "valid" religious traditions.

Since Race first published his typology in 1983, a number of alternatives have been proposed, some of which are remarkably complex. I will expound on two of these alternatives, beginning with that which was proposed by the Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis. Dupuis was satisfied with the basic tripartite structure of Race's typology but saw limitations in the terminology. To make the progression of thought more comprehensible Dupuis suggested slight alteration in Race's typology to read ecclesiocentrism, christocentrism, and theocentrism.[8] *Ecclesiocentrism* was, for Dupius, the position held by Karl Barth, who held a negative view of religions in general, but recounted the need for confession of faith in Jesus Christ.[9] Not only that, since Barth took a literalist view of the axiom "outside the church there is no salvation," this confession required the ear of Christ's earthly institution, namely the church. In this scheme non-Christian religions are perceived as little more than pathetic attempts at self-justification. *Christocentrism,* popularized by Karl Rahner (1904–1984), and systematized by Paul Tillich,[10] held that a truly workable theology of religions could not demand an emphasis on ecclesiology that was by necessity open to erroneous doctrine and thus to attack from without. The church, if it is indeed a derived mystery and not the ongoing ontological revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation, is by no means the ultimate barometer by

[8] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions,* 74–79.
[9] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions,* 71.
[10] Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume II,* 97–180.

which the salvation of the masses must be measured. Jesus Christ is retained as the mediator between humankind and the divine, but one need not seek Him in the church alone. *Theocentrism* abandoned both the churchly activity and the mediation of Christ in favour of approach to God and God alone. Theocentrists like John Hick[11] and Paul Knitter[12] put forth the argument that this approach to God has been interpreted variously through history by many saving figures whose experience of God was intense and utterly unique. Thus, if a religion may be seen as leading to God who is the centre of all theological reflection, that religion has validity and is equal to all the others.

Terrance Tiessen has acknowledged the value of the tripartite typology, but finds it unable to explain the nuanced positions now present in the theology of religions debate. Inclusivism, Tiessen observes, is a term fraught with unfortunate baggage and one that has become unusable in recent years. He thus proposes the typology be expanded to five positions which he identifies as ecclesiocentrism, agnosticism, accessibilism, religious instrumentalism and relativism.[13] *Ecclesiocentrism* in Tiessen's paradigm mirrors that proposed by Dupuis. Since Christ is the perfect embodiment of the divine will, and the final mediator for all who seek salvation, the church and its Gospel proclamation are essential for all who would come to God. Non-Christian religions, insofar as they possess no such proclamation, are not instruments of God's saving activity. However, Tiessen avers that agnostics and accessibilists may also hold this view, thus making the centrality of the church anything but the "primary identifying characteristic." *Christocentrism,* the attitude that while Christ is universal Saviour one need not encounter Him in the institutional church alone, is not present in Tiessen's original taxonomy but represents a

[11] Cf. Hick, *God Has Many Names*; *God and the Universe of Faiths*; and "A Pluralist View."
[12] Knitter, *No Other Name?*
[13] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*, 31–47.

middle position implicit in his programme. It also most accurately represents the Lutheran understanding of a Christian theology of religions. *Agnosticism* is the position taken by those that do not know whether God has the means to save individuals apart from Gospel proclamation. According to agnosticism, Holy Writ is unclear on the subject of salvation among the unevangelized. Self-proclaimed agnostics such as John Stott[14] and Donald McGavran[15] are no less certain that the sacrifice of Christ is the salvific cornerstone, but they also recognize the relative good in the religions of the world, and insist, as Barth did, that the religions in and of themselves are not instruments of salvation. *Accessibilism*, the position Tiessen himself purports, states that the covenantal relationship established between the Father through the Son is unimpeachable and unique. Accessibilists believe, however, that one should be at least hopeful that God may choose to save some who have not heard the Gospel proclamation. God, it is said, makes salvation accessible to all in a manner known only to Him, and thus the religions may be home to the saved. *Religious instrumentalism* argues beyond accessibilism and states without qualification that "God's salvation is available *through* non-Christian religions. Jesus is still held to be, in some sense, unique, normative and definitive; but God is said to be revealing Himself and providing salvation *through* other religious traditions as well."[16] Tiessen places Rahner's proposal of an "anonymous Christian" and the world theology of Hans Küng[17] in this category. Unlike accessibilists that believe God *may*

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[14] "I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question [of the salvation of non-Christians]....The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the Gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it." Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials,* 327.

[15] "All we can say, humbly yet boldly, is that if anyone *is* saved it will not be through any religion or human attainment, but solely through the objective, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whether consciously appropriated or not." McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," 103.

[16] Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 34. Emphasis original.

[17] Küng, *Theology for the Third Milennium,* 227–56.

save members of other religions, religious instrumentalists contend that God has Himself raised the religions up to be instruments of salvation.[18] *Relativism* as presented by Hick, Knitter, and Raimon Panikkar,[19] agrees that salvation is universally available through the religions as part of their contribution to the faith community. However, while religious instrumentalists are equivocal on a position for the religions in God's plan for humankind, relativists are satisfied that all traditions are to a greater or lesser degree equal and contain divine truth. Not every expression of religion is approved, as some present morally reprehensible rituals, but respect for religious autonomy can be maintained and encouraged.

Dupuis and Tiessen have produced paradigms that feature many positive aspects that must be acknowledged and applauded. The benefit of Dupuis' typology is the manner in which it explicates the progression of thought from bald churchly exclusivism that restricts salvation to a select few adherents to a religious melting pot where borders are irrelevant and experience is paramount. Although it is problematic to try to force all positions into one or another of Dupuis' categories, in general he presents a helpful starting point for assessing the content of much scholarly material on the theology of religions and for listening attentively to ecumenical discussions. Tiessen has offered what must be viewed as a bold step forward, particularly with his subcategories in the area of inclusivism. He rightly points out that inclusivists are not at all a homogeneous lot, and it is in this arena that the most profitable scholarship (at least from a Christian perspective) will be forthcoming.[20] The addition of an agnostic subgroup is predominantly useful,

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[18] Cf. D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity,* 21; Carson, *The Gagging of God,* 27; Conn, "Do Other Religions Save?" 199; and Schenk, *Who Do You Say that I Am?* 43.
[19] Cf. Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue.*
[20] It will be argued in this work that confessional Lutherans are "soft" exclusivists, or Christocentrists.

given that the term "grace" has since its origins been somewhat elastic, and it is sometimes necessary to leave the possibility of salvation of the unevangelized beyond the realm of philosophical certainty.

The original typology as presented by Race retains the position of primacy.[21] Race's typology still allows for a certain and necessary flexibility in the development of concepts which suits many, if not most, Christian theologies of religion, and so will form the structural basis for the subsequent descriptive treatments of *exclusivism, inclusivism,* and *pluralism.* The Race typology does not appear, however, to be the paradigm most able to do justice to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. This is particularly unfortunate as one considers the idea of relationship with the sacred when viewed from within the Christian faith, a faith which cannot be divorced from its historical consciousness. That said, Race correctly points out that "there is a need to co-ordinate the diverse opinions now emerging under the umbrella heading of a Christian theology of religions."[22] For these reasons I will devote considerable attention to expanding upon it, citing relevant thinkers in future chapters and summarizing their donations to the ever-burgeoning locus of developing a Lutheran Christian theology of religions.

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[21] D'Costa has pointed out that Race's typology was in large measure influenced by the neo-Hindu theologian Radhakrishnan who developed "his own position in terms of the threefold paradigm of pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism, some sixty years before Alan Race." D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity,* 56.

[22] Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism,* 6.

Chapter 2: Defining the Terms for the Theology of Religions

Terminology in the theology of religions debate has become elastic in recent decades. Key locutions such as "theology" and "religion" have become so broad as to render them practically without meaning. Lutherans have certainly contributed to this hermeneutic diminution, but have at least attempted to preserve those terms that hold particular import for the dialectics that characterize their tradition. Carl Braaten argues eloquently for a theology of religions which features "softened" exclusivism,[1] while the approach of Paul Chung produces a more inclusivist theology of religions.[2] But while their respective positions may be at odds, their commitment to the theology of religions project and its terminology is undeniable. Sharp definitions for terms must be established so that progress toward an agreed-upon Lutheran position can be expedited. To this end, in this chapter I will identify and define several key terms—Lutheran, toward, theology, religion, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—to exhibit the unique vision confessional Lutherans hold concerning the non-Christian traditions. I will then utilize those definitions and categories to assess the valuable contributions of Hans Urs von Balthasar to the expanding field of the theology of religions.

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[1] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*
[2] Chung, *Luther and Buddhism*.

2.1 "Lutheran"

2.1.1 Confessional

For the purposes of the present work I define "confessional" Lutheranism in contradistinction to a "non-confessional" or modified Lutheranism that maintains fealty to the spirit of the *three solas,* but has largely rejected the notion of Scripture as the only norm for faith and practice, and the Lutheran Confessions as collected in the *Book of Concord* as a true exposition of Holy Scripture. I admit at the outset my personal adherence to what I will term "historic" Lutheranism, which I believe and practice in the Lutheran Church – Canada.

In recent years the percentage of North Americans who would agree with the statement "there is no such thing as absolute truth" in religion has increased to around 67 per cent.[3] Holy Scripture appears to impart a different perspective on the question of the religions and saving knowledge of God. To state the biblical perspective simplistically, there exists a distinction between knowing that God exists and knowing who this existent God is and what interest He has in humanity.[4] Scripture declares that God makes Himself plain in creation and human conscience, but no one has the capacity to intuit the true God from these witnesses by themselves (Rom 1:20). Paul avers that sinful humanity can do nothing else but reject God at all times, or at least perverts natural revelation so that idolatry is the common result. Natural revelation of the true God is available universally, meaning that all persons are accountable to God. For LCC-LCMS Lutherans this natural revelation of God is manifest in the religions, but their internal contradictions and false teachings display the insufficiency of natural revelation to reveal the true God.

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[3] Let Us Reason Ministries, http://www.letusreason.org/Biblexp115.htm .
[4] Luther, *LC* II, III, 66.

To know God is to worship Christ. In the Old Testament those who do not know God beyond natural revelation are said to be idolaters. Jesus affirms the inseparable relationship between knowing God and worshiping Him in His conversation with the Samaritan woman: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (John 4:22–23)." Later in John's Gospel the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is framed as the ultimate revelation of God, while the Revelation declares that the worship of God in heaven and on earth is predicated on the Lamb of God who was slain and now sits in the midst of the Throne of God. Thus, one may be certain that worship of Christ is worship of the one true God. Luther comments:

> [The] three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe that there is only one true God and worship—nevertheless they do not know what His attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of His love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illumined and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[5]

On the other hand, to refuse to worship Christ is evidence that one does not know the true God or what He has done for the salvation of the world. Knowledge of God in the form of information about Him does not amount to saving knowledge.[6] For that one requires the Holy Spirit working faith through the Gospel, culminating in worship of Christ.

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[5] Luther, *LW* 19, 55.

[6] "Thus reason also plays blindman's bluff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. Therefore it rushes in clumsily and assigns the name God and ascribes divine honour to its own idea of God. Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or

The Lutheran Confessions defer to Scripture on natural revelation, as they acknowledge that fallen man still possesses "a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, and also of the doctrine of the law."[7] For this reason, "even the heathen to a certain extent had a knowledge of God from the natural law, although they neither knew Him aright nor glorified Him aright."[8] The fact that a "dim spark" resides in all persons explains the universal desire for religion, as well as many parallel elements between religions. As mentioned above, however, it does not and cannot give rise to saving knowledge of God, since humanity is clouded by sin and therefore must engage in false worship and idolatry until God Himself initiates a course correction.[9] Special revelation will always be required to reveal the true God.

According to the Lutheran Confessions, all non-Christians must routinely sin against the First Commandment, insofar as they unapologetically worship someone or something other than Christ. The personal religions acknowledge that God exists, and may contain elements of truth and revelation, but they cannot have a relationship with Him. They fail to worship the crucified and living Christ whose resurrection redeems creation. This refusal is commonplace, not merely among the polytheistic religions such as Hinduism which multiply gods and worship multiple creators, redeemers and sanctifiers, but also among monotheists such as Judaism or Islam that reject Jesus as the unique Redeemer of the world. Though modern Judaism claims the Old Testament as Scripture, adherents remain in a state of unbelief due to their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah promised by the prophets. Christianity did, however, rise from the genetic

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what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody's heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit." *LW* 19, 55.

[7] *SD* 2, 9.

[8] *SD* 5, 22.

[9] *Ap* II, 9, 23.

material of "faithful Israel" (Rom 9:6–8), in contrast to the Jews that rejected Christ as Messiah and Lord.[10] The Islamic faith in one God who is the creator is in no wise confessing with the First Article to believe in "one God, the Father Almighty." To identify God as Father presupposes the existence of the Son whom the Father has begotten. Confessional, LCC-LCMS Lutherans, therefore, discard the notion that Judaism and Islam confess the true God despite their rejection of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity must be confessed as a "unity in substance of majesty co-equal."[11]

Confessional Lutherans are, however, perfectly capable of visualizing a God that saves by grace through faith, but at the same time does not limit that salvation to members of the visible church on earth. In order to distil the question to its core, I ask: must salvation by grace through faith alone be always and forever regulated by the institutional church? The LCC-LCMS Lutheran understanding of salvation is that it remains a gift of undeserved kindness from God. If this is so, and human beings can do nothing by which to cooperate with God and thus be justified by Him, then there seems to be no logical or dogmatic reason to discount that salvation may occur within the church or outside of her. God is the source behind all human desire for the divine, as well as the One who creates faith and maintains it. Faith, and the salvation it grasps, are creations of God and gifts to humankind, such that it is fair to state that God is the foundation for not Christianity alone, but for all (positive) religion.

Since the time of Luther, all Lutherans have been erratic in interacting with and possibly learning from the religions of the world. As we will see, Luther wrestled with

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[10] "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but He sent me . . . . If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." John 8:42, 46b–47.
[11] Cf. Athanasian Creed.

Judaism and Islam of his day, acknowledging the ongoing existence of these monotheistic religions, and even offering to provide a preface to a German translation of the Koran.[12] Luther possessed a lively understanding of general revelation, which allows that God makes Himself available to humanity outside of Judeo-Christian salvation history. This contention for a general revelation to all flowed from Luther's exegesis of the First Article of the Creed, which unambiguously declares that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that is or will be.[13] Luther could not, however, declare the Christian God to be the sole source of life, and then prevent that God from being experienced by persons that live outside the parameters of salvation history. Biblical revelation is most certainly the mode by which grace is conferred and faith is kindled, but there are multiple biblical referents to affirm that God as Creator gives witness to Himself among all nations, and by extension, among all religions.

Luther was challenged in his person by the seeming disconnect between the righteousness that he lacked and the righteousness God declared him to possess. His ruminations on this dialectical tension resulted in a stunning treatise, *On the two kinds of Righteousness.*[14] In the arena of human righteousness, the kingdom of the left wherein God communes with humankind according to the Law, we are driven to attempt to serve our neighbour and do good for him. The religions of the world can exist in and are limited to this kingdom of the left, unfortunately without experiencing the balm of the

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[12] Luther, *Preface to the Latin Quran.* http://www.lutheranwiki.org/Luther's_1543_Preface_to_Quran

[13] "Thus we learn from this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything else that has been mentioned here, or can be mentioned, nor can he by himself preserve any of them . . . . We confess that God the Father not only has given us all that we have and see before our eyes, but also daily guards and defends us against every evil . . . out of pure love and goodness, without our merit, as a kind father who cares for us so that no evil may befall us. Hence, since everything we possess, and everything in heaven and on earth besides, is daily given and sustained by God, it inevitably follows that we are duty bound to love, praise, and thank him without ceasing." *LC* II, 16, 17, 19.

[14] Luther, *LC* 31, 293–306.

Gospel which is instrumental only in the kingdom of the right. For this reason the best that can be said concerning the religions is that they are attempts at a tangible relationship with God brought about by an internal feeling of God-hunger which eventually empties life of meaning. General revelation and special revelation are most certainly Biblical concepts, but as we have seen, general revelation offers much of value, but not salvation.[15] To say otherwise is contraindicated, since it does not speak the truth in love. The most that LCC-LCMS Lutherans are willing to admit is that God can and does reveal Himself in the observable universe, but that revelation does not represent the entirety of God's will for the world and humanity.[16] It is the Gospel, the right hand of God, that discloses the true vision and will of the God of love.

It is enough that all Lutheran Christians should allow that something of religious value may emanate from the world's traditions. Lutheran Christians have, in many ways, learned from popular Hinduism the benefits of non-violence and pacifism, as well as gained insight into new forms of reconciliation.[17] Buddhism's ecological *bona fides* are well established,[18] and Judaism has provided the earthly community with much of the theological foundation for justice and jurisprudence.[19] By drawing on the religions according to their strengths, Christians can further endow their communities with health, joy and peace as God Himself has offered. Yet there need be no fear that in so doing Christians will abandon the Gospel in favour of a "world religion" free from distinctives or particular truth. In fact, Lutherans are well suited to engage in interreligious dialogue, and to "learn" from the religions, by virtue of the two kingdoms dialectic. For example,

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[15] Schulz, "Two Kinds of Righteousness and Moral Philosophy," 25.
[16] Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol., 185–87.
[17] Lochhaas, *How to Respond to . . . the Eastern Religions*, 10–21.
[18] Lochhaas, *How to Respond to . . . the Eastern Religions*, 22–26.
[19] Kolb, *How to Respond*, chapter 3.

one may speak of the value and benefit inherent in non-violence (*ahimsa*), without declaring the practice of non-violence to be in any way salvific. A Lutheran theology of religions, then, may just as well be declared a theology of life in the context of the world community.

While Lutheran Christians are, I believe, well suited to interreligious dialogue, few Lutherans have actually engaged in such activity, and even fewer have achieved anything of lasting value. The reason may be that, present in LCC-LCMS tradition at least, there exists a sincere lack of commitment to true dialogue, which is a genuine conversation that may result in distortions of the fundamentals of a religion. Dialogue that begins with ethical matters may eventually lead to more substantive discussions of ultimate concern. Those religions that open themselves to dialogue must be prepared for challenges to their *Weltanschauung*, their sacred writings and other sources that carry authority. In the case of Christians, history indicts the faithful as those of well-meaning that constantly fail to live up to their internal high standards for morality and ethics.

2.1.2 Non-Confessional

Within Luther's comments on the Third Article of the Creed we find the following:

> [O]utside the Christian church (that is, where the Gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness. Therefore, all who seek to merit holiness through their works rather than through the Gospel and the forgiveness of sin have expelled and separated themselves from the church.[20]

Mary Christine Lohr, in her doctoral dissertation *Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions*, declares that one must be "concerned" with interreligious dialogue before

[20] Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord,* 418.

possessing the ability to recognize Luther's statement as anything but exclusivistic. She takes emphasis from works of the Law and places it on God's gracious favour and the individual faith that takes hold of it. Lohr's reading of the Lutheran Confessions removes or at least relativizes the equilibrium between Law and Gospel in favour of a preponderance of "love and blessings." Her reasons for doing so include a laudable desire to "make such texts more relevant and accessible to twenty-first century readers who are interested in articulating a message of engagement rather than condemnation of the religious other."[21] Unfortunately, she readily maintains, the Lutheran Confessions do not offer a great deal of useful fodder pertaining to the theology of religions and the status of non-Christians.

Lohr identifies the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) 1991 "Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment" as a watershed moment in the development of a unique Lutheran theology of religions in general, and interreligious dialogue position in particular. The "Declaration" called for the ELCA to pursue ecumenical agreements with non-Lutheran Christian fellowships and offered directives for entering into such agreements. Central to ecumenical efforts must be the admission that the Christian church in the past acted in a triumphal, exclusivistic manner which resulted in "parochialism, imperialism, and self-preoccupation."[22] This must be followed by an admission that the church cannot declare itself the ultimate arbiter of truth, and a desire to participate in "non-threatening and open" dialogue with all non-Christian traditions. A statement from an ELCA panel examining Lutheran-Jewish relations, "Our Challenge today," reads

[21] Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions," 208.
[22] Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions," 209.

> Christianity faces a significant challenge today—to seek relationships with other major world religions. This is an urgent challenge since members of other religions now live right next door. The Consultative Panel plays a significant role in the larger search for a theologically appropriate interpretation of Christian identity vis-à-vis the religions of the world. Consultative Panel members are mindful that this challenge for Christians is shared by Jewish neighbours as well. The interreligious challenges of today must be met together with our partners in other faiths.[23]

From this it can be stated that the position of the ELCA with respect to non-Christian traditions is by no means clear. The language is unfortunately equivocal as to whether this truly is a "search" rather than a work in progress in which the final position has been predetermined, namely, inclusivism. In any case, Lohr readily admits that the ELCA's engagement with non-Christian traditions will not necessarily reflect what might be considered the views of historic Lutheranism.

The same Consultative Panel produced a companion piece titled "Windows for Understanding," which appears to be a primer for Lutherans in order for them to appreciate their non-Christian neighbours and friends. Readers are presented with basic facts and tenets of various religions, as well as encouraged to engage in interreligious dialogue whenever possible. Lohr points out that those who implement this primer can expect to gain "new insights about God through encounters with non-Christians.

> Lutheran approaches to biblical interpretation help us to understand that our knowledge of God is held in "clay jars" (2 Corinthians 4:7), to recognize the provisional nature of all assertions about God, and to hold in creative tension the diverse biblical portraits of God. All these factors can make Lutherans more open to the possibility that we may receive truth about God from religious others and from their sacred texts, even if for us these are not canonical scripture.[24]

In other words, dialogue with the religions may broaden Christianity's perception of divine revelation, as well as serve as a vehicle to reveal elements or qualities of God

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[23] Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions," 215.
[24] Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions," 216.

heretofore unknown or unseen by Christians. Another broadly Lutheran document titled "The Amsterdam Declaration" echoes Vatican II in postulating that other belief systems my possess traces of truth.

Lohr's mostly helpful ruminations are, unfortunately, negatively influenced by a conflation of interreligious dialogue and a theology of religions. She writes,

> From these statements [on interreligious relationships], partnerships and institutional initiatives several driving elements of Lutheran interreligious relations begin to emerge. There is a sense of repentance at play. This ties into the Lutheran concept of *simul justus et peccator*. Respect is key; in all things the other must be treated with respect. This respect extends to others as well as to oneself. In Lutheran encounters with the other, there is a need to remain true to core Christian/Lutheran beliefs such as the Incarnation and a Trinitarian understanding of God. Interreligious endeavours should be relational. The ELCA serves as a bridge builder between traditions and employs a model of accompaniment that encourages a relationship of engagement and outreach. This is coupled with a desire to participate in endeavours from an ecumenical perspective.[25]

At issue is the assumption that an interfaith attitude can and must shape a Lutheran theology of religions. If commitment to interreligious dialogue supersedes a Christian doctrine of the religions, a "soft" theology of religions will emerge in order to appear tolerant and progressive.[26] A Lutheran committed to dialogue should bring his or her preconditions to the table and, as Lohr points out, remain true to core teachings. If the goal of dialogue is agreement at all costs, the likelihood that Christian distinctives will be displaced is high, particularly those distinctives which speak clearly to confession of Christ in an explicit manner. That said, the presence of an individualized theology of

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[25] Lohr, "Finding a Lutheran Theology of Religions," 232.

[26] "Christian humility seems to be one of those few central categories of faith that biblical religion does not draw from the wider store of human wisdom and that therefore will always appear paradoxical, dangerous, and nonsensical to the secular mind. For this very reason, humility seems to be one of the categories that distinguish Christian love and Christian goodness from a love and goodness not illumined by faith. It is one of our basic ways of responding in faith to the Christian mystery." Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue,* 14–15.

religions, as well as a sense of core doctrinal identity, must be a precondition all those traditions participating in interreligious dialogue.

The Pacific Lutheran Theological School, an ecumenical seminary ostensibly overseen by the ELCA, has declared itself to be committed to religious pluralism and the orientation it engenders.[27] Students and faculty at PLTS are encouraged to welcome the multiculturalism and plurality around them as a means of deepening their Lutheran moorings and faith. While it is unclear as to the extent to which this occurs, pluralism is to be "integrated" into various curricula. Ted Peters, an instructor at PLTS, recommends a journey of self-discovery in which Christians, and specifically Lutherans, should engage. The reason is egalitarian as much as epistemological. He writes,

> To be self-critical, we might work with the hypothesis that we Christians could be mistaken. In principle, it is possible that Christian claims regarding Jesus Christ are mistaken. If it turns out we are mistaken—Jesus is not the Lord—this would remove Jesus from any pantheon of lords we might wish to formulate. Furthermore, if we are mistaken, this mistake in itself would count neither for nor against the lordship of Krishna or the truthfulness of the practices of puja or yoga. The claims of non-Christian religions will have to be evaluated individually, one at a time, each on its own merit. Any post-Copernican de-centering of Jesus' lordship or truthfulness does not itself provide warrant for respecting or embracing alternative claims to lordship or truth.[28]

If the unique lordship of the specific man Jesus can be challenged, Peters maintains that any truth which would otherwise be attributed to Jesus alone must be de-limited and be ascribed to non-Christian traditions to a greater or lesser degree. Vast numbers of persons living in traditionally non-Christian milieus are known to have made some form of confession of faith in Christ, and yet have not made such confession public for fear of retribution upon themselves or their families. For Peters, these should not be termed

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[27] The www.elca.org website contains, among others, a link to www.pluralism.org , whose primary mandate is the removal of religious priority in favour of an equivalency among the religions. LCC rejects such a view.

[28] Peters, "Re-Framing the Question: How Can We Construct a Theology of Religions?" 324.

"Christians" or "anonymous Christians" since they have made a conscious decision, albeit coerced, to avoid acknowledging the lordship of Christ publicly.[29] These persons, however, can hold a particular status among the redeemed since they fulfill Luther's primary criterion for saving faith as *fiducia* with or without ecclesial involvement.

Though the implications of Peters' contribution are inclusivistic, he offers one valuable insight to those who tend toward exclusivism. Confessional Lutherans, by virtue of their ordinary requirement of a public pronouncement of faith, and consistent with Scripture, declare that not all persons can expect salvation. Yet they may live with more certainty of salvation since, as Peters points out, "soteriology and ecclesiology are intertwined."[30] The institutional church and the saving Body of Christ are intimately and permanently connected. For the medieval Roman church this comingling served as attestation that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. For Peters it means a qualified defence of exclusivism is allowed, and perhaps necessary. Since in a global context exclusivists are viewed as restrictive and impertinent concerning those who exist outside of the church, the Sacraments, especially Baptism, become gifts leading to eternal life, gifts Peters contends are "ready to be shared."[31]

Paul Chung maintains that Luther was by no means parochial in his worldview, but rather should be viewed as a "theologian of dialogue drawing special attention to the dialogical mode of the presence of God and Christ."[32] While Luther is often portrayed as radically ecclesiocentric, Chung observes that Luther's unique doctrines of justification and the reign of God may lead to the conclusion that the word of God, insofar as it is

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[29] Peters, "Re-Framing the Question," 324.
[30] Peters, "Re-Framing the Question," 330.
[31] Peters, "Re-Framing the Question," 332.
[32] Chung, "Lutheran Theology in Engagement with World Religions," 336.

ubiquitous, can emanate from outside of the Christian church properly understood. If this is so, then to search for ultimate Trinitarian truth within the church alone would leave crucial data concerning the true God undiscovered. Luther portrayed all creatures, sanctified and mean alike, as "masks" for the living God, suggesting that God can communicate with His redeemed children through the wisdom present in the religions. For Chung this bifurcated communication demands that the church must listen actively to the knowledge carried forward by non-Christian traditions.

Chung correctly senses the limitations inherent in the traditional theology of religions taxonomy of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism, in his assessment, is too restrictive in its methods and self-righteous in its triumphalism, while inclusivism and pluralism do not pay adequate homage to Jesus' claim to be the "way, the truth, and the life." This concern, however, does not preclude the necessity of taking a Christian position on the religions, despite the challenges, but for Chung, "the strange voice of God, or the 'irregular grace of God' (cf. Martin Luther's commentary on Ishmael) encourages me to be open to the wisdom of world religions."[33] Chung believes that this "irregular grace" is a necessary pre-condition to Luther's two kingdoms doctrine which can serve as a common language between Christianity and the religions and a mechanism for mutual concern and edification. Chung does not offer advice as to how the two kingdoms doctrine might be utilized, but the concept does have merit, particularly as it admits that Christians do not occupy a sanctified space distinct from the religions, but rather exist in the earthly "kingdom of the left" as do all persons. The heavenly "kingdom of the right" is inhabited by the redeemed in Christ. Discerning the

[33] Chung, "Engagement," 340.

contents of the right is a remaining challenge for a developing Lutheran theology of religions.

Theodore Ludwig has added his voice to the discussion of interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions in three ways. First, he rejects the notion that the Lutheran Confessions feature an "explicit" doctrine of salvation.[34] For Ludwig, this is not an oversight or an omission of an assumed doctrine, but rather a purposeful indicator of Lutheran Christian doctrinal principles. If the Lutheran Confessions are to be taken as foundational, and they cannot be referenced for a definition of salvation, then Lutherans themselves should not expect to make pronouncements on the experience of the religions and whether or not the Gospel may reside within them.

Second, and more pertinent to the topic at hand, is a Lutheran view of the mystery of God. Lutherans have been well exposed to Luther's dialectic of the immanent and hidden God. Ludwig indicts generations of Lutheran systematicians for attempting to silence a challenging implication of the dialectic, that of the possibility that the hidden God resides among the people of other faiths, and expresses the simple Gospel in an unconventional manner.[35] If Muslims, Jews and Buddhists all express the "mystery" of the divine, then, Ludwig concludes, the doctrine of the hidden God must be a plank in the building that is the theology of religions as it pertains to interreligious dialogue.

Third, Ludwig sees the value of several core Lutheran dogmas for a developing theology of religions. *Simul justus et peccator* may be used in an interreligious setting to show the dual activities of God, as well as the double-sided attitude of all humanity to God's universal saving offer. Lutherans will also recognize the value of the law and

[34] Ludwig, "Some Lutheran Theological Reflections on Religious Pluralism," 129.
[35] Ludwig, "Lutheran Reflections," 131.

Gospel dialectic, as well as the two-kingdom's doctrine as modes of God's saving activity. Ludwig also views Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) as helpful, since such a grace-filled attitude, which eschews triumphalism, has greater potential to resonate "in the lives of people of other faiths in their immediate situations of life—that is, three-fourths of the people of the world who live by other sacred stories [than Christianity]."[36]

Ronald Thiemann has examined the theology of the cross in some detail, and has christened it a "resource for a Theology of Religions."[37] He contends that the theology of cross is dependent upon a God Who is hidden, suffering (*Anfechtungen*) in both God and humanity, and faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ that assuages all doubt. The theology of the cross, the contemplation of Calvary, results in confidence in the believer that only a God that exchanges His righteousness for our sin and death might provide. He writes, "Exclusivists are wrong, and dangerously so, because they take a notion of truth that belongs to propositions and their associated states of affairs and apply it to entire conceptual frameworks, worldviews, or religions."[38] The theology of the cross does not allow Christians to *a priori* reject the religions as vehicles for salvation in their own right. Pluralism, or absolutism in Thiemann's parlance, is unacceptable as well, since "it does not follow that we have no way at all to establish the truth of our assertions."[39] Exclusivism places too much emphasis on epistemology, while pluralism does not place enough.

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[36] Ludwig, "Lutheran Reflections," 133.
[37] Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," 229.
[38] Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," 236.
[39] Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," 237.

Like Lohr, Thiemann gives priority to openness to the claims of the religious other over the need for a fully-developed theology of religions which may cause offence or relativise theological distinctions. He writes,

> Christian theology should eschew all attempts either to assert the necessary superiority of the Christian faith or the necessary equality of other religions' claims to truth. Rather, Christian theology should simply give the grounds within the Christian faith for a respectful hearing of the Other that might alert us to claims of truth should we encounter them in the witness of other religions. I believe that the grounds for this openness are found in the intellectual and spiritual practices of a *theologia crucis*. Thus a Christian theology of religions, modest though it may be, should emerge from the very heart of the Christian witness to the God revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.[40]

Thiemann's inclusivist leanings are connected to his contention that the Christian religion, by virtue of its inherent admixture of rational truth and faith, should not claim priority over the other religions. Christians live in hope and a doxological awareness of the coming kingdom of God and His self-revelation. God's revelation should be expected to appear in the most unlikely of locales and situations. Christians would do well to listen as carefully as they speak, and to respect the integrity and truth contained in non-Christian traditions and their practitioners.

2.2 "Toward"

The theological discipline known as the "theology of religions" is a relatively recent addition to the theological academic agenda.[41] The new perspective on the religions being generated cannot bring solutions to intractable queries being posed, many

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[40] Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," 242.

[41] A short list of contributions include: Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism,* second edition; Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*; Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*; Netland, *Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*; Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelized*; Pinnock, *The Wideness of God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in the World of Religions*; Coward, *Pluralism in the World Religions: A Short Introduction.*

of which are new in and of themselves. This section is bound to raise considerably more questions than it answers, but will at the same time bring to light issues of discussions and advances in thought on the communication of the Christian faith to the unbeliever.

It remains difficult to trace the genesis of the phrase "theology of religions,"[42] and the mystery is not alleviated by the focus placed by theology faculties on the philosophy, phenomenology, science and history of religion. The theology of religions is most often attached to the penultimate chapter of world religions, if presented at all. But in all instances, a Lutheran Christian theology of religions should consider the religions, their validity and legitimacy, in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Until recently, Lutheran dogmaticians found little value in meditating on religious plurality, and instead gave it over to missiology as a kind of irrelevant postscript. In response to this theological myopia, the pursuit of a Christian theology of religions began at the outset of the twentieth century, and continues to this day.

For centuries Christians have limited themselves to expanding and expounding upon the central narratives, doctrines and practices of their own spiritual Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic traditions. The effect of this deep reflection was to open up the Christian faith to scrutiny, since there was much on which to comment. With the advent of the theology of religions, not just Christianity but all spiritual traditions have been brought under a microscope. Most Christians, and in particular most Lutherans, would contend that Christian theology has withstood deep inspection of its origins and teachings

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[42] A short list of contributions to defining "theology of religions" include: Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*; Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*; Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*; Perry, *Radical Difference: A Defence of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions*; D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions;* Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*; Yong, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*; Schmidt-Leukel, *God Without Limits.*

from without and from within. In the last century, Christians have met the challenges of the search for the historical Jesus, critical epistemology, the faith as myth and evolutionary theory—for the ensuing decades I forecast the primary question will be over the plurality of religions.

As has been shown, religious plurality, or the contemporaneous existence of many religions, is by no means a recent phenomenon. Christianity was born within a maelstrom of religious variety, from animism and radical skepticism to soft theism and monotheism. The early Christians found that their fidelity to the Lord Christ and the Scriptures placed them in opposition to most of the religions practiced at the time. Persecution came to Christians as they stood against the official religion, emperor worship, of the Roman Empire, as well as the Jews and philosophers, who viewed Christianity as a dangerous myth. Constantine's edict that Christianity should be a sanctioned religion of the Empire succeeded in reducing the theological "competition" significantly, and gave generations of the faithful the view that the "true" religion must eventually squelch all pretenders, leaving an earthly kingdom prepared to return of the King.[43] Plurality has returned in increments, so that now the religions stretch beyond their traditional boundaries. Not only is a wealth of knowledge of the religions available for study, human and information mobility has resulted in positive and negative forms of syncretism, as religious practitioners have become free to assemble a religion for themselves from the various religious options. Moreover, Christians have become the objective of counter-missionary movements from popular traditions such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Given these circumstances, and the natural variability of religious expression, the most that may be averred concerning the theology of religions is that one may move

[43] Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1,* 238–44.

"toward" it, but never reach a point of finality. Several mainstream Protestant groups—the United Church of Christ, the Methodist fellowships, and the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America and Canada to name three—have succumbed in large measure to relativism, making the task of those who wish to defend the universal validity of the Gospel more difficult.[44] Yet the question at its most basic level has not changed: how might Christians portray the particular person and work of Jesus Christ as universal in scope for all persons in all ages? On one hand, Christian, and certainly Lutheran, theologians have learned that the question is ineluctable, no matter the degree to which exclusive presuppositions are "softened" to appease religious pluralists. On the other hand, to declare or admit one's presuppositions prior to engagement in the development of a theology of religions displays a willingness to engage in honest critique of all facets of religions, including one's own. In other words, if theological reflection is carried on in the open, a Lutheran theology of religions should be achievable, even if the result is imperfect.

Carl Braaten has correctly distilled the major issues that must be addressed by a theology of religions into three groups: theological concerns, the problem of the eschatological absolute, and the possibility of salvation outside of institutional Christianity.[45] Christianity's historic claim to exclusivity via the Gospel is the primary theological concern. The primary critics of this position come from among pluralists such as John Hick and Paul Knitter, whose respective theologies will be dealt with below. Pluralists have made significant gains among religious academics seeking deconstruction

[44] Abraham, "United Methodists at the End of the Mainline," 28–33.
[45] Braaten, "Christian Theology and the History of Religions," 5–13.

of the traditional Christian dogma of the Incarnation.[46] Conservative Lutherans, however, cannot withdraw the claim of final salvation through the historical Jesus of Nazareth, since to do so would undermine and eventually destroy the essential foundation of the faith, namely that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ saves all persons from their sinful estrangement from God, and brings eternal life. Pluralism does boast an historical Christian pedigree, which was partially informed by the doctrine of the *Logos*. The ubiquity of the *Logos*, the ongoing presence of the Word or Christ principle, reveals that this Christ principle can be present and active in the various religions and philosophies without requiring actual proclamation of Christ and Him crucified. Some Christian theologians from antiquity declared a "seed of the *Logos* (*logos spermatikos*)" to be found outside of Christianity, and is the source of natural theology that strives to convince humankind of the existence of a benevolent divine.[47]

A second theological concern to which Braaten alludes pertains to the Reformer's reaction to a doctrine of *logos spermatikos*, which he declares is antithetical to the theology of the cross. Luther could locate the theology of the cross in Scripture, but the other is nothing more than a philosophical speculation or assumption. Jesus is the *Logos* of God, as well as a concrete person, the *Logos* is the universal divine principle, and therefore the concrete Jesus is the universal divine principle. The historical Jesus gave the Logos its meaning and context, so separating the two would remove the Logos' identity and *raison d'etre*.

The influence of broad historicism on modern hermeneutics has had deleterious effects on Christendom, culminating in the relative inability of Christians to claim that

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[46] D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions A Critical Evaluation; The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity: Faith Meets Faith.*
[47] Aquinas, *ST* 38:10.

theirs is the "absolute" religion. As the argument goes, no contingent person should presume to give anything but a relative opinion on God's world, Who is the only necessary Being. This was the position of Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), whose "Big Ugly Ditch" separated historical facts from eternal truths.[48] G. F. W. Hegel (1770–1831) saw no necessary distinction between the truth of the Gospel, and his philosophy of the Spirit.[49] The true God, for Hegel, must be reconfigured to fit the changing needs of culture. Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) came to the reluctant conclusion that the certainty of absolutes has no place in the history of religions. He wrote, "It is impossible to construct a theory of Christianity as the absolute religion on the basis of a historical way of thinking by the use of historical means."[50] Troeltsch believed that all things, material and otherwise, are subject to change through historical development, including religious and ethical traditions. Development occurs in religion, ethics and philosophy in a manner similar to that in governmental systems and economics. The question often raised by Troeltsch's critics is over the implication that "historicism," also known as "historical relativism," may have over claims of Christian uniqueness and religious priority. Troeltsch named this tension as his entree into his academic work, and did acknowledge the tension that exists between scientific historical reflection and attempts to establish standards for religious truth, and any value those truths may hold.

In Troeltsch's view, historical reflection has shaped the comparative study of religion in the last century, resulting in a deepening conflict between the historian's skepticism and the religionist's desire for certainty in the face of ongoing relativism.

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[48] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century,* 31–35.
[49] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1,* 121–24.
[50] Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, 45.

Christianity, for Troeltsch, cannot defend its internal truth by appeal to miracles, or even that it is the perfect Hegelian manifestation of the universal Spirit. Miracles, for example, are not present in Christianity alone, but other religions may lay claim to similar events. Furthermore, even if it could be established that Christianity is in some sense superior to the other religions, that does not mean that all religions have found their fulfillment in Christianity. Christianity has changed and evolved over time, has suffered schisms and denominationalism, and has never experienced the kind of unity alluded to in Scripture, thus disqualifying it as a candidate for the "ultimate" religion. Troeltsch replaced the manifestation of the Divine Life in history with a Divine Reason which could exist in various religions simultaneously.

Troeltsch's Divine Reason hypothesis inevitably leads to a pluralizing that confessional Lutherans find objectionable. Lutherans are suspicious of religious traditions, Christian or otherwise, that place inordinate emphasis on the progression of theological theory as it pertains to the religions. All religions are salvific in their own context, but from a Christian perspective not all religions should be referred to as "ways of salvation" in the proper sense. No universal religion with multiple species of salvation routes exists. If such a religion existed, there would be no reason to convert from one species of religion to another, or to proselytize in the hopes of drawing the non-Christian from her self-imposed darkness. If salvation is equated to illumination, the experience of transcendence and singularity, it can be averred that only Buddhists will achieve and enjoy it.[51] The history of religions, then, is more a mechanism by which the inevitable religious differentiation can be traced and apprehended.

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[51] Braaten, "Christian Theology," 12.

Despite theology's best efforts, a Christian theology of religions, much less a Lutheran one, remains a work in progress. Nevertheless, for a Lutheran view of religions, several foundational Lutheran doctrines must not be jettisoned in the hope of moving ever closer toward a theology of religions. The revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth must remain the ground upon which all eschatology and salvation rests.[52] The cross and empty tomb is the perfect epiphany of God's eschatological desire for all persons.[53] Jesus Christ is the universal Saviour, and this belief is not an abstracted *a priori*, but an *a posteriori* reflection upon the religious experiences of all persons within their own traditions.[54] The history of religions served to confirm all the religions as living spiritual expressions, and Christian mission is the obligatory action that must "create space in the other religions for a future that will not negate but fulfill them in accordance with the revelation of the divine love and mercy revealed in the ministry of Jesus and the apostolic mission."[55]

2.3 "Theology"

The term "theology" is resistant to sharp and unambiguous definition. For confessional Lutherans theology has an objective and a subjective component. Objectively, theology pertains to the person and attributes of God, recognized by most Christians as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Subjectively, theology is equivalent to the knowledge of God insofar as humans are capable.[56] It is helpful to recall that the term "theology" is not of Christian origin, but came to light from those that the early

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[52] Luther, *SA* II, I.
[53] Luther, *LC* II, II.
[54] Luther, *LC* II, III.
[55] Braaten, "Christian Theology," 13.
[56] Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 162–72.

Christians would consider to be pagans. The fact that non-Christians coined the term is by no means surprising, given that the earnest study of God will result from persons who know of God's existence, but not His attitude and will toward humanity.[57] For this reason, in the early church "theology," and the cognate "theologian," were not interchangeable terms, meaning a person could consider the elements that pertain to a god without engaging in the study of God. This is most certainly how the early Christians may have viewed what moderns define as interreligious dialogue, as a consideration of the fundamentals of a god without assignation which may lead to conversion.[58]

The primary and proper meaning of "theology" is in the subjective sense, for as Walther declares, "theology must first be in the soul of a man [sic] before he can teach it, [or] present it in speech and writing."[59] Theology is an aptitude or qualification to describe persons with the teaching office in the Christian church. Theological aptitude is a spiritual aptitude that presupposes personal faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Non-Christians may be able to comprehend the entire counsel of Christian doctrine, and even instruct in all its glory and nuance, but they would not be "theologians" in the Lutheran sense.[60] Theology is restricted to teachings as they are drawn from and pertain to the Christian Scripture alone, and those that would be theologians must be engaged in the refutation of false doctrine that is at variance with those Scriptures.

> . . . Scripture, being God's own doctrine, *doctrina divina*, has the benign power to win its way into the hearts of men and that, far from inducing "dead orthodoxy," it

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[57] Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1,* 30–31.
[58] Cornille, *Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 12–31.
[59] Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics Volume I,* 45. Hereafter *CD.*
[60] Luther: "We see that there is more of heathen and human conceit than of the holy, sure teaching of Scripture in the writings of the theologians. What shall we do about it? The only advice I can give is to humbly pray God that He would give us doctors of theology. The Pope, emperor, and the universities can make doctors of art, of medicine, of jurisprudence, of the Sentences, but be assured that no one can make a doctor of Holy Scripture for you but only the Holy Ghost from heaven, as Christ says John 6:45: "They shall all be taught of God." Pieper, *CD I,* 47.

> produces "living" Christianity, Christianity pulsating with divine warmth and strength. Likewise the multiform gibes about "pure doctrine" will disappear; coming under the rule of the Scripture principle, men no longer ridicule "the sound doctrine" . . . but realize with holy fear that this is the only kind of doctrine permissible in God's Church, the only kind befitting the Christian teacher.[61]

Those who refute false doctrine must do so winsomely, without malice or carnal motive. In interreligious terms this means that a clear presentation of pure doctrine must precede refutation of falsehood. Polemics are discouraged in the Lutheran understanding of theology, but must not be avoided for the sake of tolerance between religions. On the contrary, polemics may be necessary since a doctrine is more fully comprehended when compared with its antithesis, and error by one or both dialogue partners can materialize at any moment and in any context. Theology in this analysis contains immutable divine truth (*doctrina divina*) over the contingent opinions of human beings (*doctrina humana*). When humans give testimony to the Gospel of Christ, the Holy Spirit is present and psychically active, moving hearts to accept the testimony and believe the doctrine as coming from the true God.

2.4 "Religion"

Scholars of etymology are by no means in agreement as to the genesis or ultimate denotation of the term "religion."[62] More common is the understanding that the meaning

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[61] Pieper, *CD I,* 75.

[62] E. B. Tylor believed religion was informed by spirit worship. The main function of religion is to offer humankind some control over the spirit world inhabited by their ancestors and others. Milloy, *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change*, 4. Ludwig Feuerbach reduced religion to the joy of life, the delight in whatever is positive in life. "[Feuerbach] insisted that it was precisely the literal anthropomorphism of theism that reveals its true origins and that constitutes its appeal. This may, perhaps, be the case, but it is not self-evidently so and if accepted without question puts the theologian in an unfair position: insofar as the theologian attempts to modify the idea of God, he or she is accused of not dealing with real religion.; if, on the other hand, the theologian accepts anthropomorphism, he or she is ridiculed. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume* 1, 228. William James proposed a psychological angle, claiming that religion is useful only insofar as it brings new energy to living, and a certainty of long term

of religion can be determined by its usage, in context. There seems to be no common usage, resulting in an unfortunate elasticity in meaning. Both Christians and non-Christians alike employ the term "religion," some conceptually and others in a more concrete fashion. That both Christians and non-Christians speak of the word "religion" does not imply that a single broad definition is attainable or even available.[63] When Lutherans use the term "religion," they mean the antithesis of those definitions that may be generated by the non-Christian traditions. Scripture declares that non-Christians may know of the historical Jesus, as well as awareness of the Law, but have no relationship with the Gospel of Christ. Non-Christians are relegated to life in bondage to sin since their entire *modus operandi* and process of thought remains squarely in the ambit of the Law. In general, when non-Christians speak of "religion" they routinely refer to longsuffering humanity's tedious efforts to placate their deity through works of worship, sacrifice, prayer, asceticism, morality or some combination thereof. The non-Christian traditions are, by their very nature, religions of the Law.[64]

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safety. James writes: "Please observe that the whole dilemma revolves pragmatically about the notion of the world's possibilities. Intellectually, rationalism invokes its absolute principle of unity as a ground of possibility for the many facts. Emotionally, it sees it as a container and limiter of possibilities, a guarantee that the upshot shall be good. Taken in this way, the absolute makes all good things certain, and all bad things impossible (in the eternal, namely), and may be said to transmute the entire category of possibility into categories more secure. One sees at this point that the great religious difference lies between the men who insist that the world MUST AND SHALL BE, and those who are contented with believing that the world MAY BE, saved. The whole clash of rationalistic and empiricist religion is thus over the validity of possibility." William James, *The Varieties of Religious* Experience, Lecture VIII. Rudolf Otto called religion the "mystery that causes trembling and fascination," while Wilhelm Schmidt offered a hypothesis that all religion was monotheistic, but over time lesser gods were added, until the result was the great plurality of religions we experience today. Based on these observations Schmidt established his famous theory of primitive monotheism: monotheism is not the end result of the evolution of religion, but it already existed at the very start of the development of humanity. Only later was it joined by "animism," "ancestor worship," "polytheism," and the like. Milloy, *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change*, 4–5.

[63] For an excellent treatment of the variety of religious expressions see Kunin, *Religion.* especially 71–171.

[64] Luther, *LW* 30, 76.

Lutherans contend that historic Christianity is built upon faith in the salvific quality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that is, in the declaration of Christ's victory over sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. Since God has already reconciled humanity to Himself, it is unnecessary, and probably dangerous, for persons to attempt to please Him through works. Paul declares as much: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by the works of the Law" (Gal 2:16). The *Apology* to the Augsburg Confession agrees, stating that "by faith we obtain remission of sins for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of our works that precede or follow."[65] Thus, those religious bodies that declare persons reconciled to their deity by virtue of their works, either whole or in part, have perverted the essence of pure and simple Gospel and must reside outside of salvific Christendom.[66]

Many examinations of world religions endeavour to answer the question: why are there so many religions? The implication here is that there must by definition be more than a small number, perhaps three or greater. For Lutherans, to speak of "many religions" is unnecessary, since there are only two fundamental religions: the religion of the Law, or of works, and the religion of the Gospel.[67] Scripture indicates that although Christianity existed alongside the religions, and in fact "borrowed" some traditions, her efforts were not pluralistic, but rather to replace the religions over time. The commission given to the disciples by Christ prior to His ascension was general, and thus exclusivistic

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[65] *Ap* Triglot 287, 19.

[66] "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord,* 418–9.

[67] Pieper, *CD I,* 19.

(Matt 28:18–20). In fact it could be maintained that Christ removed from the religions their right to exist, because only the religion of the Gospel has the power to effect salvation. Other religions, moral and upright as they may be, can do nothing but leave adherents in darkness and under the sway of principalities and powers.

The challenge, of course, is that most scholars of religion do not declare Christianity to be in diametric opposition, in a different class, than the non-Christian traditions. No single definition for "religion" has been crafted, giving way to a general concept of religion, which is so wide and encompassing that both Christian and non-Christian traditions can exist in the same genus. Yet careful scrutiny of these definitions reveals that scholars of religion often use common terminology to reconcile very distinct things.[68] They routinely ignore the basic truth and essence of Christianity in order to reduce heterogeneous religions into a homogeneous slurry featuring all manner of qualities signifying nothing in particular.

As we have seen, "religion" is that which pertains to a supernatural power or essence that creates, governs, and judges humanity and controls or influences the natural course of history. This "god of the gaps" demands the obedience of the created, who offer worship and sacrifice to appease their particular deity. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) assessed the religions of humankind as centred around belief in an absolute reality, the sacred, that is capable of utter transcendence and perfect immanence, manifesting itself in the world at will and purifying that world to bring its reality into the created order.[69] Paul Tillich spoke at length of religion as the "ultimate concern" of humanity. Religion, for Tillich, offers an experience of the Holy, something that brings inspiration, moral

[68] Kunin, *Religion*, 183–222.
[69] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 8–233.

courage and ultimate meaning.[70] A similar position is taken by Clifford Geertz, for whom religion is characterized by symbols that "establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[71] Other definitions, such as that purported by John Hick, seek to establish a religious "common denominator" by declaring the progression of humankind is proof that we are moving inexorably toward perfection and fulfillment.[72] Such progression may be achieved with or without divine, superhuman assistance.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was unwilling to ascribe to religion anything of unique value which could not be attained by other means, but rather averred that religion achieves nothing but destruction of self-awareness and discovery.

> Religious ideas are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind [sic]. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a more world-order insures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place.[73]

Freud's distrust of religion was by no means unique. Karl Marx (1818–1883) had declared religion to be a dangerous emotional crutch which prevents class equalization and progression.[74] "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature," he wrote, "the heart of

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[70] Cooper, *The "Spiritual Presence" in the Theology of Paul Tillich,* 55–59.
[71] Gwynne, *World Religions in Practice,* 4.
[72] Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 11–30.
[73] Gwynne, *World Religions,* 4.
[74] Marx writes, "*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man,* the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, *a reversed world-consciousness* because they are a *reversed world.* [Religion] is . . . *the fantastic realization* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true

a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness."[75]

The many interpretations of religion have created an unfortunate ambiguity with respect to similarities and potential distinctives between the religions. For Lutherans there is no possibility of a "world-religion" that may serve the spiritual needs of the majority.[76] Even the implication that the religions share a common desire and need to worship and serve a god does not mean equivalency in intent or desired outcome. The nature and character of Christian worship is radically at variance to the ritualized worship performed by all other religious traditions. Lutherans perceive worship as participatory, not sacrificial, since it is God who was enfleshed and Who serves His people with the proclaimed Word and the dominical Sacraments. Worshippers offer their first fruits to God not out obligation but as thanksgivings for the gift of salvation.[77] Good works, insofar as they are recognized as such, serve as expressions of joy for divine favour that

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reality. The struggle against religion is therefore mediately the fight against *the other world*, of which religion is the spiritual aroma. . . . Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself." Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1*, 230. Emphasis original.

[75] Gwynne, *World Religions,* 4.

[76] Cantwell-Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind [sic].*

[77] Balthasar avers that the centre of the institutional church is outside of herself, in the person of Christ who is the loving Bridegroom. As a result he can state that churchly love is discernible not when the Church excludes based on confession but when it reaches out to its "enemies," particularly to non-Christians who may or may not be actively antagonistic towards her. Balthasar properly warns that in reaching out the Church should take doctrinal distinctives seriously, and should never minimize them for the sake of concord. The Triune God "irradiates" the world through the church which is living, breathing and dynamic, but never in a manner which is trivial or with an essence that is relative. There must and will remain an institutional Church with hierarchy, dogma and sacrament, for the Church is the love of Christ crystallized and palpable, and like Christ Himself must never become the exclusive province of a select few, but be allowed to shine through the lives of the committed. On the other hand, the world is not entirely without merit, but is the "non-Catholic church," undifferentiated and partially redeemed. Thus, says Balthasar, "love within the church must not be closed in on herself, but must have a far-reaching apostolic and redemptive significance for the world, as is seen today mainly in the much-discussed idea of the whole world as a single family." Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, 121.

the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ has acquired (Gal 2:20). The Christian God cannot be placated by good works performed to gain favour or out of "religious duty," since to do so expresses doubt over the veracity of God's gracious promises.

2.5 Exclusivism: Ecclesiocentrism/Christocentrism

It must be considered an understatement to suppose that there are few more controversial issues in Christian theology today than how the Christian faith can or does relate to other religious traditions.[78] At the centre of the controversy is the problem of truth—who, if anyone, has the correct understanding of the divine? Logic dictates that since many incompatible truth claims are made by various religions, it follows by necessity that some of them must be false. "Orthodox" Christianity still maintains that the person and work of the historic figure Jesus Christ from Nazareth are unique, definitive and salvific. Jesus Christ is the "cornerstone," the only way to the Heavenly Father, and a stumbling block to those who are unwilling or unable to believe. No one comes to the Father except through Christ, and no one comes to Christ unless the Holy Spirit draws him or her. For this reason Christ established His church on earth to act as a permanent mediator between God and humankind. The church, through its proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, is the mechanism the Holy Spirit actualizes to build faith in Christ. Any religion, no matter how morally upright, which advances another philosophy or saviour, however qualified, must be false. This is the essence of the Christian exclusivist position.

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[78] Exclusivism is not uniquely Christian, but for the purposes of this discussion I will confine my comments to Christian exclusivism. See above, xx.

Christian exclusivists "are those who maintain the uniqueness and normativity of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the truth and authority of the Bible as God's definitive self-revelation, and who assert that where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are not to be accepted as truth."[79] Needless to say, exclusivity persists in other traditions that hold to the truth of their own understanding.[80] Yet Christian exclusivists have tended to be especially vilified, having been accused of intolerance to reckless religious genocide as witnessed during the era of African and Asian colonialism.

Like all religionists, Christian exclusivists exist on a broad spectrum. Not all have rejected the possibility of salvation among the non-Christian religions. Nevertheless, criticism against anything that remotely resembles Christian exclusivism is swift and often vitriolic. Harold Netland has pointed out that in general criticisms of Christian exclusivism fall into three categories: "those which argue that exclusivism is intolerant and otherwise morally blameworthy, those which argue that exclusivism is somehow epistemologically deficient, and those which hold that exclusivism is not demanded by the data of Scripture."[81] In other words, Christian exclusivism is for some recalcitrant, ridiculous or redundant. While these objections bear some veracity and must be taken seriously, the regrettable implication is that Christian exclusivists are naïve and in need of correction. In response it must be allowed that exclusivists, no matter their religious

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[79] Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth," 78.

[80] DiNoia suggests that Christian claims of exclusivism are by no means distinct from the Buddhist assertion that there is no attainment of Nirvana except in following the Excellent Eightfold Path. Exclusivism is not unwarranted but an expression of the seriousness with which each religion regards the true aim of life and the means necessary to attain and enjoy it. In other words, exclusivism is pan-religious, and Christians should not be vilified for exemplifying it since no one religion can claim tolerance of or even extensive contact with other traditions. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective,* 8–36.

[81] Netland, "Exclusivism," 78.

stripe, are by no means unaware of the internal tensions in their systems. Kenneth Cracknell admits without reservation that while exclusivism belongs inherently to Christian theology, the problem that exclusivity inevitably creates is increased marginalization and drift away from religious unity. Though not self-identified as an exclusivist, Cracknell nevertheless maintains that Christian evangelical activities must continue, but only if Christians allow other faith traditions to evangelize them in the process. Christians must try to learn from world religions and work for "the total salvation of the whole human race which is announced to us in the coming and already burgeoning kingdom of God."[82]

To claim there could be an exclusivist Christian position was for all intents a redundancy until the age of the Enlightenment brought forward a humanistic and secularized vision of theology and removed the possibility that one religion could be considered superior to another. It was to a large extent this move toward rationalism which provoked Swiss theologian Karl Barth to consider the question of religion in general, and the position of Christianity with regard to the religions in particular. In this respect Barth could be viewed as exclusivistic on some ecclesial issues, and more universalizing when he dealt with ultimate questions of the nature and acquisition of salvation, and by whom that salvation may be attained. Though Barth would find it dangerous throughout his career to conclude that any particular religion might hold the soteriological upper hand, he would nevertheless be consistent in his assertion that Jesus Christ is the perfect and permanent revelation of God, the very Word of the Father, and thus the conduit through which all persons move from human darkness to divine light. For this reason, then, Barth was first and foremost a Christian exclusivist.

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[82] Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths*, 59.

Barth started where he felt all good theologians should—with Jesus Christ as the revelation of the will of God.[83] As such Christ and Christ alone[84] must form the hermeneutical key to every theological concern, and act as the primary (if not sole) criterion by which all religious systems, Christian and non-Christian alike, must be balanced. Revelation was, for Barth, the quintessence of his dialectic, since it brings to light the plight of humankind and the grace of the Triune God. Revelation is not simply a manifestation of the sacred separate from creation, but God's true offering of Himself that protects humankind from living out a futile existence and perishing for eternity.[85] For humankind to "know" the unknowable God in any real sense He must transcend the boundaries of space, time, and matter and be known in an utterly unique fashion. When God is revealed it is therefore He that is engaged in revealing, and that revelation must be original with all persons as individuals, and not known *a priori*. Thus, revelation is always thoroughly new and fresh as it belongs to no mind nor is present in any imagination. Barth conceived of a revelation to which no human may be neutral—one may accept or reject Christ, but indifference to Him is not possible. Extending this position to religions in general, Barth contends that any religion purporting to "know" God objectively separate of His unique revelation of Himself is exposing itself as false and, in Barth's occasionally indelicate but theologically precise language, "unbelief."[86]

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[83] In fact, Newbigin suggests that truth is knowable only to those who are open to revelation. The Christian religion, unlike most major religious systems, is rooted in revelation, not reason. Once revelation was assumed to have occurred, this initial revelation of a single Saviour Jesus Christ can be tested for applicability to changing circumstances. The move to *understand* is always rational, and all persons thus occupied are being faithful, and are protecting themselves from aberrations, declared in Christian terms to be heresy. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society,* 33–46.

[84] Dupuis' position was that Barth was ecclesiocentric. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions,* 76. This is true insofar as for Barth faith is the subjective portion of justification but such faith must have an objective referent, Christ, who makes Himself available in His church.

[85] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/ 2, 301. Hereafter *CD.*

[86] Barth, *CD* 1/ 2, 297–325.

The nature of man and man in himself is revealed by the gracious activity of God Who offers Himself without reservation to man. In accepting grace as a divine gift man is acknowledging his soteriological impotence, and in this manner received good standing with God. Humankind does not apprehend the truth so much as it is apprehended by the truth. Humans must meet God in some form of "religion," but all come to faith in the same manner—from a condition of unbelief that is overcome by revelation alone.

For Barth, religion can be false insofar as it lacks access to revelation, but at the same time no religion in and of itself can be considered true relative to others.[87] A religion may make a considered argument or state a position, but it can only become true (a creature of grace) *extra nos*, from the outside. In a similar fashion, revelation where the truth resides can acquire the errors of religion and become infected by them, or can overcome the falsehood of religion and become true. In either case, Barth has no illusions. "[T]he Christian religion is the true one only as we listen to the divine revelation. But a statement which we dare to make as we listen to the divine revelation can only be a statement of faith."[88]

If any "religion" lacks the means necessary to attain and maintain veracity, Christianity should not consider itself infallible, but rather through prayer and constant vigil uphold the primacy of Christ while at the same time exercising tolerance of other religions.[89] Tolerance, for Barth, did not mean moderation of central doctrines for the

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[87] The missionary Hendrick Kraemer expanded on Barth's position, stating that while there may be a plurality of religious *systems*, religions in themselves are particular. One may be Christian and lay claim to revelation, but because Christianity is particular it is "true" only insofar as it possesses relationship to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Religion exists universally in the form of a religious consciousness (courtesy of John Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*) and which exists both subjectively and objectively in the religions of the world. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith,* 83–85.

[88] Barth, *CD* I/ 2, 326.

[89] "...[I]f we recognize and confess Him as the One who was and is and will be, then we recognize and confess that *we are not* alone, nor the community which, following the prophets and apostles, believes in

sake of the weak, nor did it imply superiority on the one hand or skepticism on the other. Rather, tolerance must be activated in the heart of the Christian due to presence of the revealed Christ, who by the power of the Holy Spirit is reconciling the whole world to Himself.

> Even outwardly, in its debate with non-Christian religions, the Church can never do more harm than when it thinks that it must abandon the apostolic injunction, that grace is sufficient for us. The place to which we prefer to look is only mist, and the reed upon which we have to lean will slip through our fingers. But trying to resist and conquer other religions, we put ourselves on the same level.[90]

In a subsection of the *Church Dogmatics* he titled *The Glory of the Mediator,* Barth counseled the Christian community—presumably those to whom Jesus Christ has been revealed—to pay careful attention to the secular. Since revelation can occur in many and various ways, it stands to reason that it might just please Almighty God to place some attenuated form of revelation in the minds and hearts of those who live in full isolation unreached by mission, or give it to those within the "church" whose experience of Christ is mixed and relative. Christians, those who possess the "best" of Christ, may search for truth in other religious systems since the *prima facie* evidence for the Lordship of Christ is ambiguous, at least from the perspective of language. Outside of the Biblical witness the figure of Christ exists in a cloud of unknowing. Thus, "[i]t is evident, of course, that until His coming again, i.e. until the direct and universal and definitive revelation of His glory, there can be no question of anything more than signs of His lordship or attestations of His prophecy, whether in Scripture, in the confession and message of the community, or in such true words as pierce the secularism of the worldly

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Him and loves Him and hopes in Him, but *de iure* all men and all creation derive form His cross, from the reconciliation accomplished in Him, and are ordained to be the theatre of His glory and therefore the recipients and bearers of His Word." Barth, *CD* 4/ 3, 116–117.

[90] Barth, *CD* 1/ 2, 332.

life surrounding it in closer or more distant proximity."[91] The upshot of this position means that Barth could be a relative exclusivist while still offering a universalist undertone, since as he points out even the most carefully crafted confessional articulation cannot hope to contain the entirety of Christ. Jesus Christ can and does "declare Himself" in various confessional expressions, except that His truth is portrayed from a perspective and certainly not *in toto*. The common link, and the overarching theme in Barth's corpus, is that any expression of religious faith must be Christ who informs and enlightens confessional articulations and forms the ontological basis for their claims. Barth comes full circle. While he cannot discount the possibility of revelation outside of the church, that revelation must project Christ, a point which is considerably exclusivistic. In fact, for Barth religious systems are true *only* insofar as they provide a "connection with the totality of Jesus Christ."[92] If no explicit connection of this type can be demonstrated, Christ does not reside in that voice and hence it can "have nothing whatever to do with the truth."[93]

If Christ is the whole of revelation and the norm of truth, then what should be done to overcome the limits of language? How can a finite mind separate words that "contain" truth from those which are wholly fallacious? Barth counsels that any truth claim be appraised using the query: does this truth claim align with (Christian) Holy Scripture? Such a claim may not be corroborated by an explicit passage of Scripture, but the intent and thrust must at least harmonize with the Biblical witness. Barth would not allow a replacement for Biblical truth, nor any attempt to suspend or simply emulate it. Non-Christian truth claims cannot be considered unless they lead a person to delve

[91] Barth, *CD* 4/ 3, 122.
[92] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 124.
[93] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 130.

deeply into the Christian Scriptures to find the fulfillment of their religious curiosity. The non-Christian may also cause the Christian to reconsider some aspect of the faith, and the Christian must then be willing to go where the path might inevitably lead. Barth advises that if the above criteria are met "Christianity must avoid any pride or sloth in face of them. It must be ready to hear them, and it must do so."[94] The receiving and implementing of midcourse corrections from without is, for Barth, a vital part of the history of the church, utilized by the Divine to preserve the Body of Christ and repristinate the truth.

It is with regard to the Incarnation that Barth's exclusivizing is most strident. He contends that the Word of God (meaning the person and work of Jesus Christ) "binds" itself to anyone who hears it. The internal creaturely truth perceived by the hearer is instantly challenged and reduced to mere opinion. Creaturely truths, by virtue of their individuality and separation from forensic justification and sanctification, give no freedom from the strictures of humanity. In contrast to the neutrality of creaturely truths, the Word calls hearers to radical decision for or against the Father of all. In this way the Word of God is the true binding force for all things, the unity and totality of all, and the self-authenticating finality serving as the eternal and irrevocable criterion for all truth. Mission, the "free communication of Jesus Christ in world events,"[95] must be continued due to the self-imposed plight of sinful humankind. The God that has made truth available through the Incarnation has also issued an invitation to freedom through a series of voices which call to humankind and bring willing individuals to faith. He speaks through the mystery of existence, through natural and spiritual laws, through human

[94] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 130.
[95] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 131.

freedom. Through all these voices humankind must be convinced that it is creaturely, "the creature of God, but no more; that it is grounded, yet not in and by itself, but in and by God."[96] God and the world He created do not exist on the same level, but co-exist as per the gracious activity of God in creation. The same can be said for the self-manifestation of God and the many lights that declare His being, since for Barth

> [i]n God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ we do not have a mere expression of the truth, but the one true light of the one truth above or alongside which there can be no other, rival truth....These are lights and truths in the *theatrum* of the *gloria Dei.* The meaning of the being and existence of the world created by God is to be the fitting sphere and setting of the great acts in which God expresses and declares Himself, i.e. His overflowing love for man, establishing, maintaining, executing and fulfilling His covenant with Him.[97]

For Barth, and Christian exclusivists in general, beliefs are vital to faith, and the multiplicity with which the religions refer to God must be testament to an ultimate and irreconcilable digression. It may be fashionable in some sense to maintain the illusion of equivalence between all religions, but it most certainly does not reflect theological realities. Christian exclusivists charge that it is disingenuous for religionists to reject distinctives in favour of a lowest common denominator of religions, particularly in the face of absolutist claims emanating from most of them. There is no denying that the religions are engaged in constructing claims that contradict one another on everything from the nature of the ultimate or the need for an Incarnation to epistemology and eschatology. Christian exclusivists simply have the pluck to declare what in other circles has been assumed to be true.

Any belief system that avoids situations that may result in scrutiny removes itself from a valuable opportunity to grow and learn. A religion that is confident of its logical

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[96] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 148–149.
[97] Barth, *CD* 4/3, 152–153.

acuity and validity should harbour no fear of dialogue on issues with other faiths since from the perspective of *doctrine* there is virtually nothing to lose, for one does not scrutinize all beliefs, but only those that cause tension, tension that may be relieved by altering the held position or eliminating it entirely. In fact I contend that Barth never assumed that his was the definitive statement of faith, but rather one man's humble attempt to hold a modicum of certainty. Barth does not exclude Christianity from the charge that religion is unbelief. Like every other religion Christianity *qua* religion is spiritually blind and morally bankrupt,[98] and thus no more a reliable conduit for truth than any other. Yet this does not mean that Barth is solipsistic, concluding all religions are equal. On the contrary, God alone provides the Gospel of truth to the Church, raising it from darkness and giving it light. Furthermore, the blessing God bestows upon the Church carries a special responsibility that does not pertain to other religious communities. Religion is unbelief resulting in self-righteousness, but this can only be the case where the one and true God has made Himself personally known.

> If his conviction of this truth and his refusal to compromise it led Barth to be arrogant and harsh in his attitude, then it is not toward the occupants of other frameworks, but precisely toward those who see and live life out of the same truth as himself, but who take their relationship to it for granted and thereby presume upon grace.[99]

In this way, it is my judgment that Barth prefigures and points to a "unitive inclusivism," a concept to which I will now turn.

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[98] Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology,* 180.
[99] Hart, "Karl Barth, the Trinity and Pluralism," 141.

2.6 Inclusivism: Agnosticism/Accessiblism

As has been stated previously, inclusivism maintains that salvation is available outside the church, but that explicit faith in Jesus Christ as mediator is the ultimate goal of all religion, whether known or unknown, Christian and non-Christian alike. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, in considering the possibilities for a form of inclusivism, nevertheless always maintained that modern Christianity is "forced" to agree with the Church Fathers that salvation is dependent upon one's belief in the being of God and trust in His Son Jesus Christ for forgiveness.[100] Faith is, for Rahner, absolutely relational, and an unavoidable mechanism of access to the divine. Since faith is the key to access, it must be considered merely a beginning, rather than a conditional end, and only activates the holder toward a continual redress within the pale of the true Church. Thus, in Rahner's view, the ancient formulas can and must be considered at least propositionally valid.

However, Rahner found in his exegesis of Holy Scripture an ambiguity that led him away from the historic exclusivizing position that arose from the First Vatican Council.[101] Of particular interest to him was the Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy on the finer points of the office of pastor. Paul warned his young protégé to beware of false teachers who have "wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of

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[100] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians" in *Theological Investigations Volume VI,* 390.

[101] Participants at the First Vatican Council voted on two constitutions, *De Filius* (On Faith and Reason) and *Pastor Aeternus*, on the primacy and infallibility of the Pope. *Pastor Aeternus*, the more controversial of the two constitutions, contained the following concerning papal infallibility: "We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of Pastor and Doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the Universal Church, by the divine assistance promised him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals: and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the Church. But if anyone, which God forbid, presume to contradict this Our definition—*let him be anathema.*" *Pastor Aeternus* quoted from Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume I: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century,* 340.

the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions (1 Timothy 1:6–7)." These ungodly persons may do their worst, but they can never overcome the objective truth that "Jesus [Christ] came into the world to save sinners (1:15)." Paul further directed Timothy to hold on to his faith and a good conscience, for these are the only means of protection he may utilize as he wages spiritual warfare in the world. Then, as part and parcel of such spiritual warfare, Paul instructs his charge to reach out in love to all with the message of grace and peace with God.

> First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people....This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, *who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time (2: 1–6).

Rahner was keenly aware of the dilemma this reference creates: should Paul be taken at his word, or was he simply using a rhetorical device for the benefit of one for whom outreach would become a prime directive? Rahner was by no means prepared to disagree with the apostle Paul, however reverently, regarding the universality of the promise of grace to all persons. Nevertheless, he could not at the same time relativize the Church's ancient teaching concerning salvation that is found in no one else but Jesus Christ. Rahner proposed to solve this logical disconnection by suggesting that "degrees" of church membership[102] must somehow exist, the contents of which are known only by God the Father. These degrees of membership appear

> not only in ascending order from being baptized, through the acceptance of the fullness of the Christian faith and the recognition of the visible head of the

[102] "This looser way of belonging to the Church, however, can come about (although only in an essentially lesser measure) even in the case of a non-baptized person, as e.g. in the case of a non-baptized person who is in the state of grace." Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 23.

> Church, to the living community of the Eucharist, indeed to the realization of holiness, but also in descending order from the explicitness of baptism into a *non-official and anonymous Christianity* which can and should yet be called Christianity in a meaningful sense, even though it itself cannot and would not describe itself as such. [103]

Just as one is capable of acknowledging the existence of God without special revelation and thus becoming an "anonymous theist," so too one must be capable through the visible expression of the externals of the Christian faith to attain an anonymous relationship with Christ apart from the visible Church, and thus possess salvation.

Criticism of Rahner's anonymous Christians would start with an obvious question: if salvation remains possible outside of Holy Mother Church, why then might it be necessary or even valuable to make qualitative distinctions between nature and grace? Roman Catholic theology held that the individual is at any given time in either of two states, a state of sin brought about by nature, or a state of grace given and sustained by God. This leaves no possibility of a third option, however egalitarian that option might seem. Furthermore, the state of grace is granted to the individual through means which are obtained by the power of the Holy Spirit and mediated by the Church. How, then, could any level of anonymous Christian exist?

Rahner was aware of the problem the anonymous Christian creates. He could not allow for a limiting of the deleterious effects of sin, for this would deconstruct the foundational Roman Catholic doctrine of original righteousness. At the same time he could not leave the meting out of grace without making mediation ambiguous, for to do so would render the institutional Church inconsequential. His solution was to posit that no important distinction subsists between nature and grace, insofar as grace is not absolutely alien to humankind but rather unearths what is already present within. Grace

[103] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 391. Emphasis mine.

has no independent existence outside of the individual to whom it is given; the creature in need of grace must be given an opportunity to hear and respond to it, and then to turn from spiritual poverty toward revelation. Operating under the rubric of *like attracts like*, Rahner concluded that individuals must be *a priori* predisposed to the call of God, and thus inherently capable of receiving and appropriating grace.

> Grace, as the free self-communication of God to his creature, does presuppose the creature, and thus in such possession of its being and its capacities that it can stand in and on itself and bear witness to the glory of that almighty creative power and goodness which was able to say of its works that they were good. At the same time such a creature must be given the possibility of hearing and accepting as beyond itself the incalculable new turning of God towards it in his revelation. That is to say, it must be, to begin with, a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God, therefore that being what we call Spirit.[104]

Once nature and grace were found to be coextensive, Rahner's second point concerning anonymous Christians follows logically. Humankind may indeed be predisposed to the Godhead since divinity "permeates man's being and existence."[105] But this predisposition must be capable of movement from impersonal spiritual God to personal incarnate God in the form of Jesus Christ. For Rahner, as for Barth, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the single most important event in human history, for it gives all of humankind entrance to the divine mystery of the infinite God. Human beings realize themselves only analogously over against incomprehensible divinity. Thus, the Incarnation is the supreme actualization of humanity's nature in general, and further underscores the lack of determinative difference between nature and grace.

Rahner continued by claiming that the bestowal of grace and the Incarnation are "the two basic modes of God's self-communication."[106] All of humankind, regardless of

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[104] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 392.
[105] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 393.
[106] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 393.

culture or locale, derive their spiritual centre and transcendence from these modes. The believer, narrowly defined, is one that has grasped God's self-communication and accepted that divine favour is issued for the sake of the incarnate Son of God to all human beings in a juridical manner. In contrast to Barth, who held to a more monergistic understanding of grace, Rahner believed that even prior to cognitive acceptance of divine favour humankind is imbued with a prevenient demand for the divine which he calls a "supernatural existential."[107] All humanity is free to accept or reject God's free offer of gracious favour, but rejection would bring individuals into conflict with their own being, making the choice inherently and permanently destructive. In short, all persons possess a spiritual element and express that spirituality locally in history and action. This may be given the moniker "transcendent revelation."[108] When this spiritual element becomes explicit and requires systemization, transcendent revelation is objectified and becomes "categorical revelation." Each person by virtue of his or her preapprehension of divinity[109] is the recipient of transcendent revelation, although not all persons are confronted with the "ideal quantity" of categorical revelation.

If all persons receive transcendent revelation, it follows for Rahner that each person has supernatural *faith* "whenever he really accepts *himself* [sic] *completely*, for it

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[107] Here Rahner appropriates his notion of existentialism from Heidegger, who designated categories that are applicable specifically to human persons, but not to nature. Heidegger contrasted these categories to the Aristotelian categories that had more to do with material objects of nature. Rahner conceived of a human nature historically and concretely created by God with a specific purpose and goal. Thus, the supernatural existential is Rahner's moniker for this goal of human nature as *de facto* created and intended by God. Schussler Fiorenza, "The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism," 209.

[108] Schussler Fiorenza, "The New Theology," 210.

[109] Medieval scholasticism termed this phenomenon "natural revelation." The programmatic Scripture is Romans 1: 20: "For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

already speaks *in* him."[110] One may then undertake a life of devotion and God-pleasing good works and take upon himself a basic relationship with God of all creation even before one makes public pronouncement of that faith and commits to life as part of the ecclesiastical community. The fact that no priest has heard an oral commitment to the tenets of an organized church makes no objective difference since God has made *Himself* available to persons by drawing near to them.

> In the acceptance of himself man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace, and the acceptance of this belief is again not an act of man alone but the work of God's grace which is the grace of Christ, and this means in its turn the grace of His Church which is only the continuation of the mystery of Christ, His permanent visible presence in our history.[111]

This is the crux, and the controversy, of Rahner's argument.

Needless to say, not all persons must qualify for status as anonymous Christians, for this would be contrary to reason and the Holy Scriptures. The category of theist, a bare requirement in Rahner's conception, presupposes an unambiguous belief in the existence of a Supreme Being. This Supreme Being, by virtue of its utter transcendence, must also carry the title of *God* or some functional equivalent. "No matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection, anyone who does not say in his *heart*, 'there is no God' (like the 'fool' in the psalm) but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer."[112] Human nature, given that it is twisted by sin and self-love, can prevent a theist from accepting a Saviour. Once one has a conception of God that may be fed and nurtured, it stands to reason that in time grace will have its

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[110] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 394. Emphasis original.
[111] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 394.
[112] Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 395.

way, and that one may be led inexorably to the full expression of faith made for all time in the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Rahner's third key point is built upon the foundation of the second. If all (or at least most) persons achieve salvation by virtue of transcendent revelation, does that fact alone not thoroughly reduce the need for evangelization? The urgency with which Christians have approached the task of outreach has been predicated on the doctrine of two distinct classes of persons—saved and unsaved. What happens to the Great Commission of Christ as presented in Matthew 28 if most persons, regardless of their acceptance of Christian doctrine and membership in the True Church, are saved by prevenient grace? The Second Vatican Council, upon which Rahner would assert a considerable influence, clearly taught that those who have not yet received the Gospel by no fault of their own still hold the possibility of salvation.[113] Rahner appositely chafed at the charge that his doctrine of anonymous Christians relativized outreach. He admitted that "The Second Vatican Council positively assert[ed] that it is possible for the non-Christian to attain salvation, though at the same time it declares that such salvation is achieved in ways that are known to God alone."[114] This is the Rahnerian doctrine of implicit and explicit Christianity.[115] But "in speaking of the universal missionary task of the Church as a right and duty of the Church herself this is taken to include the basic duty of every man to become a Christian in an explicitly ecclesiastical form of Christianity,

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[113] *Lumen Gentium* no. 16, 367.

[114] Rahner, "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian'" 284.

[115] This is an important distinction, one which Rahner does not make lightly. Lamadrid comments: "All humans in their inmost selves are open to the possibility of receiving revelation and are ordained toward the mystery of God. This tendency, however, does not mean that it is sufficient to remain on this implicit, general and nameless level. Humans, by their symbolic natures, must strive for explicitation. It is clearly better, according to Rahner, to be explicitly a member of the Church than an implicit member, to have an explicit and thematized faith than an implicit faith." Lamadrid, "Anonymous or Analogous Christians?" 372.

because it is quite impossible to separate these two entities one from another."[116] As a Roman Catholic Rahner is forced to declare "Christianity in the full sense of the term does involve as one of its factors a conscious awareness of faith, an explicit Christian creed, and a constitution of the Church as a society."[117] So anonymous Christianity may be reconciled with such duty in the very act of helping each implicit Christian to become an explicit one.

Rahner was careful to make the distinction between his view of the anonymous *Christian* and what he felt was Henri de Lubac's[118] inappropriate reinterpretation of the doctrine that would be tantamount to an anonymous *Christianity.*[119] The term "Christian" is relatively amorphous, and designates an extremely broad and complex collection of elements that need not be in direct concert.[120] This is the basis of denominationalism, wherein the minimum criteria needed to be considered a Christian church and not a sect are rather innocuous. Also, the terms "Christian" and "Christianity" have become abstruse due to the inherent imprecision of language, but it would be foolish to allow that Christianity in the phrase "anonymous Christianity" signifies the same reality as it does in the phrase "Christianity as explicitly manifested in the Church." Anonymous Christianity and churchly Christianity indicate very different things, both linguistically

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[116] Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," 161.
[117] Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task," 163.
[118] De Lubac's primary concern was not over anonymous Christians *per* se, but rather over Rahner's development of the supernatural existential, a concept he believed elevated nature and jettisoned grace as pure gift. "When the natural is viewed as a closed system, the human being is split in two, and the supernatural becomes an artificial and irrelevant imposition devoid of its own unique character." Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought,* 76.
[119] Rahner, "Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian," 281.
[120] "Language is never wholly precise. Concepts which are intended to express something more than the rudimentary data of sense experience, and which stand for extremely complex realities can hardly ever avoid a certain ambiguity and possibility of misunderstanding." Rahner, "Problem," 164.

and theologically.[121] Thus, Rahner warns, it is simply disingenuous to equate his anonymous Christian, which can be defended logically, with an anonymous Christianity, which cannot.

The benefit of being an anonymous Christian seems to be that one may be justified before God and thus an heir of heaven before any baptism has been performed or any assent to creedal assertions has been made. The anonymous Christian enjoys what Rahner calls "interior grace" which forgives sin and ingrafts into the life of God before the means of grace become explicit.

> There can be, and actually are, individuals who are justified in the grace of God, who attain to supernatural salvation in God's sight (and, moreover, to Christ as well), yet who do not belong to the Church or to Christendom as a visible historical reality as a result of having been touched by the preaching of the Gospel in any concrete "this worldly" sense at any point in their lives.[122]

The compelling issue, then, is still the existence of an act of faith, but one fundamentally detached from historical churchly interpretation. Rahner agrees a faith that simply recognizes the historic Church deems God ineffectual. Nevertheless, the affirmation had no great significance for Rahner, especially since the justifying power of a readiness to believe, a *fides vitualis*, never incurred the official censure of the Church.[123] As a result, Rahner could be confident in his assertion that the Church's silence on the issue of virtual faith is tacit assent. While this may indeed be the case, it is by no means absolute. Of more import is examination of the Church's contention that "the just shall live by faith."

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[121] To clarify his point Rahner cites the examples of original sin and virtue. "In such terms the adjective is precisely something more than a mere supplementary specification of the term which stands for the substantive. For it supplies a very importand modification of this term (the *peccatum* referred to in the phrase *'peccatum originale'* is not the same *peccatum* as in the phrase *'peccatum personale'*, and again the word virtue as used in the phrase 'infused virtue' in its own intrinsic meaning stands for something different from virtue as used in the phrase 'acquired virtue'." Rahner, "Problem," 283.
[122] Rahner, "Problem," 283.
[123] Rahner, "Problem," 284.

Faith requires among other things an object, and that object must retain a universal will to save.[124]

Rahner's writings were permeated with and informed by the concept of grace, particularly with regard to anonymous Christians. God and His self-communication is the centering ground of all human endeavour, and the goal of the human journey. The "supernatural existential" which all human beings possess allows grace to be made personal due to an innate receptivity present in all persons. In effect, grace lies within everyone, and is by no means alien to human experience. Thus, "there is no privileged location for grace—no holy of holies. Rather, it is in the mundane affairs of our daily lives where in a concrete but uncapturable way God's self-communication is encountered."[125] Yet grace is not God's final word, but is a necessary prior condition for the teaching of the Christian faith. Rahner points out that anonymous Christianity never renders explicit Christianity superfluous since the "dynamism" present in anonymous Christianity will inevitably lead to the visible sacramental modes found in the Church. "It presses forward towards this sacramental incarnation of itself, and thereby ensures that it is not impossible for this effective sacramental symbol of this same grace to be itself a cause of the grace and not merely an outward expression of it such as ultimately speaking would make no difference."[126]

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[124] Von Balthasar comments that nature in and of itself is an abstract notion. No one has experienced "nature", and so the best that can be said is that it is derived from reason. Because its true quality is unknown, it serves as some kind of cipher, especially since humankind cannot know what God may or may not have done. Von Balthasar denied that the desire to see God is by any stretch natural to humankind, but he does admit that it is necessary. Cf. Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 115–34.

[125] Lamadrid, "Anonymous or Analogous Christians?" 369.

[126] Here Rahner appeals to the doctrine of baptism for support. Roman Catholic Orthodoxy maintains that baptism is necessary but not essential for salvation since one need not be baptized to be justified. In like manner, baptism itself is no permanent inoculation against apostasy, nor does it justify *ex opere operato*. Baptism is effectual insofar as it creates faith. Baptism is at one and the same time the effect of a

In general, Christian inclusivism seeks to balance God's universal will to save with Christ's essential mediation. Rahner's anonymous Christian is one such attempt in that it assumes the possibility of implicit faith in Jesus Christ. This implicit faith is available to all human beings by virtue of this inherent God-wrought spiritual nature and their creation in the image of the invisible God. Spiritual beings hold a need for God, which transcends mere curiosity, a need which Rahner considers a supremely transcendent human quality. He saw an indissoluble connection between human transcendence, God's gift of grace, and the mystery of the Incarnation. From the outset of creation God has communicated His universal will to save humankind from destruction that was wrought through our fundamental denial of His sovereignty.[127] This desire to save is seen most clearly in God's offer and bestowal of grace for Christ's sake through faith.[128] Contrary to Protestant theologies and the Augustinian Roman Catholics like Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, Rahner has a more positivistic view of humanity, in that grace and not sin determines humanity's nature and being. When transcendence is realized, what is experienced is really a manifestation of divine grace that has existed in eternity before creation. Therefore, an experience of the sacred in any context, Christian or otherwise, must be viewed not as a natural experience but an experience of

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"conditioning relationship" with God, and the cause of original grace. Rahner, "The Missionary Task of the Church," 171.

[127] "Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion besides itself of equal right. But, like every other religion, Christianity did not always exist but began at some point in time. The absolute religion of Christianity comes to persons in an historical way, when they are confronted by it." Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 118.

[128] "Until the moment when the Gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely *contain* elements of a natural knowledge of God....It contains supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ." Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 121.

supernatural grace.[129] The church remains the logical endpoint for all who would be saved, but not of absolute necessity.[130]

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) found much value in Rahner's contentions, particularly as they pertained to transcendental faith. Balthasar was in qualified support of the anonymous Christian if that meant the individual who is in contact with Christ transcendentally eventually discovers Him objectively, in the Church. In other words implicit faith was acceptable provided it did not remain implicit. Yet Balthasar was suspicious that taken to its logical conclusion objective contact with Christ in Rahner's scheme was redundant since implicit faith and the uniqueness of Christ made Him means, not end. Balthasar rightly attacked Rahner's position as "lacking here a theology of the cross" which carries the force of attributing salvation not to Christ but to the will of God. Furthermore, if there is such an entity as an anonymous Christian then the Christian has no option but to consider himself an anonymous atheist. "[I]t cannot matter whether one professes the name or not. And anyone who proclaims the identity of the love of God and one's neighbour and presents the love of one's neighbour as the primary meaning of the love of God must not be surprised (and doubtless is not) if it comes a matter of indifference whether he professes to believe in God or not."[131]

2.7 Pluralism: Religious Instrumentalism/Relativism

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[129] "Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian." Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 131.

[130] "The Church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church." Rahner, "Non-Christian Religions," 133.

[131] Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness,* 120.

At the heart of religious pluralism lay the assumption that no one religious tradition can lay claim to absolute and exclusive truth, while at the same time rejecting all others as mere human conjecture or worse, catastrophic error. For this reason conversion from an invalid religion to a so-called valid one need not occur since all may attain salvation by sincerely and authentically adhering to the tradition in which they find themselves. It is axiomatic that the religions have obvious differing features, but these differences are incidental and cosmetic, and do not necessarily reflect inauthentic responses to the ultimately Real.

One recent and prolific proponent of the pluralist position is the British theologian John Hick. Hick, unlike Barth or Rahner, finds no particular assistance in Holy Scripture concerning the Incarnation and its impact upon what may be termed a Christian theology of religions.[132] Rather, Hick's religious pluralism paradigm begins with a Kantian *noumena*, a transcendent reality which lies beyond knowledge and serves as the ultimate referent for all religions, even those which do not explicitly acknowledge it.

> The new conditions affecting our understanding of the world religions have been gradually forming during the last three centuries....It was then that the generic idea of religion became established in educated circles, with Christianity seen as one particular form....At least three developments have contributed to this. One has been an explosion of information in the West about the religions of the world....Secondly, travel opportunities have multiplied and great numbers of Westerners have spent time in India, Turkey, Egypt, Thailand, Sri Lanka and other non-Christian countries....And third, and perhaps most important of all,

[132] Though he claims to be a Christian, Hick's view of the value of Scripture to determine truth is agnostic by his own admission. He advocates a Bultmannian demythologizing and higher criticism over exegesis of relevant texts. He writes, "in the end I think the situation [concerning the Incarnation] is that it's possible to fit the New Testament evidence into both a conservative and a liberal theological picture. We can't finally establish either from the texts, though we can use the texts to confirm them. I know that for some people this is difficult to accept, but nevertheless it seems to be the case (97–98)." Such a low view of Scripture would be a necessary precondition for Hick's agnosticism. It is uncertain as to the extent to which higher criticism influenced, or even induced Hick's pluralism, but it most certainly made it obligatory for him to devote much attention to complications perpetrated by "traditional" Christianity, namely the Incarnation and Nicene/Chalcedonian Christology. Cf. Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: A Christian Theology of Religions,* 82–103.

> there has been massive immigration from East to West, bringing Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, to settle in Europe and North America.[133]

For Hick, religion is informed most especially through culture and linguistics rather than revelation, which explains to a greater or lesser degree distinctives in form.

According to Hick, all religious forms share a practical soteriological—which he terms "salvation/liberation"—aim to move adherents from a position of self-centeredness characterized by exclusivizing one's own tradition, through theo-centredness which recognizes the divine in other traditions, to finally Reality-centredness, a re-centering on the mystery which many term "God" but which might be better termed the Ultimate or the Real. Despite his Christian underpinnings Hick is not selective, but rather lumps all organized religious systems together into a whole. "Each [religion] in its different way calls us to transcend the ego point of view, which is the source of all selfishness, greed, exploitation, cruelty, and injustice, and to become re-centred in that ultimate mystery for which we, in our Christian language, use the term God."[134] It is Hick's contention that practice supersedes dogmatic theory in establishing religious authority or validity.

> We are real beings in a real environment; but we experience that environment selectively, in terms of our special cognitive equipment. Something similar has to be said about the human awareness of God. God as experienced by this or that individual group is real, not illusory; and yet is adapted to our human spiritual capacities.[135]

A sincere practitioner must by definition exercise belief in the noumenal or unknowable reality, even if such belief is couched in metaphoric or mythic language. The world in which we find ourselves is not illusory, yet it is real only insofar as we perceive it humanly.

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[133] Hick, *Rainbow,* 12–13.
[134] Hick, *Rainbow*, 17.
[135] Hick, *God Has Many Names,* 106.

A question must be raised at this juncture: if transcendence and salvation/liberation are components, but not essentials, to authentic religion, what, if anything, is? For Hick this question must remain unanswered, since the universe the religions occupy is in and of itself completely ambiguous. Religious ambiguity, and its natural extension agnosticism, are meant for our ultimate soterological protection. If God were available anywhere to us directly, without the mediation of religion or meditation, we would cease to be autonomous beings and be subsumed into the life and being of God, leaving no semblance of selfhood behind. The disconnection between the created order and the Creator is then a foremost act of grace for the benefit of humankind. The Creator God makes Himself ambiguous so that all may seek and know Him where they find themselves.

S. Mark Heim has identified what he believes to be a tension within Hick's system at its most basic level.[136] Heim's major complaint is over Hick's contention that expressions of religious belief, made as they are with language that at times is unable to delineate all intentions, presuppose the noumenal reality he postulates, while at the same time being anxious to point to grammatical rather than referential differences between the religions.[137] Indeed, the circularity in Hick's approach is in large measure inherent due to the nature of the transcendentals, but a greater clarification is required. In responding specifically to the question of religious difference, Hick engages in what might be called a "revisionist" approach to diversity. Praxis may and indeed must fluctuate between the

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[136] For an excellent critical assessment of Hick's pluralism, see Heim, *Salvations,* 13–43.

[137] "Hick is certain that religion cannot dispense with belief in transcendent reality, since it is this belief...which he regards as the valid cognitive core in all religion....If belief in such a reality is rejected or devalued we will be thrown back to regarding religious differences as religiously significant or to regarding all religion as illusion. That is, if religious language and experience do not point to a reality which completely transcends their categories and texture, then those categories and texture remain indicative of truly disparate claims." Heim, *Salvations*, 32.

religions for reasons of culture, geography and history, but the process of human transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is ubiquitous. If this is granted as true then all religious experience and thought, regardless of its origin, is simply the mechanism by which an individual engages himself or herself with and to the Higher Reality. This means first and foremost that the mechanics of religious devotion—dogma, ritual, meditation and the like—are less important than the sincerity which lay under those mechanics. "People of other faiths are not on average noticeably better human beings than Christians, but nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings. We find that both the virtues and the vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population, of whatever major faith."[138] When one considers the apparent equality of moral and spiritual fruits expressed in the various traditions, one can see the benefit of Hick's viewpoint. Nevertheless, as Heim points out, "it is crucial to ask whether [Hick] provides convincing grounds to presume that there is but one end of all the faith paths and that he has described it more adequately than any existing tradition."[139]

What is the epistemological relation between the Real and the religions, or in Hick's Kantian framework between the noumenal and the phenomenal? According to Hick the Real as it is in itself cannot be experienced directly. The divine *noumenon* must make itself known to the limited consciousness of the phenomenal being through culturally conditioned experiential patterns.[140] These patterns are of two basic kinds: a dualistic, personalistic pattern which forms the basis for the theistic religions such as

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[138] Hick, *Rainbow*, 13.
[139] Heim, *Salvations*, 35.
[140] Hick, *Rainbow,* 61.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and a monistic, impersonalistic pattern which is featured in non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and most forms of Hinduism. Hick writes,

> We are aware of our supernatural environment in terms of certain categories which the mind imposes in the formation of religious experience. The two basic religious categories are deity (the Real as personal) and the absolute (the Real as non-personal). Each of these categories is then made concrete, or in Kant's terminology "schematized"—not...in terms of abstract time but in terms of the filled time of history and culture as the experienced Gods and Absolutes of the various religious traditions.[141]

Hick would deny that the Real is a personal Being as the Trinity, Allah or Jehovah are personal, and yet to make that denial does not make the Real impersonal either. Personality or impersonality are categories which do not properly to the Real and would in any case be misleading since an entity of the kind Hick proposes could not possess either characteristic.

The most positive aspect of Hick's categories is a simple deconstruction of what he perceives as religious tribalism, an unfortunate though comprehensible cultural development which assigns one religion priority through historical and metaphysical abstraction.

For Hick, religions which claim for themselves unique access to the sacred are promulgating a religious Darwinism that has led to much systemic violence and intolerance. In order to reverse this trend, all persons ought to

> see the world religions as vast complex religio-cultural totalities, each a bewildering mixture of varied goods and evils. And when we do so we find that we have no way of objectively calibrating their respective values, adding so many points for this feature and deducting so many for that. We can, I suggest, only come to the negative conclusion that it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths. It may be that in the sight of

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[141] Hick, *Rainbow,* 29.

> God one of them has in fact been, as an historical reality, superior to the others, but I don't think that from our human point of view we can claim to know this.[142]

So as to avoid misrepresenting Hick it is necessary to admit that his form of tolerant agnosticism[143] shows a form of respect for religious truth-claims insofar as they are made from a contextualized position of certainty. Hick proposes that truth-claims must be treated with all seriousness since they are verifiable in an eschatological sense. He simply chooses to gauge the validity of the phenomenal religions not on metaphysical or argumentative grounds one over against another, but rather on the basis of their adequacy to meet the pragmatic needs of their respective adherents. There is much to support in this position, since a religion that does not ameliorate felt needs is nothing more than a time-consuming distraction. Hick points to such factors as the moral legitimacy of the religion's founder, the ideals pursued by its saints, the internal consistency of its dogma, and its soteriological competence as the proper framework for dutiful transformation.[144] In an age of dogmatic confrontation Hick has taken the view that the religions are more or less equally valid, and that no one religion may occupy the epistemic high ground that some religions have claimed for themselves.

Hick is by no means surprised that Christianity has made claims of superiority since his scholarship has led him to judge that all religious systems trend toward some form of exclusivity. With respect to the Incarnation, the cornerstone of Christian exclusivism, Hick contends that Christians are in some way forced according to the logic

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[142] Hick, *Rainbow*, 14–15.

[143] This term is attributed to Gavin D'Costa, who perceived a gradual but recognizable shift in Hick's theology from theo-centrism to soterio-centrism, a position which favours orthopraxis over dogmatic theory or abstraction. When "God" resides at the end of the universe of faiths, and not at the beginning or even the middle, one may entertain a good deal of ambiguity and live comfortably with radical pluralism. D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation,* 172.

[144] "[O]nce you've concluded that [the religions'] moral and spiritual fruits seem to be, although different, more or less equally valuable, you are driven to the realization that the Real is capable of being humanly thought and experienced in more than one way." Hick, *Rainbow*, 47.

or rule of faith (*regula fide*) to assign superiority to itself. In recent decades, however, Christianity has softened its external image and the implications of its internal entitlements for the sake of religious graciousness. Hick does not challenge at least the possibility of a plurality of Incarnations, each of which may represent a node of the entirety of the divine Logos. As a result Hick neither rejects nor accepts a revealed Christ or regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet he would at the same time warn vociferously against making faith in such phenomena normative for those who wish to achieve salvation/liberation. In the end, Hick must reject not only exclusivism but any form of inclusivism (even one as tolerant as Rahner's) which puts forward a normative Saviour or philosophy that all must acquire.

According to Hick, philosophy and theology have been given the unenviable task of explicating what experience brings to our consciousness and that we accept without reservation. It is not so much that pluralism precludes speculation on the nature of the ultimate, as Hick's critic Harold Netland has observed, but rather that speculation should be repositioned to include "non-traditional" options that have been heretofore thrown out or abandoned because they are deemed radical or even heretical.[145] Hick is convinced that Christians have never been averse to speaking on the subject of the ultimate, or in attempting to employ univocal language to define God. From the beginning of the Christian movement theologians have utilized both apophatic and cataphatic language to reflect on the nature of the divine. For Hick the claim that nothing can be stated with certainty concerning the Real misses the mark. Since proof is the core value which all exclusivity (and to a certain extent inclusivity) seeks, it is not possible to stand on any

[145] Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, 215.

unshifting ontological foundation with respect to God, the divine, the Real or any other moniker.

Pluralist paradigms seem primarily interested in the promotion of "religion" over against "religious belief." Difference between traditions is subsumed under the umbrella of the Real in order to create a religious "family" in which all authentic religions may coexist, no matter how artificial or non-communicative that family may be. Throughout his career Hick has employed some well-worn analogies—Jastrow's duck-rabbit, wave-particle complementarity and cartography to name a few—to illustrate his point.[146] Perspective, experience and presuppositions make it palatable, and highly probable, that individuals will view the ultimate Reality authentically as differing human concepts of the same divine reality. As Meister Eckhart observed eight centuries ago, the experiential "God" is manifestly distinct from the ineffable "Godhead,"[147] and if such a theory is granted it is perfectly legitimate to claim as Hick does that the Real may be "authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts, as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity, as Allah, as Shiva, as Vishnu, and again as Brahman, as the Dharmakaya, as the Tao, and so on, these different personae and impersonae occurring at the interface between the Real and our differing religious mentalities and cultures."[148] However, Eckhart's contentious claim has never been accepted as anything but dogmatic theory, and thus Hick should not, and indeed has not appealed to him for corroboration.

Hick is aware that his concept, namely that of the Real, is not without flaw. For example, it seems patently contradictory to suggest that something, anything, could

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[146] Hick, *Rainbow*, 24–25.
[147] Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*, 128.
[148] Hick, *Rainbow*, 25.

simultaneously be both personal and impersonal. This is logically akin to stating that something can be and not be at the same time. It is also erroneous to suggest that the Real is nothing, or blank, a theoretical place-holder on which one may cast whatever image is appropriate given a set of preconceptions. The fact that flawed and finite human beings must content themselves with the apophatisms of what the Real is not, rather than what it is, "does not mean that it is an empty blank; it means that its nature, infinitely rich in itself, cannot be expressed in our human concepts."[149] For Hick the existence of many authentic religious systems which are for all intents and purposes salvation/liberation equivalents precluded the possibility that the Real could be identified with any one of them to the exclusion of the others.

Hick contends that the religions tend toward the poles of pure religious experience of the divine (critical realism) on the one end, and the more agnostic imaginary projection of the divine (naturalism) on the other. While some attempt has been made to locate a *via media* that could exist between these poles, Hick responds by asking: why does there need to be a third option? Hick's tolerant agnosticism seems perfectly at ease with epistemological and ontological uncertainty, a position consonant with much of late twentieth century theology. The presuppositions he admits make it virtually impossible for Hick to accept Incarnational theology of a kind that would elevate any spiritual founder to the level of God in the flesh. Of course this immediately precludes Christ from worship as both human and divine simultaneously, and in fact relegates Christians that preserve such a view (like the Christian exclusivists) to the fringes of serious theological inquiry.

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[149] Hick, *Rainbow*, 28.

> If Buddhists can accept and live by Gautama's teachings in the *Sutras*, and Muslims the Prophet Muhammad's teachings in the *Hadith*, and Sikhs the teachings of their Gurus in the *Granth*, and so on, without believing that any of these great teachers was God incarnate, why cannot the disciples of Jesus accept his parables of God's love without believing that he was himself God? Again, one does not have to believe that Jesus was God in order to see the divine goodness and love manifested (or in our Christian metaphor, incarnated) in his life—as in varying degrees in the lives of all true servants of God.[150]

In sum, Hick's Christology is decidedly anthropocentric, and seems at times to offer qualified apologies to other religious systems for what Hick perceives as an intolerant and erroneous root. For Hick the survival of Christianity is predicated upon rejection of systemic intolerance and exclusivism in favour of a tolerant agnosticism which respects the various traditions and does not demand conversion. This, he argues, is already occurring. "An undogmatic Christianity, centred on the person and teachings of Jesus," he writes, "is being heard again, alongside the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism and Islam and other traditions."[151]

Though he did not address pluralists like Hick directly, Balthasar did respond to what he viewed as the social and ideological impetus behind their claims, namely relativism. Balthasar never abandoned his contention that the Incarnation remains the foundational divine-human experience, and that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ means he cannot be subsumed under some kind of wide pluralizing category such as "great moral teacher" or "founder with a following." In fact one reason for his lifelong friendship with and respect for Karl Barth revolved around their shared conviction that Jesus Christ is the unique Lord and Saviour. It is, of course, easy for Christians to make that pronouncement, but difficult for Christianity to respond to the pluralists' query, "does God save only in this way, and if so, why?"

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[150] Hick, *Rainbow*, 106.
[151] Hick, *Rainbow*, 139.

Balthasar's primary complaint concerning relativism and pluralism in the Hickian vein mirrors my own: that it smoothes out what makes a religion unique, especially Christianity. Balthasar could not allow a Christology that makes Jesus a placeholder *for truth* as opposed to the perfect possessor *of truth.* For Hick to engage in a theological "comparing out" does nothing more than destroy the wondrous variety that is the theological landscape. "We need above all to arouse a new sensitivity to the multiplicity and polyphony of divine truth, in conscious opposition to the vociferous stance taken up about ecclesiastical and ecumenical 'pluralism.'"[152] In addition, for Balthasar pluralism could do nothing but remove the requirement of redemption from original sin, and thus make the person of Christ in particular and a Messianic figure in general unnecessary.

> If the claim [of pluralists] stands, the whole Truth must possess a ballast, an absolute counterweight, that can be counterbalanced by nothing else; and because it is a question of truth, it must be able to show that it is so. The stone in the one pan of the scales [of justice] must be so heavy that one can place in the other pan all the truth there in the world, every religion, every philosophy, every complaint against God, without counterbalancing it. Only if that is true is it worthwhile remaining a Christian today. If there were any other weight capable, ever so slightly, of raising up the Christian side of the scales and moving that absolute counterweight into the sphere of relativity, then being a Christian would be a matter of preference, and one would have to reject it unconditionally. Somehow or other it would have been outflanked. To think of [this kind of relativized Christianity] as of more than historical interest would be a waste of time.[153]

2.8 Conclusion

In summary, as long as it may be established all religions converge upon the irreducible truth—Christ and the law of love—a patient and thoughtful Christocentrism is

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[152] Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect,* 103.
[153] Balthasar, *Two Ask Why: 'Why I Am Still a Christian' by Hans Urs von Balthasar and 'Why I am Still in the Church by Joseph Ratzinger,* 29–30.

perfectly acceptable and indeed desirable, and is a prime motivation for witness and interreligious dialogue.

> The way in which Christians are to emerge from the love that surrounds them in the Church, stepping out into the world in order to bear witness in their lives to the love of Christ, is not something that can be reduced to a single formula....Testimony to the Church's love can be borne by the individual, who seeks to spread to those around him the *communio* that is lived in the Church, and also by groups that collaborate to try to make its reality take root in the world. It is part of the approach of Catholic apostolic action to want to work together with non-Catholics, non-Christians and atheists in all things that promote the unification of mankind.[154]

[154] Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism,* 122.

Chapter 3: *Sola Fide:* The Historical Context for a Lutheran Theology of Religions

From the first critical years following the Lord's Ascension to the present, God's church on earth has promulgated the view that the salvation of humankind is effected by Christ and made present most especially in the earthly Body of Christ, the institutional church. As we have seen, confessional Lutherans, insofar as they observe themselves as direct theological descendants of the earliest Christians, agree that Christ is universal Saviour, while allowing that humans may not have access to all manner of the Holy Spirit's operations both within the church and outside of her. While they did not produce a cogent position on the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, both Martin Luther and Martin Chemnitz hinted that faith and salvation could at least be available to those who through no fault of their own do not have direct, visible access to the Gospel. Balthasar's axiom "dare we hope that all persons should be saved" effectively characterizes the "soft exclusivism" of confessional Lutheranism, and serves as the overarching theme for this chapter. The following discussion presents the basis for a "soft" exclusivism from Patristic and Reformation and confessional Lutheran sources, and the potential for ongoing deployment of a confessional Lutheran theology of religions which is Christocentric and ultimately sacramental.

3.1 Early Christianity and the Theology of Religions

At the moment Jesus issued the so-called Great Commission to His disciples, a directive to teach and baptize all nations, the world of the time could be considered

pluralistic as judged even by twentieth century standards. The Roman world, which stretched from Tuscany to Asia Minor and as far north as Saxony, was replete with many gods, and with the adherents that practiced religions of one kind or another. As Paul noted in Athens, the plethora of gods meant, among other things, that adding another god or even gods to a pantheon caused few problems.[1] Christianity, however, did not view religious plurality as strictly benign, since the Lord Jesus had taught for the most part that salvation is available to all persons, but only through one source.

> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. . . .For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. . . .Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. John 3:5–6, 16–18, 36. *ESV*

Jesus handed the keys of the kingdom to His disciples, who adopted this exclusive Gospel and proclaimed it. Peter declared in his Pentecost sermon that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In a similar vein, Paul stated that "God our Saviour wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Tim 2:3–6). The apostles held similarly exclusive views with respect to non-Christians and their pagan worship practices. Paul did not condone the practice of offering sacrifices to idols, since to do so would be tantamount to participating with them, but he did not believe those sacrifices to hold any uniquely

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[1] Acts 17:16–34.

demonic presence or power (1 Cor 8:1–13). In other words, non-Christians have contact with lower level revelation, the natural knowledge of the law of God, but this law should not be accepted as a means of Christian salvation. Salvation, at least as Holy Scripture presents it, is revealed in the Gospel and appropriated by faith in the hearer. As much as natural revelation is universal in scope, so too is the special revelation of salvation by grace through faith, even if such revelation is rejected by some.

Unfortunately for many Lutherans, the New Testament does not resolve the tension in law-Gospel theology as it pertains to the question of why some are saved and others are not. The law-Gospel dialectic is, for Lutherans, the foundation for the revelation of the righteous will of God.[2] Franz Pieper declares that

> all who refuse to eliminate the Law in the matter of obtaining grace and salvation remain under the curse of the Law, since the Law pronounces the curse on everyone who has not continued in all things which are written in the book of the Law to do them (Gal. 3:10). Luther is therefore right in saying that every Christian must know the art of separating Law and Gospel. "If this is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a pagan or a Jew" (St. L. IX:798). There is only one way to be and remain a Christian: Man must silence his conscience against the accusations of the Law with the Gospel, which assures him of the forgiveness of sins "without the Law." And only those men are able to lead a holy life according to the Law who "are not under the Law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14).[3]

Martin Luther himself did not perform any form of eisogesis in order to assuage his concerns over certainty of salvation. He observed that the Lord Himself did not express His thoughts on the issue without ambiguity.[4] Jesus showed great concern for the welfare

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[2] *FCE*, V, 1–11.
[3] Pieper, *CD 1*, 62.

[4] In a letter to Hans von Rechenberg on whether those without faith can be saved, Luther wrote: "To arrive at an answer to this question it is necessary to separate our opinion from God's truth. We must be scrupulously concerned that we do not give God the lie. We must rather admit that all men, all angels, and all devils are lost than to say that God is not truthful in what he says. Such questions issue from the innate inquisitiveness of human nature, which is so loath to reconcile itself to the fact that it is not supposed to know God's reasons for such severe and stringent judgments. Our human nature is prone to conclude that if

of the people of Jerusalem, but straddled question of who is saved: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt 23:37). This tension is by no means overcome by Paul, who, writing to the Romans concerning the doctrine of *fides ex auditu* (faith comes by hearing) declares that "all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law" (Rom 2:12). Whether Christians, and particularly Lutherans, appreciate this abstruseness does not alter the fact that Holy Writ allows law statements concerning the just condemnation of unbelievers to coexist with the gracious divine reality that God "wants all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4).

With these biblical challenges as backdrop, the early Christians attempted to reconcile Law and Gospel into a coherent doctrinal stance. Christians, pinned beneath the boot of ubiquitous Roman rule, were under constant threat of violence and martyrdom for their most strongly held beliefs, namely their certitude that Jesus Christ is not only the incarnate Son of God, but also the unique Saviour of all sinners. Many early Christians were required by law to offer sacrifices to the Roman Emperor, and to make a public pronouncement that "Caesar is the only Lord" or that "Caesar is the saviour of all." Those that would not offer such ablutions to the Emperor were treated harshly, and many paid the ultimate price for their faith. They would rather suffer the supreme sacrifice at the hands of their accusers than deny that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord and Saviour.[5] Among the early Christian communities there could be no more poignant testimony to exclusivity of salvation in and through Jesus Christ.

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it were not God's judgment that all men be saved, it would be an outrage, tyranny, and injustice." *LW* 43, 52.

[5] Ferguson, *Church History Volume I: From Christ to pre-Reformation*, 64–85.

The succeeding generations of Christians, in the second century and beyond, held exclusivistic views in large measure.[6] Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (d. 258), contributed the prototypical phrase *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation) which reflected the default position of the early church.[7] For Cyprian, however, it was not religious intolerance that informed his Christian exclusivism, but rather his deep concern that as Christianity moved toward universal acceptance and even primacy, the faithful would be in danger of heresy and sectarianism through breaking fellowship with the local bishop. Yet while Cyprian limited salvation to those with saving faith in Jesus Christ, he did possess a lively evangelical concern for the practitioners of the religions, witnessed by the following assessment of non-Christians:

> We implore you [non-Christians] to make reparation to God while you still can, while you still have a little time left. We show you the way to salvation. Believe, and you shall live. For a time you have persecuted us; come and rejoice with us forever. It is here below that life is either lost or held onto; don't let your sins or your age make you put off gaining salvation. While still in this world, repentance is never too late. Even at death's door you can beg pardon for your sins, appealing to the one true God in faith. For God's goodness grants acquittal unto salvation to the believer so as to pass from death to immortality.[8]

Christ is the only source of this grace.

Another early church Father who displayed interest in the theology of religions was the philosopher-convert Justin Martyr (103–165). Though a deeply Christian scholar for most of his life, Justin was equally schooled in the philosophical streams of his day, particularly Platonism and middle-Platonism. It is little wonder, then, that Justin displayed a willingness to examine the central doctrines of Christianity in light of philosophical categories. In crafting his Christology Justin expended considerable energy

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[6] Miller et al, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus.* Schaff, *The History of the Church Volume I: Apostolic Christianity*, 503–15.
[7] Cyprian, Epistle 73,21.
[8] Cyprian, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 48; Ferguson, *Church History*, 163–8.

considering a fundamental question, "what hope for salvation can exist in a person who died before the Incarnation of Jesus Christ?" What certainty of salvation can be present when the object of saving faith remains separate from those for whom He would come? Should Christians declare all pagans that have never heard the Gospel condemned to death and hell? Justin's solution to this dilemma was to expound on the Christological notion that the *Logos*, that Word of God that transcends creation but also disperses like "seed" into the world wherever reason is exercised, can be present and active among the religions even without their acknowledgement or consent.[9]

Despite their overarching commitment to exclusivism, some early church Fathers supported at least the possibility of salvation among the uninitiated since they were unwilling to state categorically that all those without faith in Christ are lost and damned. For example, Justin opined that philosophers like Plato and Aristotle received their wisdom from the Jewish prophets, despite the fact that few if any were initiated enough to understand.

> [Christ is the] Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others whose actions and name we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious.[10]

The implication of such a claim is that the "pagans" were for all intents and purposes proto-Christians.

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[9] "We are taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and. . .he is the Word of whom all humanity has a share, and those who lived according to the Logos (*hoi meta logou biosantes*) are therefore Christians, even though there were regarded as atheists; among Greeks, Socrates, and Heraclitus; and among non-Greeks, Abraham, Ananias, Azanus, and Misad, and Elias, and many others." Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 46, 2–3; Ferguson, *Church History,* 73–7.

[10] Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 46: 2–3.

> If some should accuse us as if we held that people born before the time of Christ were not accountable to God for their actions, we shall anticipate and answer such a difficulty. We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and we have declared him to be the *Logos* of which all mankind partakes. Those, therefore, who lived according to reason (*logos*) were really Christians, even though they were thought to be atheists, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus and others like them. . . .So, also, those who lived before Christ but did not live according to reason were wicked men, and enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who did live according to reason. Whereas those who lived then, or who live now, according to reason are Christians. Such as these can be confident and unafraid.[11]

Justin's rationalism led him away from a strict exclusivism toward a more "inclusive" view of salvation which occurs in and through Jesus Christ as universal Saviour, but is not dependent upon the existence or quality of the faith required to grasp it. It should also be stated at this point that while "inclusivism" may be present in attenuated form up to at least the age of Reformation, no clear precedent exists for that which may be termed "pluralism." The first generations of Christians were not willing to give up on the particularity of Christ.

By the dawn of the age of Constantinian, institutional Christianity, Christian authors were free to express biblical exclusivism in the strongest terms. It was widely held that non-Christians of all persuasions had been given ample opportunity to respond to the Gospel, and therefore can and should be held culpable for their unbelief.[12] Bishop Ambrose (c. 337–397) summarized this view as follows: "If someone does not believe in Christ he defrauds himself of this universal benefit, just as if someone were to shut out the rays of the sun by closing his window. For the mercy of the Lord has been spread by the church to all nations; the faith has been spread to all peoples."[13] For Ambrose, the Gospel, which has been proclaimed to the virtual ends of the earth, must be so actively

[11] Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 46.
[12] Ambrose, *Psalm 118 Sermon* 8:57. Quoted from Sullivan, 25.
[13] Ambrose, *Psalm 118 Sermon* 8, 57.

and resolutely resisted that no one who remains a pagan can claim ignorance of the true God and His grace. Punishment for sin, therefore, is justified.[14]

Augustine (354–430), long recognized as a spiritual father to all of Western Christianity, gave one of the sharpest and most cogent expressions of the unique, exclusive nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In his treatise *De natura et gratia* (On nature and grace), Augustine defends God's righteous judgement to punish unbelievers, while at the same time placing responsibility for such unbelief squarely upon the shoulders of those who resist God's gracious entreaties.

> Now this grace in Christ, without which neither infants nor adults can be saved, is not given in return for merits, but is a free gift; for this reason it is called "grace." Wherefore, all those who are not set free by that grace, whether because they could not hear [the Gospel message], or because they refused to obey it, or, being unable to hear it because of their infancy, they did not receive the baptismal bath by which they could have been saved—all these, I say, are justly damned, because they are not without sin—either the original sin that they contracted, or the sins that they added by their own wicked deeds. . . .The entire mass, therefore, incurs the penalty, and if the deserved punishment of condemnation were meted out to all, it would without doubt be justly meted out. . . .anyone who judged rightly could not possibly blame the justice of God in wholly condemning all mankind.[15]

> If, as truth itself tells us, no one is delivered from the condemnation that we incurred through Adam except through faith in Jesus Christ, and yet, those people will not be able to deliver themselves from that condemnation who will be able to say that they have not heard the Gospel of Christ, since faith comes through hearing. . . .Therefore neither those who have never heard the Gospel nor those who by reason of their infancy were unable to believe. . .are separated from that mass which will certainly be damned.[16]

Augustine's various teachings on the issues of original guilt, predestination, the sovereignty of God and the nature and power of grace, gave more shape to the

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[14] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, 961–7.
[15] Augustine, *De natura et gratia,* 4–5.
[16] Augustine, *De correptione et gratia* 7:11–12.

theological and philosophical moorings of the Christian faith, and in so doing reinforced the Christian claim to exclusivity.[17]

Cyril of Alexandria advocated that non-Christians were saved by the same grace as the Christian, and could therefore be saved if God Himself willed it so. He made this assertion based upon his firm belief that a salvific knowledge of God could be attained through natural human reason independent of special revelation. "For there was always a natural manifestation of the one Almighty God, among all right-thinking men."[18] Clement placed such human reason alongside the more typical Judeo-Christian path to God, believing that God intended to use both streams to bring humankind to His fold. That God should choose to give a second human option was, for Clement, the working model behind the Pauline claim that now and for all time those who do not come to Christ are "without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

Strong ecclesiasts like Irenaeus and Cyprian were not so circumspect, and felt compelled to relegate the unfaithful to eternal separation from God. Irenaeus in particular could make this claim due to his assumption that by his time the world-wide preaching of the Gospel had been concluded, and thus anyone who chose to live outside the pale of the institutional church was guilty of separation from the source of grace.[19] "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church."[20] Cyprian took Irenaean episcopacy to mean not only that the Church and the Holy Spirit are coextensive, but also that those who are chosen to serve the people of God as bishops are in the unbroken line of succession to Christ Himself, and thus in a

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[17] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume III,* 988–1016.
[18] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.13, in *Fathers of the Second Century Volume 2.*
[19] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume II,* 586 – 99.
[20] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.24.

certain sense the unity and the very existence of the Church are dependent upon them. "The bishop is in the church, and the church in the bishop, and if anyone is not with the bishop he is not in the church."[21] Ecclesiology which depended upon Irenaeus and Cyprian meant that while God's grace was sufficient to save all persons only those attached by choice to His church on earth held any chance of salvation.[22]

During the Middle Ages, most Western theologians followed Augustine to a greater or lesser degree. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), for example, re-affirmed the church's position that baptism and faith were elements "necessary" for salvation. At the same time, however, Aquinas allowed that salvation could be granted independent of baptism, since dying before baptism was available was common, and catechesis for the laity often took months or even years, and baptism was not offered until the instruction had been completed. Aquinas argued that a "third option" between baptized and unbaptized must exist, a "baptism of desire" that offered certainty of salvation prior to the actual sacramental washing of baptism.[23] This baptism of desire also implied that the status of those traditionally viewed as non-believers was no longer dogmatically assured. Yet not all those deemed to be pagans could be saved in this manner. Aquinas believed that, more so than any other religious traditions, Jews and Muslims by virtue of generations of proximity to Christians could not expect to be saved under the doctrine of desire, for the simple reason that they were aware of the universal claims of Christianity and had summarily dismissed them. Thus, Cyprian's dictum of "outside the church there is no salvation" applied to these unfortunates. Aquinas was also dubious concerning

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[21] Cyprian of Carthage, *Epist.* 66.3. Quoted from Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume II,* 150–2.
[22] Marmion and Thiessen, *Trinity and Salvation: Theological, Spiritual and Aesthetic Perspectives*, 11–65.
[23] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* 68, 3. Hereafter *ST.*

those who could not hear the Gospel message, but did not reject God outright, either.[24] Here Aquinas re-visited the semi-Pelagian doctrine of *Deus non denegat gratium facientibus quod in se est,* that if a person lived a life that could be defined as good according to the natural law of God, God could or would be gracious.

The Council of Florence in 1442 offered what was viewed as the quintessential Medieval magisterial pronouncement on the state of non-Christians. A significant portion of the text reads thus:

> [The holy Roman Church]. . .firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of their life they are joined to it. For union with the body of the church is of so great importance that the sacraments of the church are of use toward salvation only for those remaining in it, and fasts, almsgiving, other works of piety and the exercises of a militant Christian life bear eternal rewards for them alone. And no one can be saved, no matter how much he has given in alms, even if he sheds his blood for the name of Christ, unless he remains in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.[25]

What the Council failed to recognise is that despite the stain of sin, humanity remains the creation of a good and gracious God. Human beings are created with psychological and physical faculties, reason, will and sensation. More than this, humanity has by virtue of their creation a knowledge of God and of God's eternal law. In this humanity cannot escape the question and reality of the existence of God. Scripture declares that all persons are completely depraved and in need of salvation, but God does not abandon humanity to the penalty for sin. God uses natural law and the kerygma to convict all persons of their sin, and therefore by the power of the Holy Spirit leads all persons to Christ by the Gospel in faith.

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[24] Aquinas, *ST* 113, 1–10.
[25] *DS* 1351.

The Middle Ages and Reformation saw little divergence from this balance. Thomas Aquinas averred that the Church was the source of salvation for all, not so much by reason of episcopacy, but rather the human need for revelation in order to comprehend God. "We can know neither God's being, nor God's essence."[26] If God is unknowable by natural reason, then it follows that He must make Himself known through His chosen instrument, the Church. Martin Luther would no doubt agree with the Angelic Doctor with regard to the centrality of the Church, but Luther's emphasis on faith required him to stop short of suggesting that the Church is absolutely necessary for salvation. Faith, for Luther, was the deciding factor for all persons, and thus "it would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who would doubt God's ability to do that? No one, however, can prove that he does do this."[27] Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) viewed all theological questions through the lenses of divine predestination, and thus his theology of religions was even less ecclesiocentric than Luther's. He writes, "there has not been a single good man, there has not been a single pious heart or believing soul from the beginning of the world to the end, which you will not see there in the presence of God. Can we conceive of any spectacle more joyful or agreeable or indeed sublime?"[28]

3.2 Lutheran Fathers on Missions and the Religions

Luther's theology, and thus the theology of Lutherans, is a theology of the Word. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:17). In fact these words from St. Paul were of basic significance to the

[26] Aquinas, *ST* 113, 2.
[27] Luther, *LW* 43, 54.
[28] Zwingli, "An Exposition of the Faith," 276.

Reformation in general, and the Lutherans in particular. The divine Word is the element that creates faith, and therefore is the foundation for all theology.[29] Scripture had certainly been emphasized as authoritative prior to the Reformation, but Luther and the Lutherans spoke with especial conviction concerning the Word's primacy of place, and its undeniable authority.[30] Luther was convinced that the authority of God's Word remained valid even when it differed from human traditions, and is therefore binding on conscience at all times.

The Lutheran fathers believed Christ to be the entire content of the Word. Justifying faith, created and sustained by the Holy Spirit through the Word, is non-coerced trust in God's mercy for the sake of Christ. If faith is lacking, that individual cannot "by her own reason or strength" understand the divine Word correctly.[31] Human beings, by virtue of their sinful, weakened state, have Scripture to hold them fast to the Gospel of Christ and the writings of the apostles. Thus, those without the Word reside outside of body of Christ, which is the sum total of all saved persons.[32] This biblical truth has informed the Lutheran attitude to missions for centuries, and is the major presupposition for the following section.

3.2.1 Martin Luther

Although Luther did not develop a literal theology of religions, he contributed mightily to the discussion with his scholarly work on natural knowledge and natural revelation, the dialectic of Law and Gospel, and mission. The Creator God cannot be

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[29] Luther, *LW* 40, 346–361.
[30] Luther, *LW* 45, 117.
[31] Luther, *SC* II, III.
[32] Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacrament: An Enchiridion*, 75.

known by natural knowledge alone, and Law and Gospel have little relevance and meaning to persons in their natural state. For Luther, the conclusion this draws is that reason alone cannot bring one to a state of grace.[33] Christ is the only means by which God's saving will is communicated to sinners, and therefore Christ must be preached to all nations so that saving faith may ignited, and its blessings received and exercised.

Luther asserts that human reason—by virtue of sin's clouding—cannot comprehend the manner in which God works in creation without the Law and the promises of the Gospel. The Word of God interprets and communicates the significance of God's activity to human beings. Human beings in their "natural" state meet God in vocation, avocation and creation, but understanding of events can only be attained through the lens of Law and Gospel. Luther's God is both revealed (*deus revelatus*) as well as hidden (*deus absconditus*), but the human in her natural state encounters only the hidden God, and interprets God as He is in His works as they are identified in Scripture.[34] Thus, the creating God remains hidden from the unregenerate person despite his or her works of service to others. Law and Gospel are the only means by which humanity can learn to believe in the Creator and cling to Him in His justice and mercy.

Luther's views on natural law and theology had and have consequences for the theology of religions and mission. The First Article of the Creed concerns creation and the sustaining work of God. This is the fundamental manner for seeing the world, and should not be ignored in the proclamation of God's Holy Word. In fact, evangelical preaching, Lutheran or otherwise, should place some emphasis on creation and the Creator, since creation is initiation for the Christian. Individual non-Christians can

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[33] Iwand, "Righteousness of Faith according to Luther," 320–336.

[34] Luther, *LW* 47, 209.

comprehend little of the Creator and Sustainer of all things, even if they live by the same code and in the same manner as the Christian, since the God who assesses human experience in creation is hidden from it. The Creator God must be explained to all persons in their natural state through Law and Gospel, who in turn must believe and conduct themselves according to the Word. In other words, the totality of meaning in creation cannot be fully ascertained by the natural mind independent of revelation. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all persons, heathen and redeemed alike. God's creative benevolence implies that He must provide all of humanity with access to the hearing of God's loving and creative work and the salvation He provides through Jesus Christ. Thus, the history of all persons is necessarily grafted into the faith and the church, explicitly or implicitly.[35]

Romans 2:15 declares that all of humanity "show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." In all circumstances and at all times human beings are connected to the Creator, whether they recognize that fact or not. The law of nature (*lex naturalis*) cannot be purged from our consciences, despite our fall into sin, our rejection of God's gifts, or our unbelief. Luther believed that non-Christians know the Law as much as the Christian, and as such may do works of civil righteousness in keeping with it. They cannot, however, fulfil the Law's stringent demands for love informed by Word, faith and Spirit. Luther could not support Scholasticism's view that by nature we have pure and natural knowledge of all that is moral. Natural law must inevitably condemn us, bring our sin to light, and ultimately drive us into grace and the

[35] McNeill, "Natural Law in the thought of Luther," 211–227.

embrace of Christ. Our knowledge may be clouded by sin, but we are still able to recognize natural law and the desirability of moral behaviour.[36]

Luther's 1515–1516 commentary on the book of Romans contains the seeds of his mature Reformation breakthrough, yet is still decidedly Roman Catholic in its thought and expression. In the introduction to the commentary Luther summarizes the goal of Romans as the destruction of self-righteousness and self-delusion in order to make room for Christ and His alien righteousness. God's righteousness (*iustitia Dei*) and the knowledge of God (*sapientia Dei*) are intertwined and cannot be dissected. In his commentary on Romans 1:19ff. Luther claims that all persons, by virtue of their human nature and reason, possess knowledge of a God in the abstract, which includes His eternal nature, power, righteousness, wisdom and kindness. For Luther there can be no excuse for humanity that projects this abstraction onto created things, and in so doing establishes an idol to satisfy the desires of the heart.[37] Luther does allow that had people persisted in the knowledge of God given to them, and in the faith to such knowledge leads, and not turned from the true God to idols, they could have attained salvation.

Humanity is at all times and in all places predisposed to give over their trust to someone or something, even if that be ultimately damaging. Natural knowledge of God, also known as natural theology, can lead nowhere but falsehood since it lacks God's Word, which is required for true perception of God's identity and nature. Luther argues for this path to falsehood in *Bondage of the Will*, in which he declares that the human will does possess some freedom in acts of civil righteousness (*iustitia civilis*), but in

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[36] Luther, *LW* 25, 187.
[37] Luther, *LW* 25, 156.

righteousness in the things of God humanity is so distorted and inwardly curved that they cannot know God *qua* God or obey His will. He writes:

> For here the text applies that Christ and the Evangelists so often quote from Isaiah: "You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall see but never perceive" (Isa 6:9–10; Matt 13:14; etc.). What else does this mean but that free choice or the human heart is so held down by the power of Satan that unless it is miraculously raised up by the Spirit of God it cannot of itself either see or hear things that strike the eyes and ears themselves so plainly as to be palpable? Such is the misery and blindness of the human race! . . . [M]an left to himself sees but does not perceive and hears but does not understand.[38]

Ultimately, Luther claimed that no one can grasp and cling to saving knowledge or the trust of faith without the renewing power of the Holy Word and the Spirit of God. The Book of Acts serves as objective proof that even the most educated class can remain non-Christian and thereby reject the historic Christian faith and the resurrection of all flesh.[39]

> Now, the things which lead to eternal salvation I take to be the words and works of God, which are presented to the human will so that it may apply itself to them or turn away from them. By the words of God, moreover, I mean both the law and the Gospel, the law requiring works and the Gospel faith. For there is nothing else that leads either to the grace of God or to eternal salvation except the word and work of God, since grace or the Spirit is life itself, to which we are led by God's word and work. The life or eternal salvation, however, is something that passes human comprehension.[40]

This means that unless the Spirit had revealed it, no one's heart would have any knowledge or notion of it, much less be able to apply itself to it or seek after it.

In large measure, *Bondage of the Will* rejects the possibility of a salvific natural theology, since reason and revelation have no connection, and are indeed antithetical to one another. In Luther's commentary on the book of Jonah he declares that during the great storm all of the sailors were terrified for their lives, and each called out to their own god or gods. For Luther this can only mean that the natural knowledge of God must be

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[38] Luther, *LW* 33, 176.
[39] Grobien, "A Lutheran Understanding of Natural Law in the three estates," 211–229.
[40] Luther, *LW* 33, 103.

inherently limited, leading to idolatry and, in the end, unbelief. For this reason, Luther denies the existence of a true atheist, one that can in all honesty reject the existence of god or gods. The plaintive cry of the Gentiles in the boat gives support to the idea proposed in Paul's letter to the Romans that all persons possess an innate knowledge of God and thus His existence, regardless of the quality of their belief.

> Here you find St. Paul's statement in Rom 1:19 concerning the universal knowledge of God among all the heathen, that is, that the whole world talks about the Godhead and natural reason is aware that this Godhead is something superior to all other things. This is here shown by the fact that the people in our text called upon a god, heathen though they were. For if they had been ignorant of the existence of God or of a godhead, how could they have called upon him and cried to him? Although they do not have true faith in God, they at least hold that God is a being able to help on the sea and in every need. Such a light and such a perception is innate in the hearts of all men; and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished. . . . For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they know something about God, "because God has shown it to them" (Rom 1:19).[41]

An inaccuracy would result, however, if too much is read into this relatively positive interpretation of natural knowledge of God on Luther's part. Natural knowledge is most assuredly a "bright light," but there remains a sharp distinction between the light of reason, the naturally occurring knowledge of God, and the knowledge of salvation God offers in and through His most Holy Word.[42] Luther nowhere draws the conclusion that salvation is attainable through the light of reason. In his Jonah exposition Luther thoroughly rejects the notion that saving knowledge of God is available independent of God's own revelation. Humanity's light of reason is helpful, but always insufficient.

> [F]irst, reason does admittedly believe that God is able and competent to help and to bestow; but reason does not know whether He is willing to do this also for us. That renders the position of reason unstable. Reason believes in God's might and is aware of it, but it is uncertain whether God is willing to employ this in our

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[41] Luther, *LW* 19, 53.

[42] Simpson, "Written on their hearts: thinking with Luther about scripture, natural law, and the moral life," 419–428.

> behalf, because in adversity it so often experiences the opposite to be true. . . . Free will cannot go beyond that.[43]

For Luther, what separates natural knowledge of God, and saving knowledge of Him, is the difference between the theoretical and the real. The true God has power and a willingness to help people, but natural knowledge cannot make that power an existential truth in the life of the individual. In other words, natural knowledge cannot possess the quality of *pro me* that clings to the unconditional promises of God to help in every time of need. Furthermore, natural knowledge of God provides proof that God exists, but can have no contact with God's nature in general, and God's love in particular. Luther states,

> Reason is unable to identify God properly; it cannot ascribe the Godhead to the One who is entitled to it exclusively. It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or which is the true God. It shares the experience of the Jews during Christ's sojourn on earth. . . . Thus reason also plays blind man's bluff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. . . . [R]eason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody's heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.[44]

That reason is not capable of providing saving knowledge of God gave shape and urgency to Luther's theology of mission, and thus his theology of religions. God's history has been characterized by grace as it is revealed in and through Christ and then preached to all persons. Saving knowledge would not be available and would remain unknown if it were not proclaimed. Luther makes clear that Christ is the only mechanism by which God's will to save is revealed to sinners, and that for this reason Christ must be preached in order for faith to be kindled so that it may receive and appropriate the salvation

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[43] Luther, *LW* 19, 53.
[44] Luther, *LW* 19, 54–5.

offered.[45] The church is informed and motivated by Christ's directive to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The grace of God in Christ must never be allowed to become one message among many; people come to know the true God through the preached Word, which overcomes the twin dragons of sin and death.

Luther authored extensive commentaries on the book of Genesis, and in particular on the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15. In it Luther declares that the seed of the woman, Eve, will:

> . . .crush the serpent's head, i.e. the seed will subvert, trample under his feet and crush the damage which the serpent has caused. When Adam heard this, he re-emerged from hell and was again comforted. This is the faith that the Seed will take all the power of the devil and crush it so that it is destroyed. . . . After they lived and died, their descendants waited and believed on this promise and always preached that a fruit would come and crush the serpent's head. All the content of Gospel and faith are contained in these few words. . . . It states there that Adam has been a Christian already long before the birth of Christ because he had the same faith in Christ that we have. Time makes no difference as it concerns faith. Faith is one and the same from the beginning of the world to its end.[46]

Luther maintains that Adam, condemned to death by virtue of sin, may actually and fully share in the fruits of the Gospel purchased in blood by the One who crushes the head of Satan forever. Adam could, therefore, have faith, as he is overshadowed not by the fulfillment of the Gospel, but by the promise issued to him, to Eve, and to their posterity while still in the Garden. Adam and his descendants are as much recipients of the salvation of Christ as any that hear the actual, preached Word. The Gospel lives in these persons and is the root and branch of their saving faith, insofar as that faith is present.

In his larger commentary on Galatians Luther recognizes a parallel between the blessing bestowed on Abraham and the introductory Gospel offered to Adam in the Garden. Abraham is blessed with the same seed (Christ) by which Adam was saved.

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[45] Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 53.
[46] *WA* 24, 98.28, quoted from Öberg, 100.

God's salvation is tendered universally through the seed of the woman, and ratified by the covenant God made with Abraham. Luther comments that Genesis 12:3—"and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"—contains the basic building materials for the promise of universal salvation in and through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.[47] Genesis 17:4–5 declares Abraham to be "the father of many nations," and that the covenant made with him and his descendants is an "eternal covenant" given to remain in place for unnumbered generations to come. For Luther the Abrahamic covenant could not represent a stronger indictment of Jews that claim unique status as the chosen nation set apart for special blessing by God. God has not and does not limit salvation to one class of person or another, but to those that live according the Gospel of forgiveness and hope through Christ.

> [T]he blessed Seed which was promised to Abraham . . . he is a different kind of person than Moses. About him it has been said: And a Seed will come through whom not only your people, your flesh and blood, but also everything on earth will be blessed. It is as if he were to say: I want to govern and maintain your flesh and blood and this seed for my people, but when the people who belong to the true Seed come then a preaching will go out so that all Gentiles under heaven will be blessed and so that God will be a Father for all believing Gentiles under the sun.[48]

A minor theme Luther explores in his commentaries on the Psalms is mission, and in particular the contemporizing of the Gospel message into the thought and experience of the nations. Luther, although not a well-travelled man by modern standards, acknowledged that laws, customs, and cultures vary widely throughout creation. These distinctives represent the aftermath of God's redistribution of humanity Babel, and thus exist as a natural, albeit pagan, outgrowth of God's holy will.

> . . . the kingdom of Christ is not a temporal, transitory, earthly kingdom, ruled with laws and regulations, but a spiritual, heavenly, and eternal kingdom that must

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[47] Luther, *LW* 2, 257.
[48] Luther, *WA* 16, 162.13, quoted from Öberg, 102.

> be ruled without and above all laws, regulations, and outward means. He tells the heathen to remain heathen; He does not ask them (as I pointed out before) to run away from their countries or cities to go to Jerusalem. . . . Every country and city can observe or change its laws. He does not concern Himself about this. Where laws are retained, they do not hinder the kingdom: for He says: "Praise the Lord, all you heathen!"[49]

Christians should and must engage the religions in so doing share Christ, but the laws and customs native to their lands should not be abridged or abolished, for they embody God's creative mosaic in wondrous diversity.

Luther's apocalypticism was consistent with that of his time, fuelling his concern for the ongoing mission to the pagans who live ignorant of the Gospel promises God makes to humankind. This concern is displayed in a 1524 sermon on Matthew 22:9–10: "Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests." Here Luther declares that despite humankind's tendency toward sectarianism, God willed that the Gospel emanate through the Jews, and that in the new covenant no one is excluded.[50] Christ issued the apostles a work order that is not complete until the table was full. The Jews were the sum total of the invited up to Jesus' earthly life, but a universal invitation begins with the commission issued to the apostles. This work continues until the Parousia when those that now see through a glass darkly will see in fullness of light.

Paul's epistle to the Romans was, for Luther, the quintessential expression of sin as uncovered by the Law, and the righteousness of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's hope was that all persons would see and experience their personal guilt in the face

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[49] *LW* 14, 14.
[50] *WA* 15, 714.35, quoted from Öberg, 134.

of God, and then seek God's divine assistance and grace.[51] Simple knowledge of God's existence is little better than naked atheism, since such knowledge does nothing toward honouring God, but rather allows persons to drift aimlessly into idolatry and godlessness. Every person, then, lives with a piety shaped by the Law, which cannot free from the wrath and judgment of Almighty God. Luther contends that even though the Jews possess the Word of God (the Tanakh), they are not saved by necessity since they do not believe in the Word who is revealed there.

3.2.2 Martin Chemnitz

Like Luther, the first-generation orthodox Lutheran father Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586) did not adopt a position on the religions *qua* religion, owing to his overweening concern for orthodoxy in the emerging Lutheran Church. Nevertheless, Chemnitz' views on the problem of evil and the possibility of salvation among the unbaptized may be extrapolated to include those of other faiths. The doctrine of divine providence raises the question of the cause of sin. The Augsburg Confession had dealt with this problem in a somewhat naive manner by saying simply (Article XIX): "Our churches teach that although God creates and preserves nature, the cause of sin is the will of the wicked, that is, of the devil and ungodly men. If not aided by God, the will of the wicked turns away from God, as Christ says in John 8:44, 'When the devil lies, he speaks

[51] Luther comments from the Larger Catechism: "God's kingdom comes to us in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and secondly, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation. Now, we pray for both of these, *that it may come to those who are not yet in it, and that it may come by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter to us who have attained it.* All this is simply to say: "Dear father, we pray Thee, give us Thy Word, that the Gospel may be sincerely preached throughout the world and that it may be received by faith and may work and live in us. So we pray that thy kingdom may prevail among us through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, that the devil's kingdom may be overthrown and he may have no right or power over us, until finally the devil's kingdom shall be utterly destroyed and sin, death, and hell exterminated, and that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness." *LC* II, 51–54.

according to his own nature.'" This is the only instance of the Lutheran Confessions referencing a connection with God's providence and the problem of sin and its cause.

> Chemnitz seeks to follow this very simple approach by voicing a plain categorical denial that God is the cause of sin. He refuses to consider the various logical and philosophical aspects of the problem, but on the basis of such Scriptures as 1 John 2:16 and Genesis 1 he insists that the origin of evil lies not in God but in the devil and the evil will of evil men. He says, "With both hands, indeed with all our hearts, we must hold to this true and pious opinion, that God is not the author of sin. He does not will sin, He does not coerce those who will to sin, nor does He approve of sin. No, rather He is indeed terribly angry with sin, as He declares so often in His Word, by the continuous punishments and miseries He sends upon the world and by His threats of eternal wrath. This wrath against sin has been demonstrated by the Son of God in a particular way when He came to become a sacrifice for sin and to show that the devil was the author of sin and to appease by His death the overwhelming wrath of the Father."[52]

Chemnitz was, as were Luther and Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) before him, a proponent of infant baptism, since baptism does not depend on the faith of the individual but on the promises of forgiveness, life and salvation issued by God through the sacraments. Christ instituted baptism for all persons regardless of age, and in so doing applied to blessings of the kingdom of God in universal fashion. Central to Chemnitz' view is not doctrinaire abstraction but rather the relationship God creates between the entirety of humanity and His promise and power.

One seemingly indissoluble problem concerns the faith of an infant. Chemnitz unambiguously declared that since God works to kindle saving faith through the means of grace, and nothing may deter Him from His gracious activity, it must be true that infants can and do have faith. It is here that Chemnitz allows for the possibility that not simply the unbaptized within a Christian milieu, but also those unbaptized in non-Christian lands, may be saved.

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[52] Preus, *The Theology of post-Reformation Lutheranism Volume II*, 209.

> Christ expressly says that infants that are brought to Him obtain and receive the kingdom of God, that is, forgiveness of sins, grace, and eternal salvation, Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16 . . . . For without faith no one can please God, Heb 11:6; and he that does not believe shall be condemned, Mark 16:16 . . . . Therefore there is no doubt that the Holy Spirit is given also to infants in Baptism. He works and effects this in them, that they receive the kingdom of God, though we cannot understand and conceive the nature of that divine work. For Baptism is a washing of regeneration and of the renewing of the Holy Spirit, who is shed abundantly on the baptized, that, being justified, they might be made heirs of eternal life, Titus 3:5–7. And the example of John the Baptist in [his] mother's womb shows that the Holy Spirit can perform His work in infants also before the use of reason. Luke 1:41.[53]

Chemnitz here adds that if a child dies without baptism, the church should treat him or her as if they were fully baptized members of the church. Prior to Christ, God has promised a future advent in the Messiah to come, the outward sign of which was circumcision on the eighth day. But just as the promise cannot be denied to infants who die prior to circumcision, neither can it be denied to the unbaptized among the new people of God born subsequent to Christ's first advent. Thus, if Chemnitz can argue for faith among pre-rational infants, and salvation for the unbaptized, then the same faith and salvation should be available to those that for no fault of their own do not live among Christians.

Chemnitz further declares that since Christ answers the prayers of the faithful, the church should offer up prayers on behalf of infants that have died. He writes, "Since, then, we cannot bring infants as yet unborn to Christ through Baptism, therefore we should do it through pious prayers."[54] At issue here is not salvation alone, but also the theological and pastoral implications for proclamation as a declaration of promise. The connection between circumcision and baptism is more than typological, since both are seen by Paul and others as "seals of faith." The faith of circumcision is identical to that of

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[53] Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacrament: An Enchiridion,* 118–119.
[54] Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacrament*, 120.

baptism, that the Christ that has come and will come again in glory. The difference is reduced to chronology.[55] Here Chemnitz wished to keep the speculation to a minimum; he does not debate the possibility that God may choose to work apart from His chosen means, i.e. word and sacrament. Rather than make educated assumptions, Chemnitz directs all persons to those things God in His infinite wisdom has actually promised and thus will fulfill in His time. In other words, Christians are to refrain from pronouncements such as "unbaptized infants are damned" or even "Hindus cannot be saved" since conclusive evidence for such does not exist. The most that can be declared unequivocally is that God has prescribed means for all persons to come to Him.

Another theological challenge posed on Chemnitz concerned the ancient question of whether or not God may be held responsible for evil. The answer may have a profound effect on a Lutheran theology of religions, insofar as faith is kindled by and dependent upon the Holy Spirit. In a sermon Chemnitz reassured his hearers that God did not call together all His angels and declare to them that "this one I am writing into the Book of Life, that one I am writing into the Book of Death. This one is to be saved, that one is to be rejected and damned."[56] God chose those that would believe so that they "hear the Word through which they are called, accept it through God's power and blessing, follow it, shed the old creature through true repentance, and put on the Lord Christ through true faith, let the Holy Spirit reign in their lives and lead them on God's paths."[57] Only those, then, that actively or with malice reject the offer of salvation through the Word will be damned according to the eternal plan of the Father. Among sin's most alarming results is

[55] Kilcrease, "The Salvation of the Unbaptized in Gerhard and Chemnitz," 30.
[56] Chemnitz, quoted from Kolb, "Preaching Predestination," 30.
[57] Chemnitz, quoted from Kolb, "Preaching Predestination," 31.

the removal of the fear of eternal separation from God. Chemnitz makes no explicit distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian at this point, for the most one can claim regarding acceptance or rejection of God's promise is that it serves as "entry level" Christianity and need not be interpreted exclusively.

Like Luther before him, Chemnitz was deeply concerned over the individual and his or her certainty of salvation. Christ has made the means of grace present so that there would exist an immutable, objective reality on which to focus a mutable, subjective belief. Chemnitz holds, however, that God reserves the right to act independent of His chosen means, and thus the unbaptized, and presumably those non-Christians who do not actively reject God's gracious ministrations, may enjoy the benefits of eternal salvation.

3.2.3 Johann Gerhard

Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) has been broadly identified as the pre-eminent Lutheran systematician of the seventeenth century. If Melanchthon and Chemnitz were the progenitors of Lutheran orthodoxy, Gerhard was the first major figure to teach and practice in this vein. Gerhard was remarkably prolific, his magisterial twenty-volume *Logi Theologici* representing the epitome of Lutheran orthodox dogmatics of its age. By the early seventeenth century the foundational Lutheran documents had been collected and codified into the *Book of Concord* which has been passed down to generations of Lutherans for several centuries. Given his commitment to these Confessions, Gerhard's apparent lack of originality makes perfect sense. Gerhard often granted Luther the status of final authority on dogmatic assertions, be they of primary or secondary importance.

This deference to the great Reformer shows itself clearly in Gerhard's consideration of the doctrine of Holy Baptism.

Gerhard's views on the sacrament of Baptism mirror those of Luther in his Large Catechism. By way of example, Gerhard restates Luther in averring that Baptism is God's word of promise to all persons who live under the curse of hereditary sin. Baptism is an application of water which drowns the old Adam, renews the mind, gives assurance of salvation to adults, and kindles faith in infants and children. So far Gerhard has not strayed from strict Lutheran orthodoxy. However, as Jack D. Kilcrease observes, Gerhard innovates considerably as he considers the fate of infants that expire prior to baptism.[58] For the first time among Lutherans, Gerhard suggests that God has a level of operation above that which is available to our senses and intellect. With respect to unbaptized infants, he appeals to God's grace and compassion, which He showers upon all persons, so that it is possible to suggest that these unidentified children of God may not be lost for eternity as had been the popular Lutheran view:

> In Matthew 2:16 Herod allowed to be murdered all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years and under. Without doubt, among these were certain ones who had not attained eight days of age and thus died without circumcision. But who would on account of that exclude them from God's kingdom? Much rather they are blessed little souls, quite secure little ones, little diamonds of the martyrs.[59]

Kilcrease correctly points out that Gerhard diverges from the "traditional" Lutheran view of Chemnitz and the orthodox theologians who were not willing to allow for extra-biblical speculation on any doctrine so central as Baptism. Gerhard agrees with the orthodox on the nature of Baptism, but then proceeds to challenge the notion that God is somehow bound to reveal Himself only in the dominical means of grace, namely the

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[58] Kilcrease, "The Salvation of the Unbaptized," 30–31.
[59] Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper (1610)*, 176.

Word of God and the sacraments. God is so infinitely free, Gerhard believes, that He possesses an infinite number of means by which to be gracious.[60] This means, among other things, that God in His infinite mercy may act in ways we might deem peculiar, and do so even at times when He has not unambiguously promised. For Gerhard the unbaptized are already bathed in God's divine light and have a relationship with Him, a salvific association that prevents them from eternal death.

While Gerhard may have been innovative with respect to the unbaptized, he was much less speculative on the subject of theology broadly considered. Gerhard believed, as did many if not most theologians before him, that theology, insofar as it exists, is divided into two unequal parts. "True" theology is that theology which "embraces the true knowledge of the true God."[61] "False" theology, since it does not or cannot grasp ideas about the true God, is the purview of the so-called heathen who are necessarily deprived of the light of the Word of God. In fact, Gerhard asserts, false theology should not be titled "theology" at all, since the errors embraced by the so-called heathen are not within view of the truth of the divine matter. Theology, then, does not contain any falsity per se, as if the two theologies represent two divisions the same substance. Any division of theology would simply divide humankind into "true and painted, or dead, people."[62]

Gerhard contends, as did many medieval theologians before him, that God does confer to humankind wisdom and knowledge of divine matter that God communicates by His grace to all persons equally. This "natural theology" is naturally inborn, and may be accurately titled a theology of revelation in life. Unfortunately for the "heathen," natural theology can confer relatively little of salvific value, since the common sense of natural

[60] Kilcrease, "The Salvation of the Unbaptized," 35.
[61] Gerhard, *Theology and Scripture*, 32.
[62] Gerhard, *Theology and Scripture,* 32.

theology brings about only theoretical knowledge of God, namely, "that God exists, that he is just, that he is good, etc.—and practical—that we must worship him. Or natural theology may be acquired, which one draws from a contemplation of creation and from consideration of God's works."[63]

> From a craftsman a craftsman receives questions, pronouncements, declarations, conclusions in two ways. One is that when the knowledge of something inferior depend completely on the principles of something superior, this occurs in the subordinate sciences. The other way is this: when a craftsman accepts that which another has set down but that he would also know without the other but not in the way he knows his own principles and not just as if the other had proved them. He accepts them, not as if he were unable to prove them but to examine and judge them.[64]

Human reason may interpret some things handed down by "theology," but the principle matters of faith are beyond reason's clutch if it utilizes its own flawed principles.

Gerhard is more measured in his presentation of the mystery of the Trinity, but his point concerning the Trinity and the theology of religions runs parallel to that of the unbaptized. He comments on the trinitarian formulation found in the Athanasian Creed: all who are to be saved must know and believe the mystery of the Trinity.[65] For Gerhard the letter of the Creed allows for a lessening of dogmatic certainty regarding the fate of the unbaptized, non-Christian persons. For this it is well to quote Gerhard at length:

> We exclude not only denial but also ignorance of the Trinity from humans who are to be saved. Some things revealed in the Word are arranged in such a way that they can be unknown without affecting one's salvation, though one cannot deny them without endangering the same. However, not only the denial but also the ignorance of the Trinity is damnable. (b) We do not require from all members of the Church an equal level of understanding, because the light of spiritual knowledge and of faith in some is quite bright and in others quite dim. (c) We do not require a perfect, full apprehension and intuitive knowledge of this mystery from those who are going to be saved, because we cannot be brought to that in this

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[63] Gerhard, *Theology and Scripture,* 34.
[64] Gerhard, *Theology and Scripture,* 38.
[65] Gerhard, *On the nature of God,* 267.

> life . . . . In this sense Cyprian is correct when he states that the Trinity is known only to itself.[66]

The Athanasian Creed, a foundational Christian confession of faith, asserts that for the catholic faith, which is necessary for all to be saved, there must be not a confused and implicit but a distinct and explicit knowledge and confession of the three persons of the Godhead. Neither Gerhard, nor the current author, challenges this view.

3.2.4 Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf

Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) found great reward and solace in preaching the Gospel of salvation by Christ to all, especially among those that had not received Christ, and thus could not be considered members of the earthly *ecclesia*. To this end Zinzendorf authorized the mission journeys of several of his Moravian brothers. One of these was Leonard Dober, who travelled to St. Thomas in the Caribbean to minister to the destitute African slaves there. In his classic biography of Zinzendorf, August Spangenberg made the following observation:

> I must indeed confess, that neither the Count nor the rest of the brethren had at that time any clear idea of how the hearts of the heathen were to be gained for the Saviour. They were indeed generally aware, that it was a great thing to open the eyes of the heathen, and bring them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; as well as that this could only be accomplished by the preaching of the Gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of all them that believe. It was also believed, that all the labour bestowed on the heathen would be in vain, if the Lord and his Spirit did not co-operate, and open their hearts to attend to the word.[67]

What was abundantly clear to Zinzendorf and his missionaries was that while they were to respond to God's clear call to preach Christ, the ultimate conversion of the individual was clearly in the hands of the divine, and such conversion did not by necessity require

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[66] Gerhard, *On the nature of God*, 267–268.
[67] Spangenberg, *The Life of Nicholas Lewis Count Zinzendorf*, 157.

the mediate contribution of human proclamation. The following is a summation of some key elements of Zinzendorf's ecclesiology and missional attitude that impact on the development of a confessional Lutheran theology of religions.

Zinzendorf was a pivotal figure in the history of not only the Moravian church but also Lutheranism in general. The historical Moravian church emerged from the Hussite movements of the fifteenth century, and helped give rise to the Pietist movement of post-Thirty Years War Europe. The first adherents were strict pacifists and ascetics who withdrew from their plural communities in order to live by pacifist principles. When many of the Moravians returned to the "world," they were instrumental in the development of schools, printing presses, and trade between peasants and the nobility. Zinzendorf had little knowledge of the sect at first, but as a Lutheran Pietist serving the Saxon king in Dresden he encountered some Moravians as they emigrated to his home estate. Zinzendorf began a ministry among them, but in a short time the Moravians began to affect Zinzendorf so deeply that he soon became their leader and primary theologian up to the time of his death.[68]

Owing to the Moravians nomadic history, Zinzendorf's use of church (*Kirche*) emphasized the invisible aspect, and not the concrete congregations and buildings commonly understood as the visible church. He often referred to denominations and confessional bodies such as Lutheranism as religions (*Religionen*) in their own right. This meant that all *Religionen* were not only exclusively conditioned and cultural institutions, but also possessed unique divine treasures and moral distinctives that may be of value to other Christians. Institutionless Religion does not seek to undermine traditional forms of

[68] Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice: Zinzendorf and the Early Moravians," 185–210.

religion, but respects the need of some Christians for the stability and certainty of the Church. For Zinzendorf this meant allowing Christians to remain in their respective institutional situations without fear of proselytization. God works through the *Religionen* in history and culture to bring about His intention for creation.[69]

While *Religionen* signified a "free church" movement without institutional or confessional structure, the term *Gemeine* was used by Zinzendorf to identity the Church proper, and in this sense *Gemeine* is distinct from Religion. *Gemeine* was identified as the earthly Church that was formed by Christ, filled with the breath of the Holy Spirit, and now is a living, common community, both universal and local. Zinzendorf used the term *Gemeine* expansively to include not only the local congregation but also the whole invisible Church on earth. In other words, the *Gemeine* is a local manifestation of the visible Church that connects persons to the community of believers, but need not have a direct link to an established Religion. In summary, "the only true *Gemeine*, the only foundational *Gemeine*, the only genuine original *Kirche* is the Holy Trinity."[70] The possibility of *Gemeine* exists without the absolute need for cognitive understanding or the ability to respond consciously. The lack of conceptualization in Zinzendorf's ecclesiology suggests that he did not attempt to extrapolate a theology of religions from this, but some important points may be made.

First, the primary mark of *Gemeine* is contact and communication with Jesus Christ, and through Him with God the Father. The second is a similar relationship with the Holy Spirit, Who Zinzendorf believed cares for the Church as her Mother. The term "Mother" suggests the Spirit relates to the Church economically, having a decisive effect

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[69] Freeman, "*Gemeine,*" 5–6.
[70] Zinzendorf, "*Der öffentliche Gemein-Reden (1748)*" quoted from Freeman, "*Gemeine,*" 7.

on substance and configuration of the *Gemeine*. Thirdly, the *Gemeine* is to be firmly involved in mission. The life of the *Gemeine* should reflect the relationship of Christ to His Church by sending disciples into the world to carry out the mission to share the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The crucial step in mission, for Zinzendorf, occurs in the planting of a *Gemeine* wherein all persons can live the sanctified life in Christ, while others may experience this new life as proximate participants. Zinzendorf's missional attitude was simple: bring the Gospels to the nations and the nations to the Church. He wrote, "The missionary should not 'begin with public preaching but with a conversation with individual souls who deserve it, who indicate the Saviour to you, and you will perceive it."[71] The *Gemeine* was to be non-denominational to the extent that the ultimate message shared was conscious contact with Christ, and not some interminable and doctrinaire expression which confuses the mind and deflates the spirit. *Gemeine*, then, was open to all persons, presumably those from non-Christian traditions, who then become visible members of the body of Christ in the *Religionen*. Zinzendorf's *Gemeine* is an entry point as much for those from non-Christian milieus as for persons from historically Christian situations that are seeking solace in the Church, perhaps for the first time.

Zinzendorf and his theology were greatly influenced by his experiences, particularly his home life, his education at Wittenberg University, and the year he spent in Holland, Switzerland and France on a study leave. This *Wanderjahr* connected Zinzendorf with a variety of cultures, philosophies and institutions he had not come across before, broadening his mind to the prospect of ecumenism among Christian

[71] Zinzendorf, "Instructions for Missionaries to the East," quoted from Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice: Zinzendorf and the Early Moravians," 192.

traditions, but also mission among non-Christians.[72] In the ensuing years he maintained communication with several Jews, eventually declaring that the God of the Jewish tradition was the same Saviour adhered to by Christians.[73] Zinzendorf poured over Scripture and came to the conclusion that this shared God of Jews and Christians was the Creator of all things visible and invisible, and thus was the true God of all religions, whatever they may be. The Jews, he said, engage in ritual which must be viewed as fertile ground for the Gospel to be sown and from which proto-Christians could emerge.[74]

The Creator who is also Saviour is the ground on which all religious experience occurs, and even if those who practice religion do not know it, they are speaking of, praying to and offering sacrifices in the name of Jesus Christ, the universal Saviour and Lord. In fact, as one grows in knowledge of the Creator, one is simultaneously introduced to the mutual love between the Creator (Father) and Saviour (Christ), namely the Spirit. Zinzendorf acknowledged that revelation of the true God is present in the experiences of the world's religions in general, and in the individual practitioner in particular.[75] Scripture provides all persons, Christian and non-Christian alike, with "information" concerning the Incarnation as well as God's role in the ongoing existence of Creation,

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[72] "First, silently observe to see if any of the heathen were prepared, by the grace of God, to receive and believe the word of life. Second, if even one were found, preach the Gospel to him because God must give the heathens ears and heart to receive the Gospel, otherwise all of his labours would be in vain. Third, preach chiefly to such heathens, who never heard the Gospel. We were not to build on a foundation laid by others nor to disturb their work, but to seek the outcast and forsaken." Quoted from Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology," 190.

[73] Janet and Geoff Benge, *Count Zinzendorf: Firstfruits*, 112–3.

[74] Janet and Geoff Benge, *Count Zinzendorf,* 114–5.

[75] "[Zinzendorf's] religious life was very much affected by his own experience. . . . His position in the nobility also gave ecumenical breadth, thrusting him into relations with other nobles not of his own tradition. He had continuing contact with Jews and believed that the God of the Jewish tradition was really the Saviour who, as the Christian scriptures taught him, was also Creator and therefore the God of all religion (for example, Jn. 1:1-18). He emphasized that the Jewish tradition had been the very adequate nurturing ground for the spiritual life of Jesus." Freeman, "Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf: An Ecumenical Pioneer," 290.

which help to give shape to the image of God and meaning to His revelations. By way of example, Zinzendorf could speak of the pre-Christian Jewish understanding of the Saviour as equivalent to the "Father" of the Tanakh, but an understanding of God as Triune would not be complete or even possible until the time of the Incarnation. There is no evidence, however, that Zinzendorf could refer to this as "extraordinary ignorance."[76]

Zinzendorf knew that the pathway to communion with the divine can only be traversed in the context of God's actions and will that move persons ineluctably to the Creator/Saviour. The Spirit may accompany along this pathway, but in the end unless God chooses to reveal Himself in Creation and in history, the result of which transfers identification of God from the subjective to the objective, humankind will remain mired in experiential and philosophical blindness. Zinzendorf believed the pathway to the divine as being culturally conditioned and radically individualized to bring as many as possible into relationship with God.[77] The Saviour knows each person as a unique entity with particular needs, and since He is also the source of their life He is able to tailor the salvation process when necessary. Nevertheless, it should be stated that Zinzendorf was by no means a pluralist, or a proponent of universal salvation, but rather a Pietist who saw the Creator/Saviour as loving and compassionate, one that does not release persons into the darkness unless they choose to reject His gracious offer of salvation.

3.3 Luther's and Lutheran Missional Attitudes

Not surprisingly, Lutherans consider Luther's attitude to missions as foundational to any statement made on a Lutheran theology of religions. Luther's missiology was

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[76] Freeman, "Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf: An Ecumenical Pioneer," 290–1.
[77] Freeman, "An Ecumenical Pioneer," 300.

decidedly Christocentric, but must result in growth within the institutional church, lest uncertainty of one's salvation status strip away personal joy and hope in the Gospel. All that Luther contended concerning missions was unapologetically pragmatic—the existential existence is of greater value than any unproveable abstraction. For this reason, generations of confessional Lutherans still view Luther's missiology as the groundwork for speculation on the possible salvific status of the religions. This will be explicated and defended in the following.

The early Lutherans derived much of their missional attitude from their status as a "state church," that of an entity guaranteed and governed in and through the various German sovereigns under which the Lutheran churches existed. As members of a state church the early Lutherans displayed little direct interest in proclaiming the Gospel among non-Christian traditions, since the spiritual needs of the many in the German provinces were perceived to be of paramount importance. Gustav Warneck's study of Luther led him to conclude that Luther should not be considered a missionary in our modern sense of the term. Warneck charges that Luther, understandably, did not possess a mature "idea of missions," much less did he engage in missionary activity in the traditional mode. For Luther the fledgling Reformation took the majority of his evangelical energy.[78] Dwelling on the early Lutherans' seeming disinterest in the mission to the non-Christians does an unfortunate disservice to their overall opinion of and interest in outreach to the religions. Of greater interest with respect to the theology of religions is Lutheranism's belief in an "omnipotent" Gospel that transcends the limitations imposed upon it by sinful humanity.

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[78] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 387.

Even if it should be demonstrated that Luther did not expound on mission topics *per se*, in commentaries on the Psalms, the Prophets, and Paul, he gave more than nominal emphasis to the universal purpose of the mission of Christ and of His Gospel. Luther declared that "the Gospel and Baptism must traverse the whole world," that the Gospel will be a precious treasure for all nations, and that God's blessing will rest upon not just Christendom but the whole of humanity. These more irenic declarations must be balanced against Luther's contention that none of the religions led to a longing for the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.[79] Despite his humanism and semi-Pelagianism, Melanchthon did not discount the necessity of the universal task given to believers.[80] This was not an insignificant position for Melanchthon to assume, since a debate raged at the time with Socinians that denied that there is an absolute need for salvation among the religions.[81] Melanchthon was appalled that some of his Lutheran contemporaries had chosen to exit Christendom for Islam since they found themselves bored with the religion of their youth. For Melanchthon, as for Luther and generations of Lutheran dogmaticians to follow, all Christological expressions would be incomplete if they were not followed by a wholesale criticism of the non-Christian religions.

Luther's apparent lack of concern for missions proper was no doubt connected to his contention that by his time the Gospel had already circumnavigated the globe in fulfillment of Christ's directive to "go and teach all nations . . ." (Matt 28:19–20). The Gospel, then, has a permanent and universal validity as it is proclaimed and believed. In other words, Luther declares, the Gospel is universal because it is proclaimed "for all." Luther had a decent knowledge of the geography of his time, allowing him to declare that

[79] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 387.
[80] Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 76–82.
[81] Demarest, "Hebrews 7:3, a *crux interpretum* historically considered," 141–62.

the Gospel had been proclaimed in Greece, Italy, Spain, France and others. He believed that Christians lived in Armenia, India, and parts of Africa, but also that the nations of Asia Minor were under the spell and boot of Islam.[82] It is likely that Luther's point in enumerating the nations was to prove to Christians and heathen alike that Christ is not bound to a locality but rules universally. Luther would have found claims that the Gospel need not be preached because it has already reached all persons absolutely foreign and not worthy of a Christian. After all, Luther was a mission pragmatist, refusing to be deceived that proclamation of the Gospel must inevitably result in great success;[83] God has promised the Gospel to all persons, but nowhere does He state that all will repent and believe.

Luther believed that the Gospel is always moving forward in an aggressive mode so that the whole of the nations of the world, as well as history, would be conformed to the salvific will of God.[84] The Gospel is preached first and primarily within the nations of Christendom, and then among the people and nations of whom the majority have not yet heard the message. Unlike much of missionary preaching today, which is more often than not concerned primarily with church growth, Luther routinely referred to the need for the "heathen" to repent and believe the Good News.[85] Such politically incorrect language Luther found consistent with Scripture which depicts the "Good Shepherd" as seeking "other sheep" in the sheep pen, as well as the multitude of persons, men and women alike, who though they possessed tickets were slow in coming to the great wedding and

[82] Luther, *LW* 25, 148.
[83] Luther, *LW* 19, 100–149.
[84] Luther, *LC* II, III.
[85] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 388.

subsequent banquet. But in keeping with Paul's directive, Luther viewed the term "heathen" as pertaining most essentially to non-Christians and non-Jews.[86]

The missionary that Luther envisions should desire more than to preach before Christians. "In addition," Luther writes, "Christians should also bring forth much fruit among all the heathen by means of the Word, should convert and save many by eating about themselves like a fire that burns amid dry wood or straw; thus the fire of the Holy Spirit should consume the heathen according to the flesh and make room everywhere for the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ."[87] For example, the prisoner who is a Christian should give attention to the non-Christian around him, even if he is held by "the Turk," Luther's code for an Islamist. The ordinary Christian should be as much compelled by the Gospel as the missionary abroad, since lack of occupation with the Good News makes one run the risk of losing her soul and invoking the wrath of God.

In many of his writings, Luther displayed a belief in the necessity of personal and public confession of faith among those that would be Christians. "For if all the heathen are to praise God, it must first be established that He has become their God. If He is to be their God, they must know Him and believe in Him."[88] In many of the same writings he showed a predilection for the preached Word among the heathen, since "if they are to believe, they must first hear His Word. . . . If they are to hear His Word, preachers who proclaim God's Word to them must be sent to them."[89] Yet after examination of the myriad of Luther's mission-oriented writings[90] it is clear that none of them contain a unique theology of mission, or a nascent theology of religions. Luther simply expressed

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[86] Luther, *LW* 14, 6.
[87] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 389.
[88] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 390.
[89] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 390.
[90] Rowold, "The church comes from all nations: Luther texts on mission," 450–1.

what to him was the clear impact of the Gospel on all nations, as well as his concern that this Gospel had not yet gone out to the ends of the earth. In other words, Luther's theology of mission was existential in orientation, moving away from abstraction toward practical application.

The one church of God has but one motion for Luther, that of a relentless march toward the utter realization of the universal and catholic. The church is and must be in constant motion if she is to give expression to the dynamism of the Gospel. Thus Luther's understanding of mission was proclamation of the Gospel that moves in all directions of the nations and continues to move by and through the nations. Regarding the Gospel Luther opined that it is "as if one threw a stone into the water; the stone causes ripples, circles, and streams round about it; and the ripples always roll them farther and farther; one drives the other until they come to the shore. Although the water becomes calm in the centre, the ripples do not rest but keep on flowing."[91] As we have seen above, one of Luther's great concerns was over the thousands of souls that had apostasized themselves for the religions of Islam, Hinduism, and most especially Judaism. Of more concern, however, were reports from overseas missions of converts numbering in the thousands, while there seemed to be an equal and opposite loss of members in the churches at home. Early Lutherans were in contact with many base non-Christians, including Jews at home in Germany, the "Turks" or Islamists in the Balkans, and Scandinavian Laplanders.[92] But while little tangible success was achieved among these groups, the seeds of Lutheran attitude toward the religions were sown as

[91] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 392–3.
[92] Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: a study in sixteenth-century polemics and apologetics,* 1–260.

missionaries near and far strove to put Luther's idea of missions, and thus his theology of religions, into action.

Luther's theology of mission and religions was decidedly catechetical. Luther was convinced that the Gospel possessed power to overwhelm pagan unbelief, freeing the individual to be converted by evangelical proclamation. Non-Christians shared commonalities of human nature with Christians so that they should be afforded proper treatment as fellow sinners for whom Christ died. Early in his ministry Luther hoped that once a non-Christian was properly catechized from the Scriptures and the Catechism, the majority of them would turn from their pagan paths toward the true God.[93] Later in life, however, Luther displayed a cynicism toward the religions, and in particular the Jews, whom he charged with attempting to woo Christians away from their faith and toward uttering blasphemies against Christ. To witness Christians renouncing their faith caused Luther a great deal of spiritual pain, and even caused him to become sceptical that any Jew or Turk could be truly converted and become Christian. "To debate a Jew," Luther wrote, "is like striking an anvil with a blade of straw."[94] Jews lived alongside Christians for centuries, and while they appeared to know a great deal about the historical figure of Jesus Christ, they learned virtually nothing of salvific value by their cohabitation. For this reason Luther refused to allow mission to the Jews on the same level with missions to the "heathen" and the Muslims. Nevertheless, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries missionary outreach to German Jews met with some success.

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[93] Chaney, "Martin Luther and the mission of the church," 15–41.
[94] Luther, *WA* 50, 312. Quoted in Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 393.

3.4 Lutheran Theology of Religions as Grace-Focused Christocentrism

Even a cursory exploration of Luther's prodigious theological output must lead to the conclusion that he believed Jesus Christ of Nazareth to be the absolute and ultimate manifestation of God to His creation. Christ is the irreplaceable point of intersection between the finite and the eternal. Salvation for all has been earned through crucifixion and resurrection, and justification by grace, which is appropriated by faith, does not allow for the possibility that redemption could be attained by any other means. Luther was vigilant to root out spiritual pride in himself, and he would not tolerate it in others, particularly those who deny Christ. He reserved his greatest critique for the Roman Catholic church hierarchy of his day, whom he charged with claiming power for themselves that was not rightfully theirs, and in so doing destroying the faith of the masses. Christ as universal saviour was not the issue; the church as sole source of Christ was. The implication here—can one be saved outside of the church, or outside of Christ alone—will be examined in this section.

As we have seen, and will be reminded of later, the Lutheran understanding of the world's religions is not exclusively or even primarily based upon the special revelation of God in and through the nation of Israel, the person of Jesus Christ and the church. Luther routinely affirmed the efficacy of a general revelation of God that occurs independent from the Bible and the history of salvation which culminated in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The First Article of the Creed witnesses to the God who creates and sustains all things. Recognition of the creative aspect of the divine comes conspicuously prior to the confession of Christ in the Second Article who "for us and for our salvation

came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Virgin Mary."[95] The creator God's activity echoes in the mundane expressions of life because God has not left Himself without witness (Acts 14:16–17), meaning that God can and does lay behind humanity's religions as their anonymous source of power.[96] Lutherans do affirm a twofold revelation of God (*deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*), but they retain a distinction between the terms which serves to prevent a doctrine of revelation limited to that which pertains to the Son alone, to the exclusion of the other persons of the Trinity.

God is active in the structure and nuance of human experience, just as He is active in the legalities of the religions in order to drive all persons toward salvation, as well as what is good, right and true. Luther spoke of this activity as occurring at God's left hand, where all persons, Christian and non-Christian alike, receive His good gifts. In other words, God is the source of the search for God, and its attendant quest for meaning for human existence and all reality.[97] Yet Lutherans refuse to allow "religion" to become synonymous with illusion, the common charge delivered by atheistic critics that declare religion to be a mere projection, or an opiate which serves to relieve the stress and uncertainty in human life. The person of Christ, for example, cannot be extracted from Christianity and dangle on His own. To allow such extraction would be to declare the chosen vehicle for special revelation, the holy Christian church on earth, to be at best redundant and at worst a distraction.

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[95] Luther, *LC* II, 11.

[96] "Therefore in the entire Book of Acts, taken as a whole, nothing is discussed except that Jews as well as Gentiles, righteous men as well as sinners, are to be justified solely by faith in Christ Jesus, without Law or works. This is indicated both by the sermons of Peter, Paul, Stephen, Philip, and others, and by the examples of the Gentiles and Jews. For just as through the Gospel God gave the Holy Spirit to Gentiles who lived without the Law, so He gave the Holy Spirit also to the Jews, not through the Law or through the worship and sacrifices commanded in the Law but solely through the proclamation of faith." Luther, *LW* 26, 205.

[97] Luther, *LW* 20.

Lutherans must, however, acknowledge certain realities expressed through biblical exegesis and church tradition. First, while Scripture declares Christ to be the one and only revelation of God in history and to humanity, expressions of other "revelations" are present as well. Since Law and Gospel are inextricably connected, it is erroneous to suggest that divine revelation is limited to the Gospel. Romans 1 quite clearly declares that divine revelation (i.e. the Law) is expressed prior to and independent of the Gospel of salvation through Christ.[98] Lutherans do not maintain that the true face of God may be viewed according to natural theology, but humanity can know some aspects of the divine by observing the *posterior Dei,* the "hindmost parts" of God. Luther understood Paul deeply, especially in the letter to the Romans, and thus saw the religions as not expressions of raw God-rejection full stop, but rather as possible milieu for *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel), showing people the depth of their depravity which brings God's wrath, and their need for the Gospel of forgiveness and hope in Christ.[99] Carl Braaten comments,

> In Romans 2 and 7 Paul speaks of the law written on the hearts of Gentiles, which is nothing else than the law of God working universally through the conscience of people who know not Christ. Although the understanding of this law may be dark and confusing apart from Christ, its fundamental content is the same as the law given to Israel, in relation to which Christ is announced as its end and fulfillment. From this point, Lutherans have been able to spell out some analogies. Just as the church fathers could say that Greek philosophy was a preamble to the Gospel analogous to the function of Jewish law, so also the religions may play a similar role in the history of humanity. Every religion has prophets who are similar to John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming of Christ.[100]

If this were not so, the Gospel of Christ would drop like a stone from heaven and could not be translated into other religio-cultural settings.

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[98] Luther, *LW* 31, 52–7.
[99] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 69.
[100] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 69.

To develop and utilize a modern natural theology is to engage in the main thrust of this dissertation, namely, to form a Lutheran theology of religions. Luther's understanding of the law of God as curb, mirror, and rule is necessary prolegomenon to Christian salvation as derived from the Old and New Testaments. A truly Lutheran theology of religions will transcend narrow parochial interests that limit theology to an in-house discussion for Christians, by Christians, and among Christians. Serious attention must be paid to individual experiences prior to *fides ex auditu*, to the preaching of the Gospel, and the receiving of the Sacraments.[101] No affront to Christ as unique and universal Saviour occurs when Christians pay attention to the possibility of the communication of divine revelation among the religions. On the contrary, the ubiquity of Christ is properly confessed when it is allowed that decisive and definitive expression in the area of justification is present in various religious expressions. As Braaten points out, "revelation and salvation are not coterminous."[102]

Confessional Lutheran theology maintains that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, operates as the final manifestation of revelation to humanity, and therefore is the only critical matrix by which to fashion a coherent and Christian theology of religions. God may allow Himself to be experienced phenomenologically within the practices of the religions, and may even choose to communicate His grace within them, but only Christianity places its soteriological eggs in the basket of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth for us and for our salvation. In other words, to paraphrase Paul Tillich, God may offer epiphanies and therefore knowledge of Himself without Christ,

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[101] Luther, *LW* 31, 3–15.
[102] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!,* 71.

but neither of these is salvific, resulting in union between God and humankind.[103] The essence of Christianity as the pure gift of salvation offered to all without pre-condition, distinguishes it from non-Christian traditions, despite what may be viewed as striking parallels, such as scripture, rituals, sacred spaces and the like. Justification in a Christian context is utterly unique, because of Christ's occupation of the centre of all revelation, and therefore of all history.

Justification by grace through faith alone destroys human pride and self-divination at the root, allowing God to assume His rightful place. The religions attempt to earn God's favour through the locus of human works, while faith alone gives over the work of salvation to the Triune God. For Lutherans faith must be *sola* because sin poisons any power humans may possess to perform works they believe square the ledgers with God. The religions are unable to extricate themselves from the radical state of sinfulness,[104] and in fact often offer a medium for humans to intensify their rebellion against God by hiding from His righteous judgment. Christianity is by no means incapable of rebellion, since in conjunction with other religions it is permeated by sin. Thus, no religion in and of itself is capable of generating freedom for its adherents, which is the strict purview of *sola fide*.

In the *Bondage of the Will*, Luther brought forward a concept to assess the relationship between "religion" and the Gospel. Sin is not so much an entity as it is a dearth of faith and the freedom faith engenders. When sin is present, the negative aspects of humanity's relationship with God are most risible. Sinners stand on the judgment seat

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[103] Coburn, "God, Revelation and Religious Truth: Some Themes and Problems in the Theology of Paul Tillich," 3–33.
[104] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!,* 76.

of God, and their ongoing rebellion declares God, not death, to be the enemy to be vanquished.

> Religions can be used as a shield or shelter from the just and angry Judge and offer cheap grace and the promise of salvation in exchange for fulfilling their demands, and demands of religion are always negotiable and conditional. The religions know what we must do for our salvation, and we are happy to oblige because they exact a price we can pay. Thus, the religions themselves fall under the wrath and judgment of God despite all the good and truth that they also undeniably have given to human experience and history.[105]

The Christian Gospel, as understood by Lutherans, is the unique path to reconciliation with God. It is not that divine endowment moves humans to turn from works of the law, mysticism, or Gnosticism for their salvation. *Sola Christus* is the singular and proper foundation for *sola fide*, since God chose from eternity to incarnate His reconciling love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The challenge for Lutheran Christians is communicating this Gospel truth independent of objective proof that the details of the Incarnation have been accurately represented to Christians throughout the centuries. Lutherans assume the veracity of the Christ-event, and draw conclusions on its deeper meaning and eternal significance. Lutherans have not, for the most part, engaged in the Historical Jesus debates of the last four decades, preferring to presuppose the truth of Scripture with respect to Christ, and draw from that truth the implications of this Christ as essential for salvation for all human beings. In the final analysis, outside of Christ, and the *kerygma*, there exists no possible alternative in history which has been universally accepted as garnering salvation from the divine. As we have seen, traditional Roman Catholic doctrine on the religions has, until the past two centuries, been summarized as "outside the church there is no salvation." While Lutherans respect the sentiment, and Luther was a loyal churchman, generations of Lutherans have been inclined to recast the

[105] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!,* 76.

Cyprian dictum into the grace-focused "outside of Christ there is no salvation." In sum, Lutheran divines, orthodox and pietist alike, have been exclusivists that suspend final judgment on the salvation of unbelievers.

Chapter 4: *Sola Scriptura:* The Lutheran Understanding of Natural and Supernatural Revelation of the Word, and their Roles in the Theology of Religions

Central to any theology of religions is the question of natural and supernatural revelation, and the salvific potential of either or both. The Lutheran position on natural theology, as well as general and special revelation, may be summarized as follows: apart from God's Word, humankind lives and dies in culpable ignorance of God. Under the law of God, humanity sees only a wrathful God Who is unwilling by virtue of the divine nature to be gracious and merciful. Observation of the works of God in creation, *a priori* awareness of a Creator, does not and cannot provide the faith required to recognize that God is kind as well as just. Recognition of the Creator-goodness of God is possible only in the knowledge of His grace. This chapter, then, will examine natural theology and general revelation in some detail, through history and among key Lutheran divines. The final point to be made is that revelation in nature, no matter how profound, cannot be deemed salvific, since it does not immediately connect the individual to saving grace, available only in and through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

4.1 General and Special Revelation

Lutheran dogmaticians from the time of Gerhard spoke with especial thoroughness on natural theology, and eventually made a sharp distinction between "general" and "supernatural" or "revealed" theology that had only been found in Christian (read: Roman Catholic) theology since the thirteenth century. Most systematicians did, however, refer to a *cognitio* or *notitia naturalis* (natural knowledge of God) in the manner of Paul's statement in the first chapter of Romans, wherein all

persons are capable of recognizing God's eternal power and purpose in the created order. This followed logically, since Christian theology from the outset has assumed the existence of God and believed Him to be capable of self-revelation. Until the twentieth century most Christian theologians believed there to be two streams of revelation, one physical and temporal, the other divine and eternal.[1] Despite his outspoken criticism of the perversion of natural theology, Luther took Paul to heart and accepted that even the worst of the heathen have a working, general knowledge of God, even when their actions are strictly idolatrous. Lutherans, at least until the last century, regarded pre-Christian and extra-Christian knowledge of God as of positive value, if not so much as that among Christians.

Saving knowledge of God is not possible apart from God's gracious will to make Himself known. Revelation, whether natural or supernatural, is not the result of humanity seeking God or imagining Him, but a divine gift to all persons for whom sin has caused a permanent distortion in understanding of divine things. Apart from revelation, humanity can do little more than foolishly speculate, and in doing so contradict true knowledge of God. Yet God has graciously witnessed to Himself to all persons so that they are "without excuse." Commonly a distinction is made between "general" and "special" revelation to distinguish between the grace offered to all persons at all times, and the grace offered in unique ways on specific occasions.

God speaks universally in general revelation through four general modes. First, He reveals Himself in His creative work in the physical realm.[2] Romans 1 declares that God communicates to every person individually through what can be seen in the world.

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[1] Aquinas, *ST*, 2.2.2a 3 ad 1, wherein Aquinas argues that natural knowledge is not enough, and that supernatural knowledge is necessary for salvation.

[2] Job 36:24–37:24; 38:1–39:30; Ps 19; 104; 148; Rom 1:18–21.

An experiential awareness of God is available to those who contemplate God's creation.[3] Second, God speaks through the innate moral consciousness found in all persons, and is the primordial cause of civil righteousness in all persons.[4] Romans 2 states that although the Gentiles do not have the law of Moses, which I have termed special revelation, they do instinctively know what they must do because the law is written on their hearts. We are born with the capacity to know God's moral demands primarily. Third, He speaks through the religious consciousness He gives to humanity which gives a sense of deity (*sensus deitatis*).[5] This concept is present in the writings of Justin Martyr, who wrote of an eternal Word implanted in Christian and pagan alike, and thus all those that have acted rationally and morally have participated in Christ in His manifestation as universal *Logos*.[6] Lastly, God speaks through His providential work of upholding the nations who might one day respond in faith and trust. In sum, there is no degree of separation between God and humankind so deep and profound that it cannot be overcome by grace and grasped by faith.[7]

Specific revelation was promised to humanity from the moment of the Fall, as our first parents were judged sinners, but also given the *protoevangelion*[8] (first Gospel) which announced God's plan to overcome sin and death. Since then God has intervened many times in history, from establishing a covenant with Abraham, to delivering Israel

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[3] Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 1:21, 2:11; 4:19; 8:3; 2 Cor 5:16; Gal 4:9.
[4] Rom 2:14–15; Acts 17:22–31; Gen 1:26–27.
[5] Acts 17:22–31; Gen 1:27; John 1:4–9.
[6] Justin Martyr, *Apology,* 10, 13.
[7] "Truly to find the Father in the Son is to open up the sphere of absolute Trinitarian truth, and of the knowledge in which we grow more deeply the more we entrust ourselves to the Son in faith and allow ourselves to be drawn into his innermost disposition. Christ turns to men, and says: "I give you the Logos, the *gnosis* of God; I give myself wholly to you. For I am he, and this is what God wills. The Son is the accord and harmony of the Father....You are images, but not wholly similar images; and I want to bring you back to the primal image, in order that you may become like me." Balthasar, *Seeing the Form,* 138.
[8] Gen 3:15.

from Egypt, to protecting the infant Jesus from the murderous designs of King Herod.[9] God uses a number of different forms to communicate with humankind, including speech, visions and dreams, manipulation of the created order, direct inspiration and so forth. For Lutherans, the most complete form of revelation took place as the Second Person of the Trinity took on human flesh and entered creation in physical form.

4.2 General Revelation in Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas declared that the personal qualities and work of God could be known through unaided reason and revelation. He wrote, "There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like."[10] He takes up many of the key issues with respect to God in his *Summa Theologiae.*

The primary question Aquinas addresses in the *Summa* is to what extent humans possess innate ideas of God, if at all. Can we simply cogitate in a Cartesian mode and arrive, however messily, at a concept of God? Aquinas believes that pure reason can and will produce an image of the invisible God, but not proof for God's existence. From an idea borrowed from John of Damascus,[11] Aquinas first contends that awareness of God is in some sense implanted within all persons without their knowledge or permission.[12] Second, Aquinas refers to the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God,

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[9] "One could as easily infer from the narrative that their coming to see the baby Jesus demonstrates how God may sometimes use even the wrath and follies of human beings to praise him—in this case to provide a pregnant symbol of how his Son will someday meet the aspirations of Gentiles as well as of Jews—as infer that the Magi are true believers while still being pagans." Carson, *Gagging of God*, 299.
[10] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 3, 2.
[11] John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith."
[12] Aquinas, *ST* 1,1.; *Summa Contra Gentiles,* I, 3,38.

first composed by Anselm in the twelfth century. Anselm contended that to use the term "God," whether in a positive or negative sense, proves that the user thinks that God exists. That God is "that being of which nothing is greater," and holding the concept must mean that God exists not just in mind, but also in fact.[13] Thirdly, the existence of truth led Aquinas to postulate that since to reject truth is self-contradictory, ultimate truth must exist.[14]

Aquinas' recognition of the arguments is followed by his stepwise rejection of them. While he agrees that reason could portray the qualities of God, Aquinas denied that *a priori* reason could produce adequate argumentation for God's existence. Even allowing that an image of God could be implanted in humans, that image would be inadequate to bring about certainty as to God's existence. In fact, an image of God is not implanted so much as an image or desire for happiness, which persons find is satisfied by but remains vague, so that humans can fill such desire with any number of things or experiences. Aquinas could not accept the Anselmian argument on the grounds that the definition for God offered in the ontological proof is largely abstract and not a traditional proof for God's existence. He further denies that the existence of truth must by necessity return to the existence of a first truth.

From these considerations Aquinas comes to the conclusion that God's existence cannot be substantiated using cognitive tools available to human beings. As is his wont, Aquinas offers three reasons for this. First, proof of God's existence is unlike other proofs—it is an article of faith. Second, when we attempt to demonstrate God's existence, in order to do so we must presuppose and connect to God's essence or ground

[13] Aquinas, *ST* 2, 1.
[14] Aquinas, *ST* 2, 9.

of being, which is a fundamental impossibility. Third, Aquinas opines that since the existence of God cannot be postulated apart from His works, and since God and His effects are infinitely distinct from ours, to argue back to God may be attempted, but impossible.

Having concluded that an *a priori* knowledge of God denies the necessity of a proof for God's existence, and that no unimpeachable proof for God's existence is possible, Aquinas moves on to sustain the notion that God's existence can be verified *a posteriori*, that is through His effects. He does so by utilizing his famous *Five Ways*, all of which use the necessity of some degree of causality as their basis. If a relationship between cause and effect can be established, then analogy between the created order and the creator is ascertained, resulting in the existence of a necessary being, or God, as the source of all things. The *Five Ways* deal with the concept of change, causation in particular, necessity, gradation and order in nature. Each of these ways purports to prove that an infinite regress in contingent events or beings is impossible, so the only option left to explain causality is a creator.[15]

Aquinas' *Five Ways* utilize observation to a greater degree than other classical proofs for God's existence. They cannot, however, establish anything more than recognition of that divine existence. Reason, on the other hand, can reach toward understandings of God's properties, not just His existence. Human beings cannot expect to attain direct knowledge of the divine nature, but only what flawed senses perceive. Nevertheless, Aquinas makes clear that humans can move past bare sensory experience to recognition of the concept of being. Through what has been called the Three-fold Way—the negative way, the positive way, and the way of eminence—Aquinas argues

[15] Aquinas, *ST* 2, 12–19.

that reason can make a true, clear statement about what the personal, creating God is like.[16]

The negative way implies that true knowledge of God cannot be apprehended according to what He is, but rather what He is not. Using this method Aquinas is able to state that God is eternal (i.e. not contingent), has no substantial matter, is ultimately and perfectly simple (complexity would be an imperfection), is not violent, and so forth. As a result God can be thought of as infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing and more. The positive way is another expression for causality, or the belief that God is the efficient cause of all that is. In order for any visible perfection to exist, a being that possesses all the perfections that are in humans and creatures must exist. The way of eminence deduces by analogy from finite perfections in creation a God that possesses infinite perfections.

It is clear that Aquinas' interpretation of Romans 1 includes the notion that persons can come to know that God exists, since that God must be the first cause, the prime mover, the highest and most noble thing, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. In other words, all persons can have a concept of the true God, no matter how attenuated. The question is, how is this unnuanced concept of God connected to the Triune God of Christianity? Aquinas is aware that Christianity, for the most part, chose not to attempt a proof for God's existence, but simply assumed that God exists and built theologies on the ontological foundation. Christian theology is better and more complete

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[16] "The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence. Sensible creatures are effects of God which are less than typical of the power of their cause, so knowing them does not lead us to understand the whole power of God and thus we do not see his essence. They are nevertheless effects depending from a cause, and so we can at least be led from then to know of God that he exists and that he has whatever must belong to the first cause of all things which is beyond all that is caused. Thus we know about his relation to creatures—that he is the cause of them all; about the difference between him and them—that nothing created is in him and that his lack of such things is not a deficiency in him but due to his transcendence." Aquinas, *ST* 3, 41.

than theologies of other religious traditions, and contains a necessary element of natural theology at its base.[17] This is the so-called two-tier model of the knowledge of God to which I will now turn using the famous debate between neo-orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (1889–1966).

4.3 The Emil Brunner-Karl Barth Debate

Beginning with his influential *Commentary on Romans* in 1919, Karl Barth embarked on a theological programme that would help alter the trajectory of all Christian theological endeavours of the twentieth century. Barth was concerned over a great number of issues, but one that exercised him the most was over what he felt was the overweening errors of liberal Protestantism, and how they had made Christians and the church prisoners of the context and culture in which they found themselves. He rejected the theological predominance of either Christian epistemology or anthropology for a dialectical theology which favoured clarity and confession over abstraction and pluralism. Many of Barth's critics vilified him for what they believed was a thoroughgoing anti-intellectualism that ignored key questions rather than addressing them head on. The battle Barth would have with the Protestant theological establishment of his day continued until his death.

Barth's turn to dialectic was by no means unitary, but it was he who popularized the movement along with his German compatriots Friedrich Gogarten (1887–1967) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). For this reason dialectical theology should not be viewed as a homogeneous movement. In 1934 Barth had a serious disagreement with fellow dogmatician Emil Brunner over the question of natural theology, one of the classic

[17] Ziegler, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity," 138.

theological conundrums plaguing Protestant theology through much of the twentieth century. Brunner had published a little monograph he titled *Nature and Grace: A Contribution to the Discussion with Karl Barth* in which he carefully laid out views on the subject of natural theology. He divided his work into six proofs, which will be summarized below.

First, God's material image has been lost in persons by virtue of the Fall into sin, that is as it pertains to original righteousness and free will. While the material image is lost, the formal image—that which ensures that humans are humans, and not something else—is retained. That the formal image should remain requires that humanity shall remain superior in all creation, that humans shall be rational creatures able to communicate in words, and that humans have responsibility for themselves, others, and creation. Brunner's human being is a sinner, but despite the stain of sin remains a person capable of being redeemed.[18]

Brunner's second proof for the existence of natural theology was the obvious imprint of the creator God has placed on His creation. The world itself serves as revelation of and communication from God who leaves notice of Himself in the materiality of creation. The Fall did not erase humanity's natural perception of revelation, but distorts the ability to see God's desire and will. In other words, human beings must be conscious of the will of God to be responsible for the sins they commit. For this reason, revelation must be of two sources, one universal form and the other revelation in Christ, but the challenge, for Brunner, is what it might take to theologically reconcile the two. At the very least, Brunner finds it obvious that universal (natural) theology and revelation (supernatural) in Christ are distinct.

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[18] Brunner, *Natural Theology*, 25.

> According to St. Paul the revelation of God in his creation would be sufficient for everyone to know therein the Creator according to his majesty and wisdom. But sin dulls man's sight so much that instead of God he "knows" or "fancies" gods. We may correctly characterize the objective and subjective factors thus: man misinterprets the revelation of God in creation and turns it into idols.[19]

Nevertheless, Christians can see God in creation, and thus be redeemed through a double revelation. But, Brunner adds, "Only the Christian, i.e. the man who stands within the revelation of Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God."[20]

Brunner's third and fourth proofs speak to the reality of God's preserving grace in the world. Brunner contends that a "general" or "preservative" grace exists which is operative in the world and which God utilizes to preserve the fallen creation and the creatures within it. This preserving grace must itself be revealed, so Brunner proposes that constantly operative human ordinances and traditions such as marriage and nationality reveal the grace of God and thus the benevolence of the God behind them. These ordinances are created to respond to human need, and can be properly understood through the eyes of faith. Even though perception of God and His grace are not available to non-Christians, natural theology allows that they can know some of what is necessary to be holy.[21]

Fifthly, Brunner proposes the reality of a "point of contact" which serves as an entry point for the grace of the redeeming God. He writes, "No one who agrees that only human subjects but not sticks and stones can receive the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can deny that there is such a thing as a point of contact for the divine grace of redemption."[22] This point of contact is the formal *imago Dei*, which even the worst of

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[19] Brunner, *Natural Theology,* 26.
[20] Brunner, *Natural Theology,* 27.
[21] Brunner, *Natural Theology,* 31.
[22] Brunner, *Natural Theology,* 31.

sinners has not entirely lost, and enables them in their natural state to comprehend language in the form of words, and be wholly responsible for their actions. This responsibility can be traced back to Paradise, where humanity's progenitors lost their original righteousness and were assigned status as moral beings, knowing good and evil. It is this knowledge of good and evil that makes true repentance for sin a Kantian categorical imperative. Thus, the innate, natural knowledge of the Law of God and His eternal will is inherently dialectical. Natural man comprehends the natural law while being simultaneously ignorant of it. Were persons to know nothing of the law they would cease to be human; if they knew all of the Law, their status as sinner would end. Living in sin precludes knowledge of God, since true knowledge of God requires the abolition of sin. In any case, Brunner declares, the point of contact is not limited to the formal image of God.

> What the natural man knows of God, of the law and of his own dependence upon God, may be very confused and distorted. But even so it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace. This is also proved by the fact that on the whole the New Testament did not create new words, but uses those that were created by the religious consciousness of the pagans.[23]

Further, when Scripture refers to the death of the "old man" the "old Adam," Brunner believes those correspond to the material, human side of persons, and not the formal, divine aspect.

In his final proof Brunner discusses what role, if any, this view of natural theology might play in the theological development of the church. Natural theology's closest connection may be in theological ethics, which explores such topics as orders of creation and the essence and quality of Christian love. Natural theology also has implications for dogmatics, since it allows for the use analogy in discussions concerning

[23] Brunner, *Natural Theology,* 32–33.

God. Lastly, natural theology possesses pragmatic value since the Church's proclamation of the Gospel is dependent upon a remnant of God's image remaining so that comprehension of the message is possible. That humans are responsible beings also requires that they engage and interact with non-Christians and unbelievers to share the Gospel message of salvation in and through Christ.

Barth's terse response to Brunner's defence of natural theology was as certain to occur as it was sharp in its tone. Barth has no tolerance for Brunner's argumentation, declaring natural theology to be "every (positive and negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, that is to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture."[24] Barth believed his position on natural theology to be so antithetical to Brunner's that he refused to allow it to exist as a unique topic for theological debate. Brunner may portray his position as consistent with the *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* principles of Protestantism, Barth charges, but in developing such a doctrine of natural theology he has most certainly given up on both. For example, for knowledge of God to be available beyond the Word of God, by which Barth means Holy Scripture, then one must deny *sola scriptura* as the source of all salvific realization.

> No, when [Brunner] speaks of the God who can be and is "somehow" known through creation, Brunner does unfortunately mean the one true God, the triune creator of heaven and earth, who justifies us through Christ and sanctifies us through the Holy Spirit. It is he who is *de facto* known by all men without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, though knowledge of him is distorted and dimmed and darkened by sin, though he is "misrepresented" and "turned into idols."[25]

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[24] Barth, *Natural Theology,* 74–75, emphasis original.
[25] Barth, *Natural Theology,* 81–82.

Barth reads into Brunner's compositions an imperfect preparatory phase toward service to God in which natural revelation leads humanity stepwise toward the perfect complete phase of divine revelation and, presumably, life in the Church. This is antithetical to scripture, in Barth's estimation, as is Brunner's claim humans can know God from His creation without Christ and the Holy Spirit but can do nothing to earn their salvation?

Barth next addresses Brunner's concepts of "preserving grace" and the orders of creation. For Barth it is trite and simplistic to argue that a natural human's instinct or reason would lead to a desire for, or even knowledge of, the institution of marriage. Brunner must declare sovereign grace null, since his concept of a point of contact has made grace somehow dependent on human beings and their "preparation" for grace's arrival. If this were not so, Barth continues, all of Brunner's subsequent musings on man as a moral being and his capability of communication through words would be purposeless. Barth would sooner rely upon the simple proclamation of the Christian message of sins forgiven by grace through faith, rather than the potential and presuppositions of humanity that they should accept the Gospel and be saved.[26] For Barth, Brunner serves as an unfortunate apologist for nineteenth century historians of religions such as von Harnack and Troeltsch, who elevated the status of humanity so that they need not pay heed to and obey God.

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[26] Barth, *Natural Theology,* 121.

4.4 Lutherans on General Revelation

4.4.1 Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

Notwithstanding the Biblical indictment summarized above, the Lutheran Confessions do identify and teach natural revelation of God. This revelation is two-pronged: knowledge of the existence of a God, and a weak knowledge of His will. The *Book of Concord* contains few direct direct allusions to natural theology, and most of these are in connection with natural knowledge of the Law. The *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* holds that the Law of God is imprinted on the hearts and minds of all human beings, and for this reason it must be said that humans have a "working" comprehension of that Law. The Decalogue themselves are written on all hearts, but can provide only an obscure realization that God exists, and nothing of His will for us, which comes only in and through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The *Solid Declaration* contains the following on free will:

> Even though human reason or natural intellect may still have a dim spark of knowledge that a god exists (as Romans 1 states) or of the teaching of the law, nevertheless it is ignorant, blind, and perverted so that even when the most skillful and learned people on earth read or hear the Gospel of God's Son and the promise of eternal salvation, they still cannot comprehend, grasp, understand, or believe it on the basis of their own powers; they cannot regard it as the truth. Instead, the more assiduously and diligently they exert themselves and want to comprehend these spiritual matters with their reason, the less they understand or believe.[27]

Although Luther did not expend great energy on the soteriological status of the non-Christian religions, he did refer specifically to the religions' relationship with God in the *Large Catechism*, particularly in his explanations of the Decalogue and the Creed.

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[27] *SD* II, 9.

Luther begins his treatment of the First Commandment by characterizing what it means to "have a god" with expression of *fiducia* (trust) in anything that is not the true God.[28] He admits that all persons, on some level, have observed some form of divine worship of a unique god from whom they expect to receive benefits, assistance and succor. But this pagan (Luther's term) worship, wherever it is practiced, is tantamount to idolatry. He writes,

> Even in the mind of all the pagans, trust is false and wrong, for it is not placed in the one God, apart from whom there truly is false and wrong, for it is not placed I the one God, apart from whom there truly is no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the pagans actually fashion their own fancies and dreams about God into an idol and rely on an empty nothing. So it is with idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation form creatures, saints or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.[29]

Natural humanity, without revelation of God's saving will in Christ, can do nothing more than erect idols.

Luther is more direct with respect to the differences between Christianity and the religions in his explanation of the Apostles' Creed:

> These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the

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[28] Confessional Lutherans never transmogrify faith into a divisive or exclusionary code, but rather extend the reality of the divine life to all. If faith is less about grasping the certainty of absolute truth and more about ongoing openness to further presentations of truth, this will have implications in the development of a useful and relevant theology of religions. Each person must have the capacity to allow another being to dwell within them without bankrupting their own uniqueness and sense of self. In fact, in order to be wholly in touch with Being in the fullest sense, the individual must allow himself to be entirely assumed by another greater than himself. Consciousness is thus determined not by knowing *a priori* but by being known dialogically through specific revelation. This indwelling would be specifically Trinitarian, an outgrowth of the *imago Dei* pronounced in Genesis.

[29] Luther, *LC* I,19-21.

> Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[30]

In recent years Lutheran divines have speculated as to what this rather sharp condemnation might indicate. One universalizing view intimates that Luther had in mind that all traditions of faith, and therefore all adherents of those traditions, direct their worship to the same, one, true God. This Hickian position cannot be accepted, however, because to interpret this passage in a universalist mode would create an unacceptable contradiction with anti-idolatry statements like the one from *Large Catechism* referred to above. Not only that, as John Nordling points out, the English translations from the original German were not without error. Nordling challenges what he calls an editorial insertion in many English translations of the definite article before "one, true God," as well as the traditional translation of *glauben einen wahrhaftigen Gott* as "believe in *the* one, true God." In Luther's time native German speakers distinguished between *glauben an* (believe *in*) and *glauben* plus an accusative object (believe *that*).[31] If the Latin translation of the *Large Catechism,* which seems to have picked up the nuance, a more accurate translation of the passage would be "all who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe that there is only one, true God and worship him—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them."

Luther, and the Lutheran Confessions, refuse to equate the gods of the non-Christian traditions with the one, true God.[32] The natural knowledge of God, insofar as it

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[30] Luther, *LC* II, 66.
[31] Zeigler, "Natural knowledge of God and the Trinity," 151.
[32] "Yet all this, which looks so very like injustice in God, and which has been represented as such with arguments that no human reason or light of nature can resist, is very easily dealt with in the light of the

exists, is a dim spark of recognition, present in all persons, of the existence of a God. The natural law which is universally present in fallen humanity, is a component part of general revelation, but by no means its sum total. Natural law speaks to the reality of creative essence in the universe which may be embraced or ignored;[33] innate knowledge of the divine law in general revelation discloses that this creative essence requires moral behaviour and sacrifice, even worship, but reveals nothing of God's gracious attitude in and through Jesus Christ. Thus, religious practice can be morally upright and sincere, but without special revelation it will always be little more than idolatry.

> Natural law includes actual though obscure knowledge of the fact that God is, but only Christ provides us with true knowledge of Him. The same point of view appears in the Confessions. The heathen, the Turks, and the Jews know that God is, but they do not know what He is really like in the essence of His being. The Confessions emphasise the *defectiveness* of the natural knowledge of God; it provides a false picture of God and therefore promotes works-righteousness. They do not so much stress the lack of natural knowledge of God as they do its falseness. The natural knowledge of God sets forth a distorted picture of Him. It is incapable of showing us the God who justifies and saves from sin.[34]

The Confessions go no further on the subjects of natural theology and general revelation, most certainly due to the fact the question was not under scrutiny in the early years of the Reformation. They may also have felt that speculation on the degree to which general revelation may be salvific must inevitably lead to dogmatic error.

Gospel and the knowledge of grace, by which we are taught that although the ungodly flourish in their bodies, they lose their souls." *LW* 33, 291.

[33] "Through his powers of reason, man has the ability to understand what God has commanded in the Second Table of the Decalog, though only to a limited extent. When forced to make a concrete decision, man has a congenital power of judgment, *iudicium*, which enables him to distinguish between right and wrong. He can obey parents and superiors, refrain from murder, adultery, and theft. In addition to this, he possesses knowledge of God, and he can worship Him in an external manner."

[34] Fagerberg, *A new look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529–1537)*, 66–67.

4.4.2 Franz Pieper

Franz Pieper, in the early twentieth century, provided a concise summary of North American Lutheran dogmatics with his *Christian Dogmatics.* In his treatment of revelation, he averred that all humans know, by virtue of their collective fallen nature, that there exists a God who is personal, eternal and almighty, the Ruler of the universe Who is holy and just, demanding good and punishing evil. This God is known naturally from three foundational sources. First, creation bears the stamp of being God-fashioned, as declared in Romans 1: "The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." Humankind need only observe the works of creation to witness God's omnipotence and eternal nature. Pieper notes that even among pagan, non-Christian philosophers, the same or similar language pertaining to God is used.[35]

Second, creation demonstrates God's continuous and benevolent activity in nature and human history. God has given humanity the power of self-determination, while offering ample witness of His existence in the realm of nature. God fashioned the human race from a single progenitor to occupy and subdue the entirety of creation. History's purpose is that all persons—individually and corporately—should seek the Lord and find Him according to God's good purposes. Third, Scripture declares that the Law of God has been written on every individual heart. God approaches people in the vagaries of history through actions and events outside of them. At the same time, the holy and righteous God maintains a constant direct encounter with humanity through the understanding of the Law within human nature.[36]

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[35] Pieper, *CD* 1, 371.
[36] Pieper, *CD* 1, 372.

For Pieper, the nature of revelation is of less import than whether that revelation is received by faith or cognition. All forms of non-Christian religion—crass atheism, pantheism, agnosticism and the like—suppresses or denies any natural knowledge of God in favour of humankind's "love of immorality." In order to reject the existence of God, Pieper opines, persons have to grasp the truth in unrighteousness and quell the obvious presence of God's invisible nature and His eternal deity and power. The question, however, is the degree to which humans can suppress the natural knowledge of God, so that fails to function or disappears entirely. Pieper does not answer specifically, but considers the case of the "atheist," a self-contradictory state, who displays a deliberate and settled conviction in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. "Though the mind of a wicked person may be put to sleep and fall into a stupor, so that it no longer thinks about God, it is impossible to conceive of anyone whose conscience will not finally assert itself and in the very hour of death accuse man of having ignored God."[37]

Another question raised concerns the source of natural knowledge of God: is such knowledge innate or acquired? Romans 2:15 indicates that the Law of God, as distinct from the Gospel, is implanted in the hearts of all persons, thus declaring Gentiles to be in need of the gracious divine hand as much as Jews who have always recognized it. Natural man has the ability to put this innate knowledge into practice, or to augment it, by contemplation of the universe; this is referred to as acquired knowledge of God. Both innate and acquired knowledge of God are present in human beings, innate knowledge present at the initial moment of consciousness, and acquired knowledge through the evolution of innate knowledge by virtue of reasoning and contemplation of created things or the works of God in creation. No matter the ratio of innate to acquired knowledge,

[37] Pieper, *CD* 1, 373.

Pieper intimates, neither can nor should be declared sufficient ground for saving faith.[38] Natural knowledge of God can do no more than arouse the conscience to recognize the curse of original sin, and impotence in providing a cure.

Pieper does find some positive value in natural knowledge of God, albeit in non-salutary manners. Natural knowledge is the catalyst for what Luther termed "civil righteousness" (*iustitia civilis*), which is the foundation upon which all earthly orders and social relations are built. The Church is served by those exercising civil righteousness, insofar as they benefit all persons as they practice their vocations. Most importantly, natural knowledge acts necessarily as a point of contact between the human heart and the true Law of God. Consciences could not be touched and individual sin condemned unless natural knowledge of God preceded His Law. The human soul, in its compromised and blurred state, is not predisposed to the Law of God, so it must be overwhelmed with the preaching of the Law and "cannot help confessing that we must, as the Commandments read, honour, love, and serve God, for He alone is good and does good not only to the pious, but also to the wicked."[39] Thus, natural knowledge of God and what Pieper terms Christian, or supernatural, knowledge of God, are mutually exclusive doctrinal elements,[40] but the former must precede the latter, the Law declaring the Gospel absolutely essential.

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[38] Pieper, *CD* I, 373.
[39] Pieper, *CD* I, 374–375.
[40] "The natural knowledge of God, as Luther says, enables us to know God, as it were, from without, from His works, just as we learn something of the character of the builder from the quality of the house he builds. Holy Scripture, however, which is God's Word to man, gives us the Christian knowledge of God; it reveals God's inner being, the gracious purposes in the mind of God, just as one man reveals his true nature, his feelings, and the thoughts of his heart to another by his spoken words. Modern theology attempts to erase this vast difference between the natural and the Christian knowledge of God." Pieper, *CD* I, 377–378.

4.4.3 Wolfhart Pannenberg

Wolfhart Pannenberg's treatment of natural theology and general revelation begins as it did for Pieper—with the recognition that all persons know the God of the Gospel from creation, although identification of this God is never immediate, nor is it confirmed by experience. Natural theology conveys some truth about the God of grace even to those who are not seeking nor wishing to learn anything about a unique and personal God. This knowledge of God is "imputed" to us in and through the Gospel, and may override carefully crafted visions of the world and the individual's place within it. In other words, natural theology makes its appeal by compelling humanity to act as witnesses against themselves and in favour of the true God.[41] Pannenberg is aware of the tension that exists here, and proposes that the knowledge of God is external through the Gospel, and internal through knowledge that is innate.

What is the connection, Pannenberg asks, between natural knowledge of God and human conscience? Early philosophers of mind equated conscience with self-awareness, the experience of having knowledge of one's deeds distinct from observers. Later scholars chose to separate conscience as a practical self-awareness from a theoretical self-awareness of personal identity, the "I." This distinction is necessary since conscience is not unitary, but a group of feelings of self present in all persons in an overt or repressed state implying a possible positive or negative identity. Conscience, then, is the relationship to the totality of life in which subject and object are not entirely differentiated. For Pannenberg, conscience may be likened to the relationship between a newborn infant and her mother. In the initial stages there exists no real conscious distinction between the two, particularly in an emotional sense which moves through

[41] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 108. Hereafter *ST.*

several stages of individual life before it finds some form of continuation. Likewise, the initial stages of differentiation between the individual human and God is one of symbiosis, wherein singular identity is gradually replaced by self-relation in the form of desires. Once the symbiotic relationship begins to dissolve, humanity's primary desire is for actual comprehension of and association with the God of the Gospel.[42]

Pannenberg correctly asserts that a distinction exists between Luther as a young doctor and the more mature Reformer with respect to natural knowledge of God. The young Luther compared intellectual faith (*intellectus fidei*) to a relative but true knowledge of God, although such knowledge does not equate to saving faith (*fides divina*). In the *Larger Catechism* Luther avers that the same *fiducia* produces both trust in God and trust in an idol. All human faith is composed of true and false faith together, which Luther declares to be idolatry. Both options may become realities as human beings choose whom to declare our personal God. The choice, however, must be made, since we persons must rest their allegiance on something objective to ourselves. Moreover, the choice does not itself decide who is the true God.

Fiducia presupposes a discrepancy between the self and the world. Faith as trust is developed over time, but prior to this the individual recognizes in herself a "symbiotic relation" with life.[43] This symbiosis is the foundation for an awareness of the creative

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[42] Pannenberg, *ST* I, 112.

[43] Balthasar rejected a "flat" definition of faith as assent to theoretical knowledge pertaining to God. The glory of God is made available by faith (*fiducia cordis*), and that which draws humankind into that glory is grace (*gratia*). Faith is a form of knowledge unto itself, a contemplation of the deep mysteries of the sacred that evolves into a personal and close correlation between the contingent and the eternal. This correlation is established by God Himself in and through His Son Jesus who draws all men to Himself. Knowledge, on the other hand, is an encounter with this personal God on a cognitive, voluntary level. There is no knowledge without faith, but there is also no faith without knowledge. Balthasar, "*Pistis* and *Gnosis*," 35–52.

reality that Pannenberg likens to direct knowledge of God.[44] That the symbiotic relation is demonstrably indefinite implies the concept of the infinite, since indefinite things can be made definite only insofar as they are made definite by the infinite. To intuit the infinite should not be construed as a unique awareness of God, but at the very least would result in reflection on a potential divine being fully differentiated from humanity. "Only in the process of experience, as we achieve distinct knowledge of finite things and the finitude of the self, do we attain to an express awareness of the gods and God. We develop this awareness in the course of life, in the process of experience in the broad sense as experience of the world, of the forces that are at work in it and that transcend worldly things."[45]

Awareness, in Pannenberg's view, cannot be likened to a religious *a priori* or experience of the sacred which precedes experience. This is in stark contrast to the positions of Troeltsch, Nygren, and Otto, who spoke to a greater or lesser degree of an innate sensation of the infinite. Pannenberg would not allow such subjectivity to inform the sense of the Holy—only actual experience of God by special revelation from the Holy can bring a sense of the Holy. The experience of God, and the awareness of God it engenders, is not the natural theology introduced by philosophy. The reason for this is that philosophical natural theology has not existed from the beginning of creation. On the other hand, an awareness of God has always been present, linked to the elements of creation.

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[44] Faith is a divine-human encounter mediated through the revelation of Jesus Christ. To desire such encounter does in no way imply a crass and uncritical pluralism which tears down particulars in favour of a "soft" agreement between religious worlds. Rather, confessional Lutherans defend historic Christian particularism over against the religions, culminating with the unique revelation of Jesus Christ brought forth in the history of the people of Israel for the benefit of all.

[45] Pannenberg, *ST* I, 114.

> When, therefore, we refer to Paul's statement about the knowledge of God from the works of creation to the religions, we cannot conclude that they are all from the root up no more than idolatry. In them there is knowledge of the true God through creation, though again and again, of course, there is also the exchanging of the incorruptible God for creaturely things. The one-sided exposition of Rom. 1:19 – 20 solely in terms of the natural theology of the philosophers has contributed to a one-sidedly negative assessment of non-Christian religions in the history of Christian theology. Today we have to correct this false development and arrive at a more nuanced judgment on the world of the religions.[46]

Pannenberg wishes to traverse a middle course between a natural theology universalism and a special revelation exclusivism. There is knowledge of God in creation, but to perceive personal connection to that God requires revelation which substitutes the divine for the mortal in time and in reality. Natural theology is not salvific; general revelation may be.

4.5 Is Natural Theology or General Revelation Salvific?

The question still must be addressed: is natural theology or general revelation sufficient for salvation? Traditional, confessional Lutherans have almost universally maintained that special revelation is necessary for salvation to be assured. How and if God chooses to work directly has not been of primary concern. We have seen Luther and Pieper reject the notion of salvific general revelation. Brunner seems open to saving knowledge of God available in a general fashion, while Barth rejected the notion of a general revelation entirely. Pannenberg leaves the question open. For the remainder of this chapter I will offer some biblical and confessional materials in defense of the historic Lutheran position.

In this chapter I have chosen to eschew a thorough exegetical treatment of the pertinent Scripture references that pertain to natural theology, general revelation or

[46] Pannenberg, *ST* I, 117–118.

special revelation. Far too much needs to be addressed, and lay outside the parameters of this work. At this point it is enough to assert that Scripture does proffer a position on these issues. In Romans 1 the apostle Paul declares that all persons, Jew and Gentile alike, are sinners in the eyes of God. At the same time, Gentiles cannot claim ignorance of the Law of God, since He has revealed Himself to them, albeit in a manner that is open to conjecture and opinion. Gentiles are, therefore, under the same curse and liable for the same punishment as those with the Law of Moses. What is revealed to them Paul describes as "invisible attributes" (αόρατα αυτου) which is unsubtle polemic against the pagans of his day that worshipped material objects they themselves erected.[47] In any case, God does not remain "invisible," beyond sensory perception, but graciously enables humanity to perceive His power and eternality, and thereby come to an acceptance that a divine Being exists, and this Being is ontologically distinct from all that humanity experiences. Idolatry, then, is not the fate of unbelievers, but guilt expressed as the worshipping of false gods. That many reject this changes nothing about the one who reveals Himself.

Paul continues his examination of natural theology in Romans 2, in which he warns members of the tribe of Israel against adopting a superior attitude to the Gentiles, since possession of the Law does not offer any advantage with respect to their relationship with God. The εθνη to which Paul refers are not defined by him, but they could be 1) Gentiles that know the law and are saved apart from explicit faith in Christ, 2) Gentiles who fulfill some parts of the Law but are not saved, or 3) Gentiles who are saved by Christ Who fulfills the Law in their stead. Luther's conviction was that option 2 best represented the correct interpretation of these passages. In addition, Paul obliquely

[47] Zeigler, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity," 145.

alludes to some universal phenomenon he feels must be responsible for the moral consciousness of humankind, although he fails to disclose just what this phenomenon might be.[48] Paul does not mean to suggest that all Gentiles have a perfect knowledge of the Law, and can therefore fulfill its demands. More likely Paul is speaking of a certainty of knowledge pertaining to God's holy and eternal will, and the attendant behaviour that is consistent with that knowledge. Unfortunately, Paul does not give clues as to how far this knowledge may extend, but clearly he believes Gentiles are confronted by the will of God in the law, and an undeclared number of them repent and believe the Gospel.

Paul's sermon in Acts 17 may be the quintessential biblical referent to a natural theology. In this case Paul is not garnering an appeal to reason in order to elicit faith in the existence of God. The problem Paul addresses with the Athenians is not atheism, but idolatry. He praises the townsfolk for their religiosity, and then utilizes the altar to an "Unknown God" as proof that while they may be deeply pious people, their sacrifices, philosophies and speculations indicate they worship a being of which they have no knowledge. Paul's God does not rest in temples, nor is He worshipped by hands. Since He needs nothing that humanity could offer, He gives without measure and expects nothing in return. Gärtner construes this to signify that all that is made has a unique and valuable purpose, which precludes the notion that God acts capriciously or arbitrarily. Paul argues this convincingly, declaring that God established all the nations in order that they should dwell on the earth in the land He provides, and to "cleave to Him" and "inquire about Him." "Man must be heedful of the revelation, and from the knowledge of God gained thereby will then spring a rightful worship of God."[49]

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[48] Zeigler, "Natural knowledge of God and the Trinity," 147.
[49] Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation,* 158.

Gärtner further declares that the two clauses in verse 27, "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him," require special attention. The second phrase is not a simple indicative, but rather an optative, signaling something potential, not actual. Seeking, then, will be at best uncertain, and a positive result at least as likely as a negative one.[50] To "feel their way," as the ESV translates, gives the sense of fumbling in darkness in like manner to a blind person's daily experience of life without sight. Paul is declaring that the only power possessed by humanity directed to knowing God is akin groping for Him in utter darkness. It is clear that caution must be exercised against making too generous a claim as to humankind's ability to attain knowledge of God through natural revelation.

Psalm 19 has long been considered the *locus classicus* in the OT on the subject of general revelation. Here God's glory is said to be revealed clearly by the work of His hands.

> The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. Psalm 19:1–4a

In the Psalm as a whole, "wordless speech" is contrasted with and supplemented by God's Word in the Torah. Thus there is unity to God's revelation in creation and Torah, but a unity in which there is not only a distinct qualitative difference between these two modes of revelation, but also an order, that God's general revelation of Himself in creation can only be understood in the context of special revelation. There remains the objective nature of creation revelation, which is still a universal declaration. The handiwork is God's "line" which is universally revealed. This term, however, is more

[50] Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech,* 159.

often associated with God's justice and judgment, that is, a measuring rod which brings His justice to bear on the nations.

In Romans 1 and 2, Paul is moving inward in a series of concentric circles. He begins in 1:18 with the whole of humanity, to humanity apart from special revelation (1:19–32), to the "righteous person," mainly among the Jews (2:1–16), thus placing everyone under the judgment of God. Paul's argument concerning general revelation is deeply negative and pessimistic. He attacks the Gentiles first, but then shockingly indicts the Jews as well. There is no explicit mention of salvation anywhere in the passage. Why, then, *must* salvation be potentially implicit in this general revelation? To aver such is to suggest that condemnation and salvation are of the same fundamental material. The commission of one sin can render a man inexcusable, but one carefully enacted good work is by no means sufficient to save him. The Gentiles were guilty because they chased false gods in place of the true God that they knew, or at least could know, from the revelation of nature. Yet it is inappropriate to infer from this that the knowledge of that one true God is absolutely sufficient for salvation. Idolatry is sufficient for condemnation, but the avoidance of it will not suffice for salvation.

Romans 1:20 is concerned with "God's eternal power and divine nature." In other words, there is knowledge of God embedded in and manifested from creation, but it is of a "general" and limited nature. Paul refers to God's invisible qualities, or that which is inaccessible to human eyes. His "power" and "divine nature" are virtues which determine His relationship to humankind. "Eternal power" shows that God bears up all things, that man lives by His might, and man is totally dependent upon Him, as Schleiermacher declared.

Where and to whom Paul is speaking in Romans 2:14–16 are key questions with respect to general revelation, and the development of a theology of religions. John Sanders has suggested that among Paul's audience are those who demonstrate saving faith, but do so outside the boundaries of the institutional church.[51] The text and context, however, would lead to a different conclusion. In the context of Romans the universality and depth of sin run throughout the letter, and serve as the end of Paul's argument which began in earnest at 1:18. To state that Paul is promoting a works-based soteriology would be inconsistent with the climax of the argument in Romans 3, wherein Paul is unequivocal that justification is by grace through faith alone. Romans 2, then, cannot mean that people can be saved independent of the Gospel.

Daniel Strange is correct to state that here Paul is referring to "Gentile unbelievers who do not have special revelation but general revelation, in terms of morality, which condemns and does not save."[52] Since they are sinners, Gentiles would attempt to suppress the testimony of the Holy Spirit within and around them. Nevertheless, they cannot entirely keep the Spirit's testimony from being effective.[53] There is involuntary conformity to some of the requirements of the Law in their moral choices. As Paul has already stated, the Law is written on their hearts, and as they are image-bearers of God, they must act in some manner in accordance. All persons, to some extent, do the works of the Law which is written on their hearts. They may appear to do what obedience to the Law requires, without a true motive or a true purpose.

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[51] Sanders, *No Other Name,* 67–68.
[52] Strange, *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 62.
[53] From the resurrection until the consummation, the Spirit acts as the unifying medium between heaven and earth as well as between Father and Son. This unifying activity carries the additional responsibility of "universalizing" Jesus in history and "interpreting" the Son to the world. Jesus' earthly mission was decidedly limited; the Spirit makes the mission "catholic." Every historical epoch and unique and valid experience of the sacred gains its credibility by the Spirit Who reveals Christ.

Romans 10 has often been used as a biblical impetus for missionary work, as it seems to argue in favour of preaching of the Gospel so that men and women might be saved. Inclusivists like Sanders, however, use this text variously to support their claim that mankind can be saved by general revelation.[54] Sanders has argued regarding verse 9: ""That if you confess with mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" does not necessarily entail that those who do not confess will not be saved because "If A, then B" does not necessarily mean "If not A, then not B.""[55] The problem with Sanders' logic is that he assumes that the two classes do not precisely coincide—he assumes his conclusion ahead of time. But exegetically the coincidence of both classes is exactly what Paul presupposes. For Paul, calling upon the true God is impossible without belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

To whom is Paul speaking in verses 14 to 18? To argue for a "Gospel according to nature," wherein it is possible to be ontologically saved without being epistemologically aware of Christ, depends on Paul's objects being Gentiles, the ones that have received no special revelation. Many commentaries on Romans, including John Grothe's self-published work,[56] argue that Paul is referring either to Israelites exclusively or mainly. If Grothe *et al* are correct, this passage becomes somewhat irrelevant because Israelites received not only general revelation but also special revelation.

If one were to take these passages as a group, the first thing noticed is that general revelation of the works of God, but without a revealed "supplement" these works remain

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[54] Thiessen, *Who Can be Saved?,* 265.
[55] Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Saviour*, 144–145.
[56] Grothe, *The Justification of the Ungodly Volume II,* 533–552.

abstract and unclear. We do not denigrate general revelation by making this observation. God's works have always required His words to unmask them.[57]

> Special revelation is needed because special grace is needed. An intense knowledge of one's own unworthiness and a determination to do better, even *with* the Gospel, is not salvific. Faith must be consciously placed in the Gospel of Jesus [Christ]. The difference here is the difference between knowing the standard for which man was made and receiving God's provision for the standard breaker. *It is the difference between law and Gospel.*[58]

Furthermore, sinners need the regenerating power of the Gospel in order to know God as Creator and Redeemer, and general revelation is an inappropriate vehicle for such power because knowledge of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is not contained in it.

What, then, is the purpose of general revelation if it is not salvific? Considered independently, the purpose of general revelation is unclear. When related to special revelation and the wider purposes of God, however, it serves a crucial purpose. In the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Melanchthon speaks approvingly of a "righteousness of reason" (*iustitia rationis*) as honourable works prescribed in the Decalogue.

> God wants those who live according to the flesh to be restrained by such civil discipline, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments and penalties. And to a certain extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own powers, although it is often shackled by its natural weakness and by the devil, who drives it to shameful acts. Moreover, we willingly give this righteousness of the reason the praises it deserves, for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this, as Aristotle rightly said, "Neither the evening star nor the morning star is more beautiful than righteousness." God even honours it with temporal rewards. *Still, it ought not be praised at Christ's expense. For it is false that we merit the forgiveness of sins through our works.*[59]

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[57] "...God's 'revelation by deed' without God's revelation in the Word, remains an 'undecipherable hieroglyph.'" Pieper, *CD* I, 302.
[58] Strange, "General Revelation: Sufficient or Insufficient?" 68. Emphasis mine.
[59] Kolb, *Book of Concord, Apology* IV, 22, 124.

The Apology, then, does not assign general salvific effect, but allows that under certain circumstances general revelation may provide the background for God's redemption in Christ. "The Law written into the heart of man serves as the point of contact when the Church preaches the Law. Luther [writes],

> If the Natural Law had not been inscribed and placed by God into the heart, one would have to preach a long time before the consciences are touched; to a donkey, horse, ox, cow, one would have to preach 100,000 years before they would accept the Law in spite of the fact that they have ears, eyes, and heart, as man had; they can also hear it, but it does not touch their heart. Why? What is at fault? Their soul is not so constituted and formed that this preaching would take hold. But when the Law is propounded to man, he soon says: Yes, it is so; I cannot deny it. Of this validity he could not be convinced so quickly were it not for the fact that the Law is written in his heart. Since, however, it is already in his heart cannot help confessing that we must, at the Commandments read, honour, love and serve God, for He alone is good and does good not only to the pious but also to the wicked.[60]

4.6 Some Final Comments

The term "revelation" is not unique to Christianity, but exists to a greater or lesser degree in the world's religions. In other words, Christians are not the sole possessors of revelation. The religious world teems with references to theophanies, visions, manifestations of "the spirit," voices of the divine, miracles and so forth. Those religions that place great emphasis on revelation as communication from the divine often use reports of such communication apologetically as proof of the religion's veracity and authority. The individual or individuals to whom the revelation is issued are often viewed as unusually spirit-led. Thus, those religions, such as Christianity, that claim exclusiveness based upon revelation must be cautious, since religious phenomena occur broadly, and "faith" is, for Lutherans, Spirit-granted and Spirit-driven. Why, therefore,

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[60] Pieper, *CD* I, 374–5.

could faith not exist among the non-Christian religions, particularly among those that favour displays of natural and supernatural revelation?

Lutherans, as has been stated above, believe that despite the Fall, human nature is largely intact. If this is so, then natural reason, which flows from human nature, must be intact as well. This opens the way for a sharp rendering of Romans 1, which declares that the natural reason of humankind does not and cannot receive supernatural or special revelation from creation. This inability is not traced to ignorance of natural reason, but to the gravity of the current sinful state in which reason finds itself.[61] Sin has caused humans to become blind to their own sense of createdness, and thus their dependence upon a benevolent God. Sinful men and women do not acknowledge God not turn over to Him the honour He deserves and expects. Humans engage in self-actualization, and will continue to do so until they become the cosmological centre of the universe.

Humankind, in their rationality, want to be sovereign in a land they simply inhabit. God then becomes little more than a functionary, an object of the needs and wants each person identifies. Natural religion, or natural revelation, pronounces itself a powerful manifestation of God, but in fact has become a mere abstraction of true, supernatural revelation which is, for confessional Lutherans, the only basis for religious communion and salvation. God is an object only to Himself, and therefore to know God is to be inserted into God's knowledge of Himself (1 Cor 2:11). Through revelation God brings to humankind a portion of knowledge of Him, but this revelation does not

[61] When Christians fail to distinguish between natural and supernatural revelation, they find the hybrid concept usually cannot account for all forms of revelation described in scripture. For example, the verb "to reveal," along with its noun form "revelation," connote individual supernatural occurrences of interaction with God by speech, action, or some form of divine communication. The Incarnation is the quintessential revelation of God, as scripture declares (Luke 17:30; John 21:1,14; Gal 1:16; Col 3:4; 2 Thes 1:7; 1 Pet 1:7).

augment or enhance flawed human nature (1 Tim 6:16). Human reason can grasp that which is offered by natural revelation, and can make a decision on how best to act on the data. However, that same human reason must be reoriented to God through supernatural revelation, or react harshly and obstinately against it.

> There is a demonstrable, rectilinear, and to that extent nondialectical relation between primitive revelation and the revelation of the Word, between the knowledge of God and Christology. Because man knows of God through God's original manifestation, he cannot be blind to Christ. There is a bridge here which anyone can see and cross. Man should recognize the deity of Christ's Word because he has once heard God's voice. In this sense he must recognize God in Jesus.[62]

In recent years a different attitude toward natural theology, one that seeks to expand the human knowledge base rather than claims status as a source of saving faith. For example, those engaged in creation science are discovering the unfeasibility of "proving" the existence of God from observations of the universe. Rather, they are simply offering some plausible arguments that emerge from a series of conceptual questions. These creation scientists are attempting to refute standard-issue Enlightenment thinking which infers that no "rational" person could believe in a supreme being in general, or accept Christianity in particular.[63] Such humility with respect to natural theology or natural revelation is laudable, but Lutherans are justifiably cautious. The temptation to make pronouncements based upon clever theories, even when they do not violate Scripture, must be avoided. Natural theology, or natural revelation, cannot be held as a substitute for God's Holy Word; the source of natural theology is the Law, and thus it does not contain or teach Gospel. "Natural theology cannot be a substitute or even a parallel to the Bible. Its purpose is as a source of resonance in the nonbeliever with

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[62] Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith Volume II,* 26.
[63] Sennett and Groothuis, *In Defense of Natural Theology,* 10–11.

revealed Christianity—a way to make man's [sic] sinful hatred for God less intellectually credible."[64]

[64] Cochran, "A Way Forward?" 278.

Chapter 5: *Sola Gratia:* Atonement and Redemption in the Lutheran Theology of Religions

In chapter three I lamented the relative paucity of Lutheran sources in the area of the theology of religions. While a few significant Lutheran voices from outside the LCMS-LCC trajectory have laboured in this field, there is still considerable work to be done. Over the last few years, through the study of much scholarly work, I have come to conclude that Lutherans have not shown so much disinterest in this area as commitment to another theological endeavour, namely apologetics. For confessional Lutherans, orthodox Christology prevents speculations on the presence, or lack thereof, of Christ in the religions and their adherents. If theological speculation is allowable at all, it would be in the portion of the *ordo salutis* beyond justification, that is, in the areas of rebirth, enlightenment, conversion, and sanctification.

First, this chapter will briefly survey the history of universalist thought up to Luther and Melanchthon, to show the degree to which modern inclusivists and pluralists have wandered from the orthodox Christian position of salvation in and through Jesus Christ and Him alone. The soft exclusivism confessional Lutheranism purports rejects all the relativism that inclusivism and pluralism implies. Second, I will summarize the key elements of atonement theory, with an eye to establishing the Lutheran position, and offering an apology for it. Third, I will explore the implications of atonement theory, for Lutheran soteriological thought and the development of a uniquely Lutheran theology of religions. Many elements that have been theoretical to this point will become eminently practical, insofar as they apply to an ongoing dialogue between Christianity and the religions, which will be the theme of the concluding Chapter Six of this work.

5.1 Lutherans and Universalism

While it is true that Scripture declares personal trust in Christ alone is absolutely necessary for salvation, it also reveals the will of God to be for the salvation of all persons everywhere and in every time. Neither of these truths have been challenged in this work. Lutherans have, for centuries, assumed the meaning of terms such as "salvation" and "to be saved" are ubiquitous in Christendom, and thus need not be carefully defined. This oversight has caused some challenges in the theology of religions debates. In the case of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, chapter 2 verse 4, the traditional rendering of the Greek verb *sosthenai* is "to be saved," as in "God wills all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." The Greek could be taken for a temporal period (to be saved from something or someone here), for eternal salvation outside of time, or a hybrid of both.[1] In either case, *sosthenai* may support the concept of *universal* grace which points to universal salvation, or *sovereign* grace, which more accurately depicts the views of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. Grace is most certainly universal, provided it is understood as a universal motion and offer, and not an ontological rendering which cannot be refused.

Luther, along with his contemporary John Calvin, rejected any doctrine of human free will that attempts to explain, perhaps sympathetically, the reason why so few are saved and so many are damned. Erasmus of Rotterdam, consistent with the humanism of his time, suggested that since God wills the salvation of all, and not all are saved, that some degree of human free will must exist so an individual choice can be made for God or against Him. Of the Lutheran scholars of the generation following the Reformation,

[1] Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 176–179.

most followed Luther on the subject of universal salvation, which I have already examined at length, while Melanchthon preferred a mediating position related to his view that individual cooperation with proffered grace means humankind takes some responsibility for their eternal situation, either positively or negatively. A good deal of modern Lutheran synods, particularly among the churches of the Lutheran World Federation, have followed Melanchthon into an unfortunate form of synergism.[2] In any case, fundamental to framing a Lutheran theology of religions, and engaging in interreligious dialogue, is a sound distillation of the Lutheran position on universal salvation.

As with much of dogmatic theology, the Reformers took many of their cues on the universal salvation question from preceding generations of Christians. Ambrose's interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4 shaped the synergistic attitudes of Erasmus, Hyperius, and other contemporaries of Luther and Melanchthon. Ambrose laboured to answer the perennial question, *Cur aliis et non aliis?* (why are some saved and not others?) with an analogy that others utilized until the Reformation and beyond: If a doctor prescribes medication for a patient, the patient achieves no benefit unless he or she takes it. Extending the analogy, God has made the medicine available to all, but some refuse to take it, and are lost as a result. For Ambrose, there is no sense is declaring someone "saved" if that individual has no desire to be saved.

Augustine of Hippo certainly taught free will in his early years, but after his protracted conflict with Pelagius he began to emphasize that sinners, no matter the degree to which they are "sanctified," cannot orient themselves to the grace of God. God, in

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[2] For example, Heine, "Being precedes doing. The ontological approach to justification with reference to interreligious dialogue," Lutheran World Federation, Documentation 45, 81–93.

exercising His personal will, predestines an unknown number of persons to salvation, and leaves the remainder to suffer eternal condemnation in hell. For Augustine, 1 Timothy 2:4 cannot refer to a universal saving will in God, but rather a saving will that is *particular—Deus vult omnes homines salvos fieri* would then become "God would have men *from all classes of society* to be saved."[3] There is evidence that Augustine's "all classes" doctrine was treated with relative indifference by Luther, and rejected outright by Melanchthon.[4]

Erasmus clearly taught free will in his 1503 catechetical text *Enchiridion.* "The human mind," he wrote, "has never strongly commanded itself to do anything which it could not accomplish. A great part of Christianity is to will with the whole heart to be made a Christian."[5] Erasmus maintained that God greatly desires that all persons would be saved, and He has made salvation *available to all in their station.* Sinners exercise free will, itself a gift of God, as they decide whether or not they will come to Him and receive His salvation or reject His offer of grace and be damned. In a gloss of his 1519 translation of 1 Timothy 2:4, Erasmus wrote:

> [Christ] is the Saviour of all; he excludes no one from salvation; he offers the light of the Gospel unto all people. Whoever rejects, whoever withdraws himself, imputes to himself his own blindness; whoever perishes, perishes by his own fault. For what can a physician accomplish, if the patient rejects the health-giving medicine? Certainly it is not the fault of Him that fewer than all people strive after salvation and, leaving the darkness of their old life, come unto the light of Gospel truth. Christ is the truth; he who acknowledges Him will be saved, regardless of from whatever kind of life he comes to this place. The same salvation comes from One and is offered through One unto all people.[6]

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[3] Augustine, *Enchiridion,* LCC 7, 401.
[4] Green, "Universal Salvation (1 Timothy 2:4) according to the Lutheran Reformers," 282.
[5] Erasmus of Rotterdam, *The Essential Erasmus,* 47.
[6] Green, "Universal Salvation," 283.

By 1513, Erasmus had thoroughly sharpened his view of God's gracious and saving will, as well as the responsibility humanity has in accepting it.

From the dearth of references to 1 Timothy 2:4 in Luther's corpus, one might conclude that he was not entirely comfortable with the implications. In addition to a commentary on the entirety of 1 Timothy, Luther referred to it in a small number of commentaries on other biblical texts, some disputations and a sermon.[7] One does find an evolution of sorts in his thinking on the text from two editions of his translation of the bible into German, in 1522 and 1546, respectively. Lowell Green describes Luther's transition as follows:

> In his first translation of the Scriptures, the September Testament of 1522, [Luther] rendered the passage as follows: ". . . [*Gott unssern heyland,*] *wilcher vil, das alle menschen genesen und zur erkentnis der warheyt kommen"* (. . . God our Saviour who wills that all people should be *restored* [to health], and come to the knowledge of the truth). Later, Luther replaced the active verb, *genesen*, with the passive verb, *geholffen werden.*
> In his last translation, which appeared in 1546, he gave it as follows: ". . . [*Gott unsern Heiland,*] *welcher wil, das allen menschen geholffen werde, und zur erkentnis der warheit kommen"* (. . . God our Saviour who wills that all people should be *helped*, and come to the knowledge of the truth).[8]

Luther contended that the active component of grace causes those that sick with sin (i.e. all persons) to get well. Furthermore, in the Vulgate rendering of the Gospels, *salvum facere* is better translated as "to be made well" or "to be healed," rather than "to be saved."

Luther's commentary on 1 Timothy 2:4 places the doctrine of God's universal will to save in sharp relief. That God does not desire the sinner's death is axiomatic for Luther. More to the point, however, is Luther's determination to protect monergism in salvation. God wishes to illuminate all persons, and that all would be saved, but "this is

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[7] Green, "Universal Salvation," 284.
[8] Green, "Universal Salvation," 284. Emphasis original.

an exclusive proposition that is expressed in universal terms. . . . [God causes all men to be saved; therefore He is the only Saviour."[9] The exclusive is embedded in the universal; God desires that all be saved, but not all trust the promises of God. There is only one true God, therefore some will perish of their own accord.[10] 1 Timothy 2:4, then, speaks of a general or temporal salvation which Luther avers applies to all persons equally, since the blessings turned over apply only to the natural order. On the other hand, Luther speaks as well of the *availability*, rather than the *certainty*, of a supernatural salvation through the faithful God Who does not promise to save the faithless.[11]

Melanchthon did not appreciate Augustine's doctrine of all "kinds" of persons of varying degrees of righteousness will be saved. For Melanchthon, Augustine's view was tantamount to an invincible predestination that distorts the distinction between law and Gospel. Melanchthon did take a step beyond Luther with respect to universal salvation in his own commentary on 1 Timothy: "I fit these words of Paul to this universal promise and revealed will: God will have all men to be saved, revealed by his will in the promise, which is most truly efficacious in those who maintain themselves in the Word."[12] In other words, salvation is not effective until the sinner accepts the Word in faith. Melanchthon could reach such a conclusion only by digression from Luther's position, particularly

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[9] Luther, *LW* 28, 262.

[10] "God preserves from plague both the ungodly and the godly. He gives both the light of the sun. Is this not a general statement? He tells us to pray for all men, because such a prayer for men is acceptable, even if they are wicked. The grace of God is one and the same, even for the faithless. We must therefore pray not only for the faithful but for all men. That prayer offered for them is both heard and pleasing, because He wants it so and desires to save all men. God wants to be asked that we may gain this request from Him, as Paul says Rom. 3:29: "Is He not the God of the Gentiles also?" He commands us to pray, and He accepts our prayer even for the wicked, because He is considering the following: that through our prayers He wants to save even the wicked, to give peace, wife, etc. Prayer for all men is acceptable, because He desires all men to be saved. Paul is not speaking about God's incomprehensible will—a topic forever secret, as here regarding the will of His command. There is a will which is hidden and reserved for Himself. This He points out to us in word and deed." Luther, *LW* 28, 262.

[11] Luther, *LC*, II, II, 25–33.

[12] Green, "Universal Salvation," 285.

with regard to the meaning and implication of *sothenai*. Where Luther comprehended this term to indicate general salvation, Melanchthon saw in it the more supernatural eternal salvation, and applied it to all persons. His interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4 emphasized the universal saving will of God, and rather unfortunately coloured the views of generations of Lutheran dogmaticians to follow.

5.2 Lutherans and Atonement Theory

If universalism is unbiblical and thus unacceptable, then the mechanism by which the benefits of death and resurrection of Christ is bestowed to sinners becomes essential to the theology of religions. The primary dogma concerning the atonement, in Western Christendom most especially, is the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) declared that the actual event of the cross must be made indispensable through an *a priori* consideration of necessity, over and above the *a posteriori* claims of the previous pictures of soteriology, namely knowledge of the historical life and fate of Jesus of Nazareth as a pattern or way of salvation.[13] Anselm attempted to demonstrate the absolute necessity of the divine-human adjutant Jesus, as well as that the atonement had to occur in the exact manner it did. In doing so Anselm rejected the Passion as recapitulation, which would offer inconsequential reasons for the crucifixion, and as a ransom paid to Satan, which does not explain the necessity for God to utterly defeat any and all enemies; God could have chosen to crush Satan directly, and released the captives by divine fiat. Why the subterfuge?

The key element of Anselmian satisfaction theory as it pertains to a Lutheran theology of religions is the necessity such places on the relationship between God and

[13] Anselm, *Why God Became Man,* 80–83.

post-Fall creation. All persons, insofar as they are rational, owe to the Creator a debt of unqualified and repentant response. Sin is that which causes humanity to withhold this response, resulting in a direct dishonouring of God, and a disruption in the Creator-Creation dialectic. Further, it is observed that return to pristine relationship and obedience cannot restore the damage of past sins, since total obedience is required and owed. Under such circumstances the human condition is beyond self-healing. God remains the efficient cause of salvation, but could He not achieve this by direct means, offering simple forgiveness to all? If this were possible, Anselm states, there would be no need for God to assume a human nature and dwell bodily among the fallen.[14] For Anselm, it is not possible for God to forgive in this manner, since mercy would override justice, sin and justice would be equated and soteriological chaos would be the inevitable result.[15]

Later dogmaticians would find ineluctable logical inconsistencies in Anselm's formulation, leading them away from the claim of *a priori* necessity for the atonement in favour of a relative necessity. God, in His omnipotence and perfect justice, could have chosen to reconcile humankind to Himself in any manner which does not contradict His nature. The chosen means, however, is the most appropriate to expiate the penalty for sin, and to awaken within us faith, hope and love. Anselm may have promoted a God that stoops beyond absolute necessity, but he was correct in his insistence that the concrete life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was infinitely more than a mere symbol of the

[14] "Now we have found the compassion of God which appeared lost to you when we were considering God's holiness and man's sin; we have found it, I say, so great and so consistent with his holiness, as to be incomparably above anything that can be conceived. For what compassion can excel these words of the Father, addressed to the sinner doomed to eternal torments and having no way of escape: 'Take my only begotten Son and make him an offering for yourself'; or these words of the Son: 'Take me and ransom your souls.' For these are the voices they utter, when inviting and leading us to faith in the Gospel." Anselm, *Why God Became Man,* 161–2.

[15] Anselm, *Why God Became Man,* 162–3.

divine truths humanity already knows. He was correct that the relationship between God and human beings was permanently altered in the events of Golgotha.[16]

Abelard (1079–1142) challenged Anselm at various points, but most especially over God's mercy: why must God's justice be sated in some fashion before He may be merciful to sinners? Jesus declared sinners forgiven prior to His death, a cruel death on a cross which could be viewed as nothing more than multiplying human sin rather than compensating for it. Given that nothing or no one could atone for the murder of the Messiah, and that no one should be by any means delighted over the suffering and death of an innocent, is it not capricious that God the Father should find the sacrifice of His Son acceptable for the reconciliation of the whole world? Abelard contended that the doctrine of the atonement restricts God's freedom and leads inevitably to a foreboding vision of the divine that could only be found appalling. In other words, Abelard believed that to construct a theory concerning reconciliation to God inevitably leads to the creation of an unintentionally forbidding picture of the divine.[17]

The Socinians picked up on Abelard's critique of Anselm at the time of the Reformation. For them, divine freedom and mercy must be raised above divine justice. If God is Lord of all, then He can choose to ignore or set aside His divine prerogatives at any time He chooses. Further, while satisfaction makes conceptual sense in the human context, it is a vulgar and ultimately senseless act in which God might engage. God has no need to offer payment to Himself, and even if He did, the payment made by the death of Christ is inadequate, since the sufferings of one man could never atone for the sins of the whole world. Jesus' sufferings were at best finite, and though eternal life would

[16] Gerhard Forde, *Christian Dogmatics Volume II,* 22–23. Hereafter *CDE.*
[17] For an excellent summary of Abelard's Atonement doctrine see Kaiser, "The Doctrine of Atonement according to Peter Abelard."

require eternal death in compensation, Jesus was only dead for three days.[18] The Socinians also found fault with Anselm's theory of substitution. To aver that sin and its punishment can be transferred from the guilty to the innocent is absurd, in the same fashion as transferal of righteousness to the unrighteous must be declared improper.

Nineteenth century liberal theologians like Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889)[19] and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)[20] described the work of Christ as moving humankind toward a new historical community of belief in which the power and transformation in Christ could be experienced. The natural, empirical life could be largely transcended by faith. Schleiermacher, via his doctrine of "absolute dependence," attempted to wend a path between what he believed to be sterile vicarious satisfaction doctrine and the pure moral-influence Christianity of many of his contemporaries. This could be achieved, Schleiermacher felt, by visualization of the redeeming act of Christ as the locus for establishing a new common life which is original in Him and derived in humankind. The historical Jesus did not provide a mere illustration of the redeemed life, but established in His Body, the Church, a new collective life subsisting in an actual historical community. Jesus of Nazareth is the enfleshment of sinless perfection and unsullied God-consciousness. He does not simply provide enhancement of pre-existing moral perfections humans already possess. Jesus' perfection radiates from Him, capturing all persons, drawing them in and convicting of sin. "Grace," whatever Schleiermacher meant by the term, is available in community (presumably the Church), and there alone.

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[18] MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History,* 363–368.
[19] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1,* 270–281.
[20] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1,* 93–105.

Despite the obvious genius of Schleiermacher's work, he failed to steer an unambiguous path between the vicarious substitution doctrine of his dogmatic forebears, and reliance on moral influence to articulate justification orthodoxy. To interpret Christ's activity through the lenses of some nebulous "feeling" reduces the Son of God to a religious ecstatic coming to terms with His God-consciousness, a model for hagiography rather than the object of proper devotion.

Ritschl operated in a fashion similar to Schleiermacher, though he attempted to recapitulate the work of Christ in light of the new historical churchly community. Ritschl agreed with Schleiermacher's emphasis on the historical community as it related to the religions (*heilsgeschichtliche*), but rejected any reference to absolute dependence as resulting in monotheism as abstraction, and religion as metaphysical and impersonal. The kingdom of God, by which Ritschl meant the historic Christian community, must be explicated in concrete, actual and practical terms. Theology, then, is eminently practical knowledge of God, gained in community, in a manner which connects to the world as it is. Furthermore, "practical" knowledge concerns itself with the religious, insofar as the religious involves the entirety of the person in his or her way of life.

> Religion is concerned with rising above mere "nature" to "spirit," above subjection to the law of death, the "flesh," the "world," time, and decay, to the position of *dominion*. In Jesus, God takes the last, decisive, and concrete historical step with humankind in establishing the kingdom, God's true dominion. Everything flows from the practical influence of Jesus as n historical person. Jesus reveals God as Father, the God of love to whom we can draw near with confidence. Wrath is replaced by love; wrath pertains only to life outside the kingdom. *Christ draws people into this community of confidence and trust in the God of love who in creation and redemption has set the true* telos *for human existence: a kingdom where all are united to God in love in spite of all hindrances of a natural, physical, or metaphysical sort. One is saved from false conceptions of God by being drawn into the community of love by Jesus.*[21]

[21] Forde, *CDE II,* 28. Emphasis original.

Ritschl's Jesus dies not so much as martyr or vicarious substitute, but rather as one Who remained true to His calling to the end. Jesus accepted the horrors of crucifixion without vacillation, temptation or fear. His was the perfectly heroic act of religion.

Emil Brunner, writing generations after Ritschl, rejected the notion that the wrath of God could possibly be placated by any equivalent payment on humanity's behalf. Nevertheless, he contended that the atonement must remain a central element to the forensic elements of justification. Without the sacrifice of Christ, God's love could be little more than sentimentality. Love must be holy for it to be divine. Brunner believed that conceptions of vicarious satisfaction fell into error when they perceived God not as the subject of atonement, but as its object. Also, atonement thinking has suffered as special revelation has given way to general revelation as central to Christian religious thought. In terms of vicarious atonement doctrine, as general revelation it can never be viewed as true; the doctrine is only true when viewed through the lenses of special revelation. Brunner's view, as we have seen, has had profound effect on a (Christian) theology of religions, since the bulk of the foundational (and contentious) elements of the Christian tradition exist only in the realm of special, revealed knowledge—they are perceived only through faith.[22]

In his 1930 work *Den kristna forsoningstanken* (*Christus Victor*), Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) moved past what he charged were the twin "theories" of vicarious satisfaction and moral influence to reinstate a motif that had been in place for centuries prior to the Reformation and was repristinated by Luther and the Lutheran Reformers, that of Christ engaging with and achieving a victory over the principalities and powers,

[22] Brunner, *Dogmatics Volume II: The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption,* 271–307.

and in so doing releasing captives enslaved to Satan and their own sinful desires.[23] God sends Christ the Victor to earth to win it back, not to satisfy some deficiency or contravention. What Ritschl and Schleiermacher identified as a doctrine of redemption or salvation, Aulén insisted was the true doctrine of atonement, of release from captivity over an expiation for sin. In other words, in the act of reconciling the world to Himself God is reconciled to the world.[24]

Aulén contended that God in and through Christ is in direct conflict with the demonic forces of creation. In vicarious satisfaction God's action is not continuous; the Father sends the Son, but must in turn be satisfied by the sacrifice of the God-man. Aulén's victory motif features an action that is continuous, insofar as the Father sends the Son, and works in and through Him to defeat principalities and powers. God, then, is simultaneously the reconciler and the reconciled. He offers the sacrifice and accepts the sacrifice in one motion. Not only that, Aulén contends, the victory motif promotes the resurrection to the status of necessary, decisive event, the initiation of the new age of the Spirit. The Father does not enter human history to assert His force, but to give Himself. Satan is the embodiment of evil, and can never attain equality with God, even as he derives any power he possesses directly from God. The ultimate evil act, the cross, is a victory over Satan who overreaches himself in the conflict with God and loses the battle at the moment he claims to be victorious.[25]

Aulén's victory motif has contributed to the resurgence of resurrection as the quintessential atonement doctrine among Lutherans, while slowing a return to the theological moralizing so commonplace in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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[23] Aulén, *Christus Victor,* 72–6.
[24] Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 132–8.
[25] Aulén, *Christus Victor,* 63–71.

Unfortunately, one may challenge the motif in that it seems to overlook sin and guilt in favour of a protracted treatment of mortality, finitude, and death. When such are the basic assumptions of salvation, sin recedes as an actionable offence, and the necessity for the cross and resurrection becomes difficult to maintain. If the primary need of humankind is to be saved from death, then a redeemer could provide life in any number of ways that do not include personal sacrifice. Under such a scheme, Jesus, who was "crucified under Pontius Pilate," becomes little more than a transitory figure who could deceive and defeat Satan in various ways not limited to crucifixion on a Roman cross. Could the Redeemer not enjoy a long and healthy life, or lead a popular but violent rebellion? Could victory not be and remain victory?

Atonement motifs, as I have examined briefly, are by no means exhaustive, and in the end are mere images or pictures, representing some aspect of the truth of reconciliation, but not the entirety thereof. A Lutheran theology of religions must show familiarity with the various atonement theories, so as to not lose the ability to speak meaningfully on not only God's person, which forms the bulk of interreligious concern, but also His activity, which can recess into the background without an unambiguous accounting of His sacrifice on humanity's behalf. Without atonement theory the cross loses its scandal and is an object of human speculation. Instead of the perfect icon of God's judgment, the cross can be an object of human curiosity, another landmark in our continuous pursuit of pan-religious "values." It is here that I turn to arguably Luther's most vital contribution to Christian doctrine and practice, namely, the *theology of the cross* (*theologia crucis*).[26]

[26] For a classic treatment see Von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross,* especially 112–143.

Gerhard Forde (1927–2005) points out that coincident with Aulén's *Christus Victor* was the re-emergence of and re-connection with Luther's theology of the cross.[27] As we have seen, the *subjective* view of the atonement, that which focuses on Christ as the giver of the sacrifice as well as the sacrifice itself, has a long pedigree which can be traced back to medievals such as Anselm and Abelard, even if it may not have been found there explicitly. In any case, the aim of the subjective view is to escape the sufferings of our sin-filled prison, and rise to perfect communion with God. This ascension may occur through the law and moral improvement, or from victory over tyrants who exercise power through our mortality and finite nature. In any case, atonement may be considered to have occurred when such ascent to God succeeds as release from spiritual bondage.[28]

Luther believed that in putting human depravity on display, the law is as much a tyrant over humanity as Satan himself. The law demands perfect obedience in outward expression as well as within the heart. The perfection required by the law turns it into a taskmaster and dictator. Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, all persons reside under God's wrath. No abstract "payment" can even the scales. The true "battle," then, is fought by God Himself Who pierces His own wrath and brings victory which is effective for all persons in their present. This position is contrary to Aulén, and the most that can be said concerning God's will for the universal salvation of humankind. Luther was uncomfortable with a doctrine of satisfaction because

> It is too week and says too little about the grace of Christ and does not sufficiently honour Christ's suffering. One must give them higher honour because he did not

[27] Forde, *CDE II*, 47.

[28] The point is not to declare theological solidarity with Buddhism and the connected doctrines of suffering and liberation. Christian shares little common ground with the major religions on the subject of atonement theory.

> only make satisfaction for sin but also redeemed us from death, the devil and the power of hell, and guarantees us an eternal kingdom of grace as well as the daily forgiveness of subsequent sins, and so becomes for us an eternal redemption and sanctification.[29]

Thus, Luther saw little distinction between making a payment to God or to the devil with respect to the lost and condemned creature to be redeemed.

Luther was convinced that atonement and reconciliation were contingent upon God's gracious act of forgiveness through Christ, but at the same time something must happen on the part of the redeemed sinner who lives his or her life as someone transformed and different. If God has put an end to any separation remaining between Himself and humanity, the wrath which must be overcome would be terminated. Furthermore, insofar as we receive this self-giving God and trust in His promises, the divine wrath would be satisfied in that moment, and God would win the victory over sin, death and the devil for now and forever. The essential point, for Luther, is the "great exchange": Christ takes upon Himself the sin humanity carries, and gives over His righteousness which is appropriated by the individual in and through faith (*fiducia*).

This brings to mind a question of concern to the developing theology of religions: if it is assumed that Christ has indeed provided blood of the type required to save all humanity, then what guarantee exists that the sacrifice of Christ is has provided *enough* blood? God is not the problem here; we are. Can and does God actually accomplish our delivery from sin and death, and initiate new life for the sake of Christ? Luther contended that atonement is not so much about deification, establishing oneness with the divine, but rather it is a reality as God gives Himself over in such a fashion as to initiate a people

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[29] Luther, *WA* 21, 264, 270.

who do not fear but trust God implicitly and live lives that please Him. Christ reconciling the world to Himself is the ultimate expression of atonement.[30]

Luther, as much a pragmatist as a theologian, was uniformly interested in questions that center not around the way things *might be*, but around the way things *are*. God has a case to make against humankind, and His wrath must be mollified if we are to be saved. Yet such wrath cannot be calmed by a simple heavenly exchange between Father and Son. Only as God makes humankind His own is atonement finally accomplished.[31] This softened form of deification challenges the possibility of a Rahnerian "anonymous" Christian, since a humankind which has been appropriated by God through His gracious activity in Christ will not exist outside of a confession of Jesus Christ as unique Saviour and Lord Who wills a close relationship with all. Furthermore, if God were the object of satisfaction, rather than its subject, a position held by the monotheistic religions and others, there would be no need for an incarnation or a cross. Luther's view demands that Christ be the subject of the atonement, a position which is uniquely confessional and exclusivistic.

In his seminal commentary on Galatians, Luther penned a tight statement on the doctrine of the atonement: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.'"[32] For Luther to deny that Christ is a sinner and a curse is to move toward denial of His sufferings, His crucifixion and His death. This Christ can suffer and die only as an abstraction in the mode of the redeemer of the Gnostics. Luther's Christ must well and truly exchange His perfection for humanity's curse in a real act of exchange. But how could Jesus Christ be

[30] Forde, *CDE II*, 47–63.
[31] Luther, *LW* 26, 287.
[32] Luther, *LW* 26, 276.

an actual sinner? Luther declares that Christ, of His own volition, places Himself under the law and becomes the evil that He seeks to eradicate. "Because he took upon himself our sins, not by compulsion but of his own free will, it was right for him to bear the punishment and the wrath of God—not for his own person, which was righteous and invincible and therefore could not become guilty, but for our person."[33]

The reality of Jesus Christ's death, and the life of the human being in Christ through the "great exchange," became the bases for many of Luther's theological formulae, including *simul iustus et peccator.* Christ "was at once damned and blessed, at once living and dead, at once in sorrow and joy." When Christians confess that Christ has conquered sin and death, they are proclaiming unambiguously that He is divine, since only a divine being can possess the power and authority necessary to facilitate such a reversal. In fact, Luther remarks, divinity which is self-giving is an essential element to his doctrine of *simultaneous saint and sinner.*

> For it belongs *exclusively* to the divine power to destroy sin and abolish death, to create righteousness and grant life. This divine power [the scholastics] have attributed to our works, saying: "If you do this or that work, you will conquer sin, death and the wrath of God. In this way they have made us true God, by nature![34]

For Luther the entire nature and character of the atonement is subsumed under the person and work of Jesus Christ. God has given Himself over to death as both priest and sacrifice on our behalf. This is achieved by divine power of the Incarnate Son of God alone.

Given Luther's attitude to the atonement, the necessity and function of the resurrection from the dead comes into sharp relief. Christ has Himself been raised, bringing an end to sin and death for those who grasp the personal benefit of the

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[33] Luther, *LW* 26, 284.
[34] Luther, *LW* 26, 283.

resurrection for themselves. The abolishment of sin and death came about through Christ who overcame them in His flesh. Humankind is asked to do nothing more than trust that He has achieved this abolishment for us and our salvation. In other words, Luther's great reversal cannot remain abstract—it must be "domesticated," and done to and for us. "We cannot stand by as idle spectators speculating about things beyond, wonder about how atonement works in heaven."[35] The only obstacle to a complete reconciliation with God is unbelief, whether the "invincible" variety of Vatican II, or the more subtle renunciation of the *euangelion* in favour of anthropocentrism and its handmaiden pluralism. A confessional Lutheran theology of religions, therefore, acknowledges and proclaims the biblical truth that salvation (as distinct from liberation) cannot proceed from adherence to the law. There is no possible means by which God could be a God of love if He is, at best, a giver of "help" rather than grace.

Tension will always exist between God's wrath over sin and His love in Christ Jesus. Luther could find no means to square the two, since to do so would be tantamount to allowing the law to persist in its force over humankind. In confessional Lutheran parlance, "to be saved" means in the most precise terms to be freed from the clutches of God's law that brings with it the requirement to be permanently active in performing one or another good work to appease God's righteous wrath. While "belief" does carry with it an Islam-like emphasis on God's oneness, the most basic unit of belief is personal trust that God is the God of love He reveals Himself to be. The true God declares faith alone to be the only *shibboleth* that returns creation, and our sinful human condition, back to their pre-Fall righteousness, innocence and blessedness.

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[35] Forde, *CDE II*, 57.

In his seven volume tome *Glory of the Lord,* the theological aesthetics, Hans Urs von Balthasar takes up the necessary human awareness of the being of the Divine, made concrete and visible in the earthly dying and rising of Christ. Balthasar maintains that Christ is more than simply the visible form of God; He is the "concrete universal" of divinity Who is despised and forsaken on earth. Christ's sacrifice on humanity's behalf establishes Him as the collective link between creation and creator, the common Saviour for all persons.[36] Compare this with Luther's aesthetics, by which he means God's goodness and glory, as deeply grounded not in an abstract understanding of beauty, but rather in the Reformation teaching of justification by grace through faith.[37] For Luther, the Spirit of justification is identical to the Spirit of creation and resurrection. This Spirit is leading to the transformation of all things, known in Scripture as the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus spoke directly concerning the beauty of creation, particularly with regard to God's care for lilies of the field and birds of the air (Matt 6:25). Paul Chung views this as proof that Luther's Jesus is not only mediator for creation and all that is in it, but also a "cosmic" Christ that is a catalyst for ecumenical activity, of both narrow and broad forms.[38] Such a view would effectively mirror Balthasar's decisive theme of Christ as the *concretum universal*, or concrete universal. Christ is universal in scope because His death and resurrection are objective, personal and existential—ubiquity is abstract; universality is catholic. The theology of the cross is the Christian foundation the doxology of divine

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[36] See chapter one.
[37] "Now if I believe in God's Son and bear in mind that He became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, pears, as I reflect that He is Lord over and the centre of all things." Luther, *LW* 22, 496.
[38] Chung, *Martin Luther and Buddhism*, 137.

aesthetics, leading to a realistic recapitulation of suffering as a necessary component of eschatology. Chung correctly points out that:

> Luther's theology of the cross is not only anthropological and soteriological, but also universal and cosmic. It thereby becomes a basis for engaging dialogue with religious pluralism in perspective of the cosmic Christ. A non-religious interpretation of the Gospel implies a Christological interpretation of the world come of age. Thus, universal interpretation of Jesus Christ implies interreligious interpretation of the Gospel, by recognizing the mysterious presence of Christ in people of other faiths.[39]

Once again, however, the "presence of Christ in people of other faiths" is immanently true, but does not necessarily carry with it soteriologic freight. On the other hand, such presence does have applicability in Christian mission. As an example, since suffering is a cornerstone concept in many Eastern religious systems, Luther's theology of the cross could have significance as a facilitator of interreligious dialogue, if not an objective proof of the presence of salvation.[40]

For what reason did God's grace lead Him to assume flesh and become human? Although there would seem to have been innumerable options open to Him, why did the Father send the Son to suffer such an ignominious death at the hands of the ungrateful? As we have seen, the answer lay in God's desire to elect humanity to salvation, rather than expect sinners to attempt appeasement through their efforts. To assert that we are epistemologically "free" to make choices which have bearing on our reconciliation with God is express defiance of the only God that makes Himself known. This is the essence of Luther's theology of the cross, since

> God cannot come directly to people bound in their own illusions. God can only die at the hands of such piety. God can only be rejected. So it must be if God is to unmask the bondage for what is. Hence Luther maintained that in Christ, God

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[39] Chung, *Martin Luther and Buddhism,* 137.

[40] Rejected is the view that the cosmic Christ is not merely present in the religions, but is present in a salvific manner—no explanation for such a lack of nuance can be countenanced by confessional Lutherans.

> comes "under the form of opposites," under the opposite of what an aspiring free will wants or expects. God comes not as the great and glorious ruler but as the humble, suffering, despised, and rejected outcast who is beaten, spit on, and executed., as one quite superfluous to the way we must run things. . . .There is no way to get through to the bound, disaffected will directly.[41]

Life for all comes only from the death of One.

The cross was the inevitable result of sin, both original and actual. The theology of religions asks, however, how a relatively pedestrian historical event could carry such universal significance? The non-Christian traditions tend to view the cross as at best an incidental episode, an accident of history. I have perused the "once and for all" of Golgotha through the lenses of sacrificial, moral and forensic systems, but have not found one that could be considered sufficiently valid to be viewed as comprehensive. The cross can never serve as an icon or an idea, for such would neuter its transformative capacity in favour of a pre-existing order from which there can be no divine re-creation or curative. Christ's sacrifice carries universal significance for the simple reason that He, the divine-human manifestation of the Father, was universally rejected, but nevertheless was raised for the justification of all humanity (Acts 2:32–36). If we were to elevate Christ to heroic status, that would not be enough—the cross must be defended and upheld by God.

For confessional Lutherans, the cross of Christ is a stumbling block for those that contend for a universal vindication of humankind, whether that vindication is viewed as salvation, liberation, union with the Tao, or some other formulation. Universalism is an unbiblical philosophical abstraction which declares God must eventually save everyone from their suffering and restore all things at the Consummation.[42] Lutherans agree that

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[41] Forde, *CDE II,* 67–8.
[42] Lutheran World Federation, *Justification in the World's Context*, 146–152.

God must save universally, and in fact does, as Christ instructed His disciples to preach after the Ascension. Like any gift, however, individual appropriation of this universal salvation is still required. Inclusivism is by no means tolerant in comparison to exclusivism, since it is never kind to be abstract and ambiguous. Lutheran preaching takes no pleasure in the law, for example in declaring hell to be populated, perhaps heavily. Universalism is a Gospel orientation which, as Balthasar shows, is the overwhelming hope that all persons would be saved. The eventual outcome of law-Gospel preaching is entirely in God the Holy Spirit's hands.

As we have seen, forgiveness is a dangerous concept, and universal, unconditional forgiveness is subversive to the requirements of a wrathful God. It cannot just occur—it must be guaranteed by the cross. Further, a critical element of forgiveness is that it be demonstrated in the actions of the forgiven. For this reason, forgiveness must be offered in the name of Jesus Christ alone, for He was sacrificed on our behalf, and He leads His redeemed children to new life (Heb 13:14). The resurrection was, for us, a stroke of both judgment and salvation. This means that at base salvation is penetratingly subjective, requiring changes in allegiance and behaviour.

5.3 Lutherans and the *Ordo Salutis*

Confessional Lutherans are often cited for an overweening emphasis on justification over sanctification. The charge is somewhat justified, although Lutheran pneumatology features a vibrant doctrine of sanctification, beginning with the call of all persons to faith in Christ, the enlightenment, rebirth, conversion, and finally repentance. In this section I will summarize the key elements of the activity of the Holy Spirit, and

how these feed into the doctrine of justification and impact a potential Lutheran theology of religions.

The call to faith is the unique purview of the Holy Spirit, who through Baptism and the external preaching of the Gospel testifies to sinners universally the gracious will of God in Christ for the salvation of all persons. As the sinner contends with conscience, contemplates the universe or the existence of a benevolent God, she can experience the "call" to consider God more deeply (Rom 1:20; 2:14,15; Acts 17:27). In a community in which the true God is known and worshipped, there can be a "call" to salvation (1 Kings 10:1; 2 Kings 5:2f.; 1 Thes 1:8). Neither of these calls, however, should be considered salvific. They are calls, using Lutheran dogmatic parlance, in the *wide* sense. The call in the *narrow* sense is a direct invitation from God to be saved. This call is multi-source as well, occurring through human beings or angels, or directly from God the Holy Spirit Himself (Gen 12:1).[43]

Historic Lutheranism has limited the Holy Spirit's activity to certain usual means, namely Word and sacrament (Rom 10:15; 2 Thes 2:14; 1 Cor 1:23,24; Matt 22:3,14; 1 Pet 3:21). Even these allow for a good deal of diversity. The call to salvation may occur in the "normal" fashion, through the visible preaching ministry (Rom 10:14; Acts 8:30f.; 2 Thes 2:14), or through extraordinary means such as miracles, ecstasies, or other mystical experiences (Matt 2:1; Luke 23:42; 1 Cor 2:9,10). Since it is God's intention that all persons be brought to salvation through these means, the call must represent God's eternal will, and be efficacious, able to bring about what is desired. According to Scripture, God wills that all persons should be delivered from slavery to sin (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Johannes Quenstedt (1617–1688) writes concerning the universality of the call:

[43] Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics Volume III*, 230–235. Hereafter *ELD.*

> But we say that this call is universal (1) by reason of God's intention . . . (2) by reason of Christ's command. . . . Therefore as far as creation extends, so far does the preaching of the Word extend . . . (3) by reason of its public announcement, for all people in the whole world are called. For the sound of the apostles went out into the whole earth (Mk 16:20; Rom 10:18).[44]

This does not mean that God issues the call to all persons in an identical fashion. The call to salvation is equal in all persons because all are called in the same way, namely, by grace. Regardless of culture, geography, or other factors which are claimed to influence religious pedigree, God gives all persons indistinguishable powers to repent and believe the good news. The same Gospel that is efficacious among Christians is efficacious among all persons everywhere.

Enlightenment refers to the Holy Spirit's unique function of filling the heart with the saving knowledge of God's grace in and through Jesus Christ (Ps 13:3; 19:8; 118:27; Luke 2:32; John 1:5,9; Eph 1:18; 3:9; 5:14; Heb 6:4; 2 Cor 4:6; 2 Pet 1:19; Isa 49:6).[45] Scripture indicates that enlightenment is not limited to an external awareness of Scriptural truth, but also includes an inward, subjective knowledge of truth in sinners which demonstrates their freedom from the corruption of sin and the punishment of death. The Holy Spirit's armament to produce such enlightenment is the preaching of the Gospel. This rejects the views of the enthusiasts and pantheists, in that saving knowledge of God is produced only through Spirit-appointed means, but the particular means by which the Holy Spirit kindles divine knowledge in the heart are at best assumed, and cannot be unimpeachably known.

The process by which enlightenment pervades consciousness is psychological as well as spiritual. In fact, post-Reformation Lutheran dogmaticians believed that the Holy

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[44] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 231.
[45] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 237–244.

Spirit must affect the intellect of the sinner prior to any occurrence of enlightenment.[46] This view was most certainly shaped by the pietistic controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wherein many Pietists maintained that in order for Gospel preaching to occur among the faithful, the preacher must be represent himself in thought, word, and deed, as a member of those reborn to life in Christ. Moreover, one must be regarded as godless and an enemy of the church, and lacking in enlightenment, if one did not overtly display the behavioural manifestations of pietistic sanctification.

Lutheran orthodoxy responded sharply to pietism against what it viewed as unfortunate statements of falsehood. First, an individual may be utterly convinced by the law of God of their personal sin and spiritual impotence, as well as their status as redeemed through the Gospel, while at the same time appearing disobedient to the Word of God in life. Not all those with salvation "walk the talk." Second, just as the Holy Spirit can arouse indignance and opposition in the sinner, He can cause the same sinner to come to a knowledge of God by virtue of a disturbed conscience. Third, the knowledge the Holy Spirit engenders should never be relativized by declaring it natural knowledge alone. The orthodox theologians indicted their pietistic opponents for excessive subjectivising of Christian faith, by placing life ahead of doctrine, and insisting that piety is not a result, but a precondition, for enlightenment.

In sum, enlightenment is a process, beginning in the sinner with only literal knowledge of the Gospel and its implications. Over time, queries become conviction in

[46] "With respect to the man receiving the heavenly doctrine, illumination is either literal and pedagogical, or spiritual and completely saving. The first is the work of the Holy Spirit, by which he equips through his grace assisting externally and preparing the intellect of the man who is not reborn but inclined to be with the literal knowledge of what must be believed and produces historical assent to the Gospel, so that he is more and more disposed to respect saving faith. The second is the work of the Holy Spirit, by which he enters and inhabits the contrite human heart to kindle the saving knowledge of divine mercy founded in the merit of Christ, to produce confident assent to the Gospel, to confirm and to seal with his internal testimony." Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 243.

the truth of the Gospel, and formal assent, or at least commitment, to it. At this point, the Holy Spirit is only one spiritual force acting on the sinner from the outside. The sinner may reject the Holy Spirit at any stage of enlightenment, at which point the "enlightening" activity of the Holy Spirit ceases, Who then begins to act in other, albeit similar, fashions. On the other hand, a sinner who remains under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, either explicitly or implicitly, is granted saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, both as universal and permanent Saviour. It is at this point that the Holy Spirit is said to dwell in the sinner, who should from this time forward be regarded as "enlightened" (1 Cor 2:14). The Holy Spirit's entry into the heart is equivalent to complete enlightenment, even if He achieves such enlightenment in a multitude of ways, such as the non-Christian who is unable to make public confession of Christ, but possesses saving faith.[47]

Rebirth is distinct from enlightenment since it is the act of the Holy Spirit, which is entirely objective—the spiritually dead sinner is made spiritually alive by means of the kindling of saving faith through the Word of the Gospel and the Sacrament of Baptism (John 3:3; 1 Pet 1:22,23; 1 John 3:9; 5:18; 2:29; 4:7; 5:1–4; John 3:6; Tit 3:5). The closest analogue for the term rebirth would be "conversion,"[48] although Scripture does not offer a proper definition for either. As a result, Lutheran divines have found it necessary refer to rebirth in two senses: the narrow and wider senses. The wider sense refers to the reception of new spiritual powers, the new position of justified sinner, and the new life in the Spirit—i.e. vivification, justification and sanctification. The narrow

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[47] "Things have come to such a pass within external Christendom that the confession: 'I believe in Christ,' means very little, since different meanings are attached to these words. Some hold that faith, as far as it saves, has as its object the entire Word of God, including the Law, while others teach, with Scripture, that the sole object of faith, as far as it justifies, is the Gospel and that willing obedience to the Law is not the cause, but the effect of justification." Pieper, *CD* II, 422.

[48] See below.

sense of rebirth is concerned with each of these individually, and justification in particular.[49]

The doctrine of rebirth impacts the theology of religions at the point of the bestowal of faith. Genesis demonstrates that the Fall into sin occurred as a result of unbelief on the part of our first parents (Gen 3:1). If this is to be overcome, and spiritual life the result, then the giving of new spiritual life must occur not in unbelief, but in faith. Whatever unbelief is sown which leads to spiritual death (Eph 2:2) is uprooted by faith and the new life in Christ (Eph 2:5). Entry into the kingdom of God is gained through new birth to a living hope and faith in the promises. Titus 3:5 reveals that God does save through the washing of rebirth, implying that rebirth is the impartation of faith, since faith alone saves. Furthermore, unbelievers stumble against the Rock, Jesus Christ, whereas the believers, the "living stones," become integral components of the church, the house Christ has built. Rebirth is largely synonymous with spiritual vivification (John 1:13), or the transformation that occurs within the individual as a result of faith.[50] Luther and Melanchthon contended that this transformation could not be limited to the restructuring of morals, but must be a radical regeneration ("new creation," 2 Cor 5:17) of the most essential components of humanity—reason, intellect, will, spirit, emotions—which were present, but corrupted, before such rebirth has taken place. As a result of this restructuring, God alters the direction in which the individual moves, that is toward God rather than away from Him.

In the narrow sense, rebirth is a momentary experience that may not feature a cognitive element that would discern it from enthusiasm, mysticism or the like (John

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[49] *FCS* III, 19–21.
[50] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 245–255.

5:24; 1 John 5:12). The man or woman that has been reborn goes from a state of unbelief and condemnation to one of belief and blessing instantaneously. At variance with many inclusivists is Scripture, which does not allow for a lingering, third "state" that exists between unbelief and belief.

> Renovation and sanctification will happen day by day (2 Cor 4:16; Eph 4:23; 2 Cor 7:1). But vivification and regeneration are nowhere said to happen day by day and gradually, or to be greater or lesser, as one regenerate person is said to be greater or more alive than another, but the transferring from death to spiritual life happens in an instant (John 5:24).[51]

Rebirth, therefore, is immutable in the sense that it cannot be strengthened or lessened, just as a living thing cannot be more or less alive.

When rebirth is interpreted more broadly, however, it can represent a more gradual process, efficacious just as the narrow sense, but ultimately resistible. As we have seen, Confessional Lutheran orthodoxy holds that the Holy Spirit works largely through the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. While it is possible for rebirth to occur outside of the obvious parameters of Word and Sacrament, such rebirth takes on an element of certainty if it is conditioned by the means of grace which are always and everywhere effective.[52] To aver that rebirth is not irresistible declares God's unwillingness to make the spiritually dead alive by His powerful hand. Humankind is free to live under its own rubrics and conditions, free from divine coercion, save the constant pleadings of the Holy Spirit to repent and believe the Good News. Thus, the most that should be said of the non-Christian traditions is that they be viewed as potential Christians rather than anonymous ones, since they can indeed be somewhere on the gradual path toward rebirth and faith.

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[51] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 249.
[52] Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 101--172.

The distinction between rebirth and conversion has been treated by Lutheran divines as quite small. Rebirth, making alive, and regeneration are similar in meaning, more often referring to justification broadly considered, rather than a renovation of man. This is contrasted with conversion, wherein the Holy Spirit actively transfers the spiritually dead person from a state of sin to a state of grace, in order that he or she might partake in the blessings of eternal life. Conversion has a discernible starting point, which Scripture declares is a state of sin which humanity lives in confident ignorance of or active revolt against God. This starting point is bereft of spiritual good, and characterized by evil, blindness, pride and perversity brought about through bowing of the will to Satan, and thus experiencing remorseless terror of God and His wrath.[53] Scripture identifies the source of this misery as sin viewed as a corruption of original righteousness. In other words, the formal starting point for conversion is the generalized sinful condition, while the objective starting point is liberation from the tyranny of Satanic authority. Conversion is at least bifurcal, and thus more complicated than is often allowed.

A state of faith for the sinner is the first (formal) goal of conversion. This state of faith has an observable, outward component, that of a heart of thanksgiving for the gifts given by the merciful God. The gifts God provides are, in fact, apprehended only by and through faith. The second (objective) goal is God Himself, whether known as the Triune God (Acts 26:18; Luke 1:16,17; Jer 4:1) or Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep (1 Pet 2:25). In general, then, conversion is present in the sinner when a generic "god"

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[53] "Conversion consists in transferring an unreborn person from the state of wrath and sin into the state of grace and faith, out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light; there are preparatory acts for conversion, in respect to which conversion is said to finally occur. . . . In this conversion the man to be converted is given new powers, first to recognize the sins he has so far committed, then beneficially to recognize Christ and his merit by which he is freed from sins." Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 259.

becomes the Triune God, that God becomes the sinner's God, and the sinner, now having been regenerated (or "reborn") begins to live in a state of grace under the true God's protecting hand.[54] Those who are not "converted" cannot be considered among the elect, although the formal and objective components of conversion suggest that even though conversion itself is instantaneous, the adherents of the various traditions, as well as those to whom God is conceptual or abstract nonsense, can be on the path *toward* conversion and elect-status, even without acknowledging it. A transition to confessing Christianity is to be anticipated and expected, and thus a conversion must be questioned without conscious assent to Jesus Christ as universal Saviour and Lord.

For confessional Lutherans, conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, Who effects such a miracle on persons without their permission or assistance. According to Scripture, the ultimate means by which the Holy Spirit converts is the Word, both Law and Gospel, although the Gospel is that which possesses the power to convert and save (1 Cor 1:21; Rom 1:16). Co-operation between the sinner and the Spirit can occur, but only after conversion, and never for salvific reasons. Chemnitz comments:

> It is a far different thing to speak of the powers or faculties of the mind, will and heart of man before conversion, before he has begun to be healed and renewed through the Holy Spirit, than when once he has begun to be healed and renewed. For then (in the latter case), through the gift and operation of the Holy Spirit, there are present and follow new movements in the mind, will and heart. Also, the healing and renewal itself is not such a change that is immediately accomplished and finished in a moment, but it has its beginnings and certain progress by which it grows in great weakness, is increased and preserved. But it does not grow as do the lilies of the field, which neither labour nor worry; but in the exercises of repentance, faith and obedience, through seeking, asking, knocking, endeavouring, wrestling, etc., the beginnings of the spiritual gifts are retained, grow, and are increased.[55]

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[54] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 258.
[55] Hoenecke, *ELD III*, 276.

In sum, if a man or woman were to possess the ability to participate in their own conversion, even using powers given to them by God, we would have to infer that conversion is not the unaided work of God.

As with rebirth, conversion may be resisted, despite the regenerative activity of the Holy Spirit, which is always effective. As we have seen, God desires that all persons would come to conversion and thus appropriate salvation for themselves. Further, the Word of God is always and everywhere prevailing, and therefore the Holy Spirit can be considered successful despite the presence of some in eternal damnation. Yet since human beings are entirely passive in God's salvific taxonomy, the grace that converts must be considered irresistible, and able to effect conversion without human will or natural assent.

In general, with regard to justification, the Lutheran Confessions contend that it is not so much achieved, as applied. Scripture reveals a good deal concerning the nature of the salvation Christ has won for humanity through His vicarious satisfaction. Human sinfulness brings wrath, but Christ's atonement brings the full grace of God displayed in the forgiveness of sins. Individuals can be certain of their salvation insofar as they are convinced that their sins, both original and actual, are truly forgiven.[56] *Soteriology,* in other words, is the application of salvation of those who by faith alone appropriate the forgiveness of sins. All soteriological teaching, including the theology of religions, must be beamed through the prism of objective reconciliation (justification), a reconciliation that is not effected by change in the human heart, but rather in a change in the heart of God (2 Cor 5:19; Rom 5:18). God's vicarious action on our behalf justifies humanity in His heart (Rom 4:25; 5:10).

[56] Pieper, *CD* II, 397–404.

It is the Gospel that mediates forgiveness, from the multitude of forms by which it is transmitted, either spoken, read, consumed in the Sacrament, pondered in the heart, etc. The reconciliation is object, wholly independent of the will of persons, but still requires acceptance. The path to salvation has been established by God; human beings, should they desire reconciliation with God, have no choice but to walk that path, and no other. Thus it is an error to assume that those that have no faith in the Gospel can possess the universal reconciliation earned by Christ, and the salvation and forgiveness such reconciliation earned (Mk 16:15,16).

The point at which a sinner believes (trusts) in the remission of sins, he or she comes, by virtue of this faith, into real, personal possession of the forgiveness of sins; in other words, he or she is fully justified (subjectively) before God. The justification is pre-existent; faith makes it actual and personal.[57] "Only he who denies—or has forgotten—that God has reconciled the world to Himself by Christ and now offers in the Gospel the reconciliation accomplished by Christ, the forgiveness of sins gained by Christ, as a free gift, will look for something more than faith as necessary, on the part of man, for justification."[58] Thus any religion that would be in Lutheran parlance a "religion of the law," that is any tradition which demands a behavioural change to appease a personal or impersonal god or gods, is searching for something "more than faith," and therefore cannot be considered salvific (Rom 3:28). As long as a person seeks to reconcile God with his or her own works, they remain *extra Christum* (outside of Christ).

For confessional Lutherans, objective reconciliation or justification is the essential divergence between the Christian religion and all other religions. Both inclusivism and

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[57] *Ap* IV, 48–60.
[58] Pieper, *CD II*, 404.

pluralism have marginalized justification in their paradigms, and as a result have caused previously invincible dissimilarities to become at best notional, and at worst beneficial. Neither full-bore inclusivism nor pluralism can showcase a thoroughgoing Christology, since Christology is necessarily preparatory to a doctrine of justification by grace through faith.[59] Indeed, as Pieper notes, justification by faith "represents the climax in man's earthly life, inasmuch as man in this life can reach no higher status."[60] Justification is that unique element in orthodox Christianity that is responsible for the dignity of the religion, as well as its primacy among the religions of the world.

Justification effects the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and by extension the entire Trinity in believers (Gal 3:2; 5:32; Eph 3:17; John 14:23). Only Christians can be correctly termed "the temple of the Holy Spirit" or "the temple of God" (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16), but this does not alter the larger position I have taken in this dissertation, namely, that no person can predict entirely the means of and degree to which the Holy Spirit acts outside of the institutional church. The most that can be averred is the great mystery that is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and/or the Trinity is the *unio mystica*, the mystical union with all others in the Body of Christ, which is His Church. The mystical union is a result of justification, not its basis. God's presence in the mystical union is ontologically distinct from His general presence in creation. Scripture declares that only believers may benefit from the mystical union, because it is accorded only to those who have saving faith in objective (confessed) justification (John 14:22–24). The mystical union cannot be abridged to some form of moral influence theory or to

[59] See above.
[60] Pieper, *CD II*, 405.

the indwelling of divine gifts.[61] It is not a pantheizing transformation or assumption of the substance of the Christian into the substance of the Triune God.

5.4 Salvation, the Theology of the Cross, and the Theology of Religions

The theology of the cross, one of Luther's unique contributions to systematic theology, came forth as a direct result of his considerations prior to the Heidelberg Disputation, and in connection to his 1525 work, *On the Bondage of the Will*, which has already been referenced in this dissertation. For much of his formative years, Luther viewed God as malevolent power that focused far too much attention on him. God demanded perfection, while knowing full well such perfection was a literal and metaphysical impossibility. Luther could not rid himself of the notion that God expresses the most negative qualities of earthly parents, namely neglect, absenteeism, and carelessness. His theology of cross, now so much a presupposition for much of Lutheran theology, evolved from Luther's abject terror that he and all creatures do not have, nor can they produce, the commitment to justice and love God demands of them. As Luther would later observe, God is aware of humanity's impotence in this regard, and does not require the civil righteousness demanded by the Law in order to attain salvation. The message of scripture is "salvation by grace through faith," and refers not to humankind but to God Himself, to Who He is and what He has done and still does for human creatures throughout history. Thus, the theology of the cross is an essential point of departure for any potential Lutheran theology of religions, since it speaks to the problems of the current era, while simultaneously maintaining the Christian's focus on God, and on what it means to be a fallen human being.

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[61] See above.

The theology of the cross is distinct from a theology of suffering, which is featured in many of the eastern religions and philosophies, Buddhism in particular. It must also be distinguished from a theology of glory, which declares humanity capable of behaviour that suits and pleases the Divine of one's choice. These distinctions are key elements in the theology of religions, insofar as those practitioners of a theology of suffering tend toward a pluralist understanding of salvation, while those favouring a theology of glory are more exclusivist in nature and practice. It is neither at these poles, but at some midpoint, where confessional Lutherans dare to tread.

What is the theology of the cross? First, in keeping with the Lutheran attention to law and Gospel, it should be noted that the theology of the cross is not a program of self-help for those that have experienced tragedy, pain or loss.[62] Luther knew of loss, but he chose not to fixate excessively on tragedies, or conversely, on blessings. His faith had God as its solitary object, not only for grace and goodness, but for all the blessings of body and soul. He was also deeply realistic concerning evil and suffering, as he fought with emotional, physical and spiritual pain most of his adult life. Still, suffering did not derail him.

The theology of the cross is the polar opposite of the theology of glory. Lutherans contend that a theology of glory is fallacious because it presumes to know something of God, as well as the glory inherent in a human being. The God of a theology of glory is unimpressed with the necessity of atonement, preferring instead to perform up to standard to fulfill all that humankind had mishandled. This God can and does make Himself known in various displays of power, and has no compunction against straightening humanity out when they stray, even if that disciplining might require

[62] Mk 10:42–5.

additional suffering or even death. Theologians of glory wish for a God that will vindicate their vision of religion and give them the *gravitas* and authority to judge their enemies sinful, godless, or worse. Once again, a Lutheran theology of religions must be exclusivistic, but would not express moral or intellectual superiority over the religions, since all persons require Christ's substitutionary sacrifice and His blood-bought righteousness. *Missio Dei,* as well as the theology of the cross, requires nothing less than to treat the religious other with respect and love.

Second, the theology of the cross denies that human reason can capture and hold who and what God is, and use such knowledge of human purposes. Theologians of glory, on the other hand, claim to possess mastery over the human mind as it ruminates on earthly matters and God's revelation of Himself in time, and that the invisible things of God are accessible to human intellect. In this way God becomes an abstraction, an amalgam of bits of human experiences, preconceptions and epistemologies. Remaking God in our image serves well one purpose for a theology of glory, namely, the desire for good human performance. Humankind are not so much "sinners" as possessors of a soiled identity that can be eradicated so that "good" behaviour and performance may flow from this new, God-infused identity. The theology of the cross is deeply threatening to such religious views because it attacks and lays waste to what is often considered the best in religion, that being pious works for the benefit of the neighbour. Humankind may act humanely and selflessly in the realm of civil righteousness, yet the theology of the cross will not allow human deeds to shape God's activity, or God's demonstration of mercy to be informed by the actions of people. For confessional Lutherans God is absolutely hidden, and absolutely present. He hides Himself and makes Himself known

according to His good pleasure.[63] His Holy Spirit is present according to the divine will, and He will save in keeping with His own timetable. Once again, Balthasar is correct: we should dare to hope—as theologians of the cross—that all persons would be saved.

In the third place, the theology of the cross is predicated upon Luther's understanding of the two kinds of righteousness. Luther's observations of humanity lead him to conclude that while original sin is a stain upon all persons, they are still capable of a multitude of acts in the realm of civil righteousness, or that which benefits the neighbour but does not carry with them a necessary reward in heaven. There are, then, two ways of being righteous which must be separated. "Active" righteousness (in the horizontal sphere) is that which human beings can achieve on their own terms, but contributes nothing to salvation. Virtually all religions other than Christianity offer some kind of tangible payoff for moral behaviour. "Passive" righteousness (in the vertical sphere), however, has as its source God and God alone. Human beings are righteous in God's sight simply because He created and re-creates us in Christ. Practitioners of the non-Christian religions can and do exhibit righteousness, but it benefits their neighbours rather than themselves. Confessional Lutherans who take the theology of the cross seriously recognize this, and declare to others that God desires all persons to be saved, and that all are welcome.[64]

Fourth, the theology of the cross shows how God has solved our human crisis: the cross displays God's nature, His method of dealing with evil and how He proposes to reclaim all of humanity for Himself. The Father authorized the Son's mission to go into the fallen world, take sin, death, and hell upon Himself at the crucifixion, and in so doing

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[63] Luther, *LW* 31, 41.
[64] Luther, *LW* 31, 41.

bury the sins of all persons for all time in a tomb just outside of Jerusalem. Although it is not discussed at length in scripture, confessional Lutherans contend that without Christ's sacrifice on the mount at Calvary, all persons remain under the Law's condemnation, and thus have no (spiritual) life in them. In the final analysis, the problem is sin, which brings about rejection of God and His standards for being truly human. Death is the primary symptom of sin disease, which may have as precursors disgust at personal foibles and failings, discouragement at self or others, or physical deterioration of health, memory, or reputation. Yet each of these symptoms can lead a defeated sinner to life and identity in the cross. Lutherans that are in conversation with adherents of non-Christian traditions have a particularly strong response to those dissatisfied with life and personal identity. Such conversations can lead to Calvary, and a recapitulation of the human dilemma.

Fifth, the theology of the cross focuses human attention on the God who is radically other, but also radically near, so much so that He is in the midst of our human afflictions, not just with sympathy or healing that carries a devotional cost, but with the very solution for the evils that cause us to suffer. Luther trusted in the merciful nature of God, yet did not find absolute comfort in scripture, where it appeared to him that God must work in both the good events and the evil ones.[65] He did not allow, however, for humans to question the hidden will of God, but he did express consternation at the question of why some are saved and some are not. In his Genesis lectures of 1535, Luther offered the following clarification for previous writings on the subject which I share at length:

> A distinction must be made when one deals with . . . knowledge, or rather with the subject of the divinity. For one must debate either about the hidden God or about the revealed God. With regard to God insofar as he has not been revealed, there is

[65] Ex 4:11; Isa 45:7; Amos 3:6.

> no faith, no knowledge, and no understanding. And here one must hold to the statement that what is above us is none of our concern. . . . Such inquisitiveness is original sin itself, by which we are impelled to strive for a way to God through natural speculation. . . . God has most sternly forbidden this investigation of the divinity.[66]
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> From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son. He shall die for your sins and shall rise again from the dead. And in this way I will fulfill your desire, in order that you may be able to know whether you are predestined or not. Behold, this is my Son; listen to him (cf. Matt 17:5). Look at him as he lies in the manger and on the lap of his mother, as he hangs on the cross. Observe what he does and what he says. There you will surely take hold of me. For "he who sees me," says Christ, "also sees the Father himself" (cf. John 14:9). If you listen to him, are baptized in his name, and love his Word, then you are certainly predestined and are certain of your salvation.[67]
>
> If you believe in the revealed God and accept his Word, he will gradually also reveal the hidden God, for "he who sees me also sees the Father," as John 14:9 says. He who rejects the Son also loses the unrevealed God along with the revealed God. But if you cling to the revealed God with a firm faith, so that your heart is so minded that you will not lose Christ even if you are deprived of everything, then you are most assuredly predestined, and you will understand the hidden God. Indeed, you understand him even now if you acknowledge the Son and his will, namely; that he wants to reveal himself to you, that he wants to be your Lord and your Saviour. Therefore you are sure that God is also your Lord and Father.[68]

For Luther, those who search for answers will find them only in the cross, where God perfectly reveals His power and wisdom in His broken body and spilled blood. A confessional Lutheran theology of religions must bring all persons here, or nowhere.

Lastly, the theology of the cross leads us to recognize not only the awful, sinful truth about ourselves, but also the astonishing fact that we are forgiven children of God, whose identity is no longer stained by sin and death. The Holy Spirit leads us to recognize ourselves in Christ alone. We are children of God, with great potential to share love, peace, and joy with all persons. Since God has a plan for all of humanity, all persons have a common interest in all other persons. Thus, the theology of the cross is

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[66] Luther, *LW* 5, 43–4.
[67] Luther, *LW* 5, 45.
[68] Luther, *LW* 5, 46.

fundamentally missional, and cannot be taught without confessing unambiguously the implications of the cross on the entire human community.

In the context of the universality of the Holy Spirit, the foolishness of the cross of Jesus Christ can and does move Christians to a vulnerable openness to persons of non-Christian belief, or no belief at all. Christians that fully comprehend atonement theory, the *ordo salutis*, and the theology of the cross, are well-suited to humble and Gospel-weighted communication. Strangely, as Harold Wells points out, "it is this very particularity and scandalously exclusivist/universalist faith in the crucified Christ as Saviour of the world which can move us to an attitude of humility in our encounters with others, and to a genuine eagerness both to learn and to share."[69]

[69] Wells, "The Holy Spirit and the Theology of the Cross," 492.

Chapter 6: *Sola Christus:* The Lutheran Attitude toward Interreligious Dialogue

Martin Luther's 1543 essay titled "On the Jews and Their Lies," with its comparatively vitriolic attitude to those of the Jewish faith, has often been cited as evidence[1] that Lutherans have been poisoned against a fair-minded and non-polemical view of the religions.[2] When combined with Luther's equally sharp critique of the "Turks" (Muslims), together these would indicate a trend toward poor interfaith relations.[3] The Lutheran Confessions have very little to say about the matter, and even though Lutherans have made some contributions to scholarship in the theology of religions, they have not taken a leading role in interfaith issues, at least until the last number of decades.

In this chapter I will examine the subject of interreligious dialogue as it is viewed by Christian traditions in general, and Lutherans in particular. A softly exclusivist, Christocentric, and hopeful theology of religions has already been established to be the position of confessional Lutherans. First, I will identify the need for and the purpose of interreligious dialogue to establish why interest in such dialogue is rising, if slowly, among Lutherans. Second, the role of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will be summarized, as well as the attitudes of various Protestant traditions toward dialogue. Third, Roman Catholicism's considerable contribution to this topic is examined, followed by the implications the defining elements of these have had and will have on confessional Lutheranism.

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[1] Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought,* 216–35.
[2] Luther, *LW* 47, 121–304.
[3] Luther, *LW* 46, 157–205; 43, 215–41; *WA* 53, 272–396

6.1 The Purpose of Dialogue

There exists today, as ever, an absolute need for dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. The question is: what conditions must be met before true communication can take place? Evangelical scholar Norman Geisler has warned that true, productive dialogue is at best unlikely because neither side in such a discussion would be willing to concede the veracity of the other's central hermeneutic, thus ending one modicum of common ground. Consider a discussion between a Christian and a Muslim. The Christian, if he or she has a high view of Scripture and revelation and is, for this reason, a relative exclusivist, cannot allow that the Qur'an contains any inherent authority as a rule for faith and morality. Likewise, the Muslim must declare the Christian Bible to be, at best, a spiritual guide, which never comes close to the Qur'an in revelatory stature.[4] Although each partner would most certainly allow the other to hold their sacred books as authoritative, they would have to with all respect and integrity reject any reference to them for corroboration. Geisler likens this to a bridge built from both ends, but with neither builder expressing the will to complete the span.[5]

Geisler's solution to the dilemma is somewhat disappointing, but also compelling. Regardless of how individuals may feel about the religious other personally, one must remember that all religions claim, to a greater or lesser degree, absolute truth. While the missional model of dialogue finds this an intractable issue, Geisler believes belief in

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[4] "Precisely the fact that aspects of foreign world views and religions, if they can be given a positive evaluation in any way at all, have always a place within the uniqueness of the event of Christ and indeed can often contribute to seeing aspects of this even more clearly and more richly, prevents Christians from assuming an attitude of intolerance, without delivering them up to the relativism that is common today." Balthasar, *Explorations Volume III,* 75–6..

[5] Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," 527.

religious truth to the exclusion of others can be of great value in dialogue—it is in the expression of absolute truth that the religions are creating, *ex post facto*, the common ground for dialogue. Geisler writes, "Dialogue presupposes common ground for meaning. . . . Only one worldview can be true. . . . The system that is true provided the basis. . . . Both participants believe it is their system that makes meaningful dialogue possible."[6] In other words, the possibility of truth forming within dialogue is the basis for that dialogue and the hope for its success, even as the dialogue partners possess a fierce belief that in the end their system of belief will be vindicated. But in order to get this far, two voices willing to articulate their revealed truth and be challenged are still required.

As we have seen, evangelism best serves the needs of the church when it is not viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means to engender further dialogue, where the possibility of non-coerced conversion truly exists. Effective evangelism leads directly to informed dialogue, where proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ can occur most effectively. For confessional Lutherans, dialogue must avoid the scourge of relativism so prevalent among Christian denominations. There must be a search for truth in which both sides participate, but one that does not allow for non-propositional truth or some individualized worldview to govern the discussion. Dialogue must not proceed at the expense of mission, and it must model itself after our Lord's interaction with and proclamation to the sinners of His day. Our attitude must be Christ-like, humble, sensitive and courteous.

> [Clark] Pinnock sees evangelicals involved in dialogue as walking the middle road between relativism and fideism. Ironically, given the history of those who traditionally support dialogical activities, both relativism and fideism kill true dialogue—relativism because it kills the motivation to dialogue (if all truths are roughly equal, why dialogue about them?), and fideism because it makes rational

[6] Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," 527.

> discussion a luxury one can either have or not have depending, I suppose, on how the Spirit moves one. Traditionally, conservative Christians have avoided dialogue because of its misuse. . . but that is not a good enough reason to reject it: "Bad dialogue should not drive out good dialogue."[7]

Dialogue is more than an activity; it is a way of life that reminds us daily to offer a verbal defence for the proclamation of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

6.2 Dialogue in History

The relationship of Christianity to the other religious traditions of the world has been of paramount importance since the beginning of the church. The early church understood herself in the context of first century Temple Judaism, but soon thereafter philosophical interlocutors from Greece and Rome helped reshape the church's theological conventions. To aver that interreligious dialogue is a relatively recent phenomenon fails to take seriously the church's mission in the world, and her necessary dialogue with the cultural traditions with which she intersected. The churches of the Reformation inherited this reality, but moderated the missional aspect in favour of challenging the prevailing theological teachings of the time, teachings that the Reformers believed were damaging the coterie of believers. The churches of the Reformation did not develop a theology of mission in the early stages of reform, because they had more pressing issues to attend to at home.

Dialogue and its relationship with mission has been a concern for Christians from the inception of the religion, but the scientific study of mission and dialogue did not begin in earnest until the twentieth century. The first World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in 1910 initiated debate over mission and dialogue, although those specific

[7] Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," 528.

terms were not utilized. Conference participants believed it to be a "decisive hour of Christian missions," and strove to produce a strategy to evangelize the entire world within a single generation.[8] One of the conference sub-committees, Conference Commission IV, was given the task of producing a missionary message that would be perceived by non-Christians as conciliatory, and thus worthy of the pursuit of a relationship.[9] But rather than relying on scriptural precedent and abstraction, Commission IV sought the input of missionaries in the field. Of concern were non-Christian doctrines and observances that appeared to offer the most comfort and hope to adherents, as well as those moral, intellectual and social conventions that hinder those who might respond to the Gospel's call.[10] What, if anything, do non-Christians find unsatisfactory about their traditions, and what possible points of contact may exist between these concerns and the Gospel? In the end, the Commission received many more responses from the field than were anticipated. Of particular interest was the recognition among the missionaries of the shortcomings and vagaries of the traditions they encountered, coupled with their strong belief that those Christians engaged in dialogue should be well-prepared for and genuinely sympathetic to those of other traditions who presented themselves for religious conversation. Any undue criticism of the religions, the missionaries recommended, must cease immediately.[11]

Commission IV operated within the traditional ecclesial realm and the overall vision of the Conference and its commitment to evangelization. At the same time the Commission was revolutionary for a number of reasons. First, while "dialogue" for most

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[8] Schulz," Fellowship Issues and Missions," 164.
[9] Stanley, "The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: sifting history from myth," 7–18.
[10] Cox, "The Harvest Field Controversy: the roots of mission and Christian unity at Edinburgh 1910," 147–154.
[11] Ariarajah, "Interreligious Dialogue and Mission in Protestant Theology," 39.

Christians through the centuries meant apologetics, the Commission attempted to ascertain the nature and quality of the religious experience of the non-Christians, refusing to declare their theological convictions as "primitive," "preparatory," "naturalistic," or "devoid of revelation."[12] The religious traditions, when they engage in dialogue, should be treated with the utmost respect and seriousness. Second, Christian dialogue participants were encouraged to listen carefully to and attempt to learn from other faiths, with the hope of enriching the Christian experience. The "best" elements of the religions were to be examined in the context of true adherence to those religions; only committed practitioners were allowed to speak on behalf of the individual religions.[13] Third, the Commission attended to the religious expressions with patience, so that the true meaning behind the doctrines and the spiritual search required to reach those doctrines, and that those religious expressions would not be too soon rejected for incompatibility with the Gospel. Fourth, in keeping with the spirit of true dialogue, the Commission allowed the religions to challenge and/or correct Christian assumptions, arguing that Christian understandings of all spiritual realities are not necessary unimpeachable. The Gospel message has not remained pristine through the centuries, and a living encounter with the religions may have the desirable benefit of revitalizing the church and sharpening her self-understanding as she moves forward.[14]

Another significant Missionary Conference was held in Tambaram, near Madras, in 1938, which followed the less impactful 1928 Conference in Jerusalem. The Tambaram Conference strove to promote interreligious dialogue, but also to address the

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[12] Ariarajah, "Interreligious Dialogue and Mission in Protestant Theology," 41.
[13] Phan, "The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: challenges for church and theology in the twenty-first century," 105–8.
[14] Ariarajah, "Interreligious Dialogue and Mission in Protestant Theology," 41.

quandary of growing secularism in both East and West. The Conference was somewhat marred by the unexpected walkout of the European delegation, who had sensed that the Commission on dialogue was drifting from the core positions of finality in Christ and the necessity of mission. Ironically, organizers for the Conference had wished to provide participants with the biblical and theological rationale for mission, and had requested the Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer (1888–1965) prepare a volume for study before the Conference began. Kraemer's book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) drew heavily on neo-Protestant theology of the time, in particular the dialectic of Karl Barth.[15] Kraemer enjoyed cordial relationships with most of the participants, despite his stanchly exclusivistic views—in his view, the Gospel is incompatible with the religions, and thus all persons must be challenged to respond in faith to the Gospel, although Kraemer does not define clearly what this response can or must be.[16]

6.3 The Impact of the World Council of Churches (WCC)

By the time the World Council of Churches (WCC) formed in 1948, Kraemer's exclusivising position had begun to be challenged by theologians and missionaries alike. The WCC recognized the controversy, and while working with the International Missionary Council (IMC) embarked on a study of "dialogue" as envisioned by Kraemer-style exclusivists and those that would consider their position moderate and inclusive.[17] It was determined by many in the WCC that traditional "mission" was failing as a tool for introducing non-Christians to the Gospel. The experience of plurality in

[15] See chapters three and four.
[16] Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World.*
[17] Kraemer, "The formation of the World Council and its significance for the relations of the churches to one another," 260–6.

exposure to the religions meant dialogue would hereafter be viewed as the proper approach to the religions. Furthermore, the Gospel as God's decisive revelation and the only way to salvation was largely maintained in the early years of the WCC.[18] Dialogue as continued to animate the WCC, particularly following a special conference held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1977. The conference's greatest achievement was the "Guidelines for Dialogue," which offered goals for dialogue that would not stand opposed to basic mission concerns. Since then, virtually all World Mission Conferences have attempted to give even-handed treatment to the theological issues identified in Thailand, but with at best limited success.

"Guidelines for Dialogue" was a watershed event in the history of interreligious dialogue, insofar as it proposed a "basic Christian confession" that "may also find understanding and even agreement among many of other faiths and ideologies."[19] Religions have contributed to the formation of communities, but the effect of culture and community on religion is equally profound. Pluralism, in the sense of religious toleration, is a common occurrence today, and individual households may harbour adherents of several religions simultaneously. The Christian community cannot help but manifest not only great cultural diversity, but also a variety of interpretations of the faith.

> Our experience as Christians in this widely scattered community is very varied. There are churches who live in situations of social, cultural and national suppression, where their identity is threatened and their freedom restricted. There are times and places Christians may have to stand apart from others in loyalty to Christ but this does not absolve Christians who have indulged in the temptations of cultural arrogance and communal exclusiveness, both consciously and unconsciously. Thus they have contributed to the divisions within the community

[18] The WCC's 1973 Bangkok Conference on "Salvation Today" declared that while Buddhists could be saved, they should not be considered partners in the experience of salvation, since this is gift offered out of water and the Spirit (John 3:5; Tit 3:5). Beyerhaus, "The Authority of the Gospel and Interreligious Dialogue," 143.

[19] "Guidelines for Dialogue," I, 1.

> of humankind, and have created antagonisms between different groups within the Christian community itself. Christians, therefore, must stand under the judgment of God.[20]

Just as the Gospel cannot be sabotaged by sinful Christian adherents, at the same time it cannot be limited to a particular culture, and, presumably, to one religion.

One great strength of "Guidelines for Dialogue" pertains to the attitude it recommends to Christians engaged in interreligious dialogue. Christians should not come to dialogue as "manipulators," but as "fellow-pilgrims" who have been touched and altered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and whom they "seek to meet anew in dialogue."[21] Christians should proceed not with an air of superiority, but from a position of humility that forbids issuing judgments while simultaneously avoiding such loaded locutions as "anonymous Christians" or the "cosmic Christ."[22] The Christian should present as repentant, since the dialogue partner must know that Christians are undeserving recipients of grace as well. Dialogue should be a joyful event for Christians, since the Holy Spirit gives witness to Christ as Saviour and Lord. And lastly, Christians should enter dialogue with integrity, which must include "the capacity to be wounded which we see in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and which we sum up in the word vulnerability."[23]

Scholars representing various WCC member churches have offered similar sentiments on behalf of their traditions.[24] The Hispanic Pentecostal Samuel Solivan

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[20] "Guidelines for Dialogue," I, 10.
[21] "Guidelines for Dialogue," I, 19.
[22] "It is the Christian faith in the Triune God Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirit which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance." "Guidelines for Dialogue," III, 1.
[23] "Guidelines for Dialogue," I, 21.
[24] Newbigin, "Christ and the world of religions," 202–213.

declares that the Holy Spirit is God's gracious gift to unbelievers and believers alike, and for this reason God's grace may be present in "non-traditional circumstances."[25] Writing from his Reformed perspective, Jay T. Rock is more circumspect, stating that since Reformed thinking does not require God to work through preordained means alone, the Holy Spirit may call individuals and communities directly. The church is not synonymous with the kingdom of God, and therefore should be considered the regular, narrow source of redemption, whereas the secular realm, and thus the faiths, is the foundation of irregular, wide redemption.[26] Anabaptists, following the Reformed, contend that God's work cannot be contained in only one institution or historical era, but must be discovered anew by every generation. Human knowledge of the relationship between the Spirit and the Logos is attenuated, and could have an analogue in the encounters between Christianity and the religions—we can know of the Spirit's activity in the religions, which is certain, by simple involvement and observation.[27] Nehemiah Thompson notes that the Methodist tradition follows the position of John Wesley, who "was not a universalist. He believed and preached that Jesus Christ was the saviour of the world. But he did not undermine the integrity and the light that exists in other faiths."[28] Eastern Orthodoxy, according to Michael Oleksa, confesses that "in the end, Christ will have us all in his eternal, loving embrace—Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Moslems, traditionalists, atheists, agnostics."[29] While Christians come to dialogue from their unique situations, and those situations differ from the religions, they cannot declare their God to be the only one in existence, and thus dialogue is more about fellowship than

[25] Solivan, "An Hispanic American Pentecostal Perspective," 41.
[26] Rock, "Resources in the Reformed Tradition," 63–65.
[27] Finger, "A Mennonite Theology for Interfaith Relations," 90–1.
[28] Thompson, "The Search for a Methodist Theology of Religious Pluralism," 102.
[29] Oleksa, "An Orthodox Theological Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue," 135.

the Gospel.[30] Lastly, Peter Slater avers that the Anglican community emphasizes the necessity of being "Christ-like" over traditional belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is Christians articulating the meaning of "Christ-like" and its implications for all people.[31]

6.4 Interreligious Dialogue and Roman Catholicism

Among Christian traditions, Roman Catholics have arguably shown the most interest in and commitment to interreligious dialogue. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, published in 1964 during Vatican II, helped create a spike in dialogue fervour, as within it Pope Paul averred that the church has since her creation been in dialogue with all of humankind.[32] This dialogue has taken place in four unique ways: dialogue with the world; dialogue, or broad ecumenism, with individual members of non-Christian traditions; dialogue, or narrow ecumenism, with adherents of non-Catholic, Christian traditions; and dialogue that occurs within the church herself. Paul did not, however, move in the direction of Roman Catholic inclusivist Karl Rahner, since he maintained a skeptical evaluation of the religions until his death. To Paul, the religions were, at best, beneficiaries of the Gospel message, while their status as transcendent realities was dubious. Still, Paul required dialogue to occur with the religions, although he did not foresee an ongoing or even official role for it in the life of the church.

Vatican II did not contain specific exhortations toward dialogue as central to the mission of the church, either. The Conciliar documents refer steadily to evangelization, that is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ to non-Christian who might

[30] Oleksa, "An Orthodox Theological Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue," 135.
[31] Slater, "An Anglican Perspective on Our Interreligious Dialogue," 154–5.
[32] Sherwin and Kasimow, eds., *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, 33.

then experience conversion and become members of the Body of Christ. Of course, the Council did make specific allusions to interreligious dialogue and encouraged participation in it,[33] but stops short of declaring dialogue as central to the missional function of the church. Dialogue may serve a useful function as "pre-evangelism," but that is the limit of its utility.

Jacques Dupuis maintains that while the conciliar documents were unconvincing as to Magisterial views on dialogue, that uncertainty changed in the post-Vatican II years, with the decisive progress in thought occurring in the 1980s and 1990s.[34] Significant among the postconciliar documents are "Dialogue and Mission," produced by the Secretariat for non-Christians, the 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, and the document "Dialogue and Proclamation," which has become the action plan for broad Roman Catholic ecumenism since its publication in 1991. Briefly stated, "Dialogue and Mission" lists the principle elements of missions as follows:

> 1. the witness of life; 2. "the concrete commitment to the service of humankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it"; 3. liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; 4. "the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together towards truth and to work together in projects of common concern"; 5. finally, announcing and catechesis. "The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements."[35]

"Dialogue and Mission" further specifies that interreligious dialogue is a regularized task of evangelization, and can take on many forms. Dialogue occurs among persons of good will, works justice and liberation for those in bondage, is engaged in by scholars debating deep issues of theology, and concerns prayer and contemplation at the deepest level. Dialogue is, in other words, the common search for the Absolute, and

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[33] *Nostra Aetate* 2, *Gaudium et Spes* 92.
[34] Dupuis, "Interreligious Dialogue, a Challenge to Christian Identity."
[35] See *Secretariatus pro non-christianis*, "Dialogue and Mission," 126–41.

> can be understood in different ways. Firstly, at the purely human level, it means reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion. Secondly, dialogue can be taken as an attitude of respect and friendship, which permeates or should permeate all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church. This can appropriately be called "the spirit of dialogue." Thirdly, in the context of religious plurality, dialogue means "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment," in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions.[36]

Redemptoris Missio adds that while dialogue and proclamation have a discernible connection, they "should not be confused, manipulated, or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable." Proclamation is primary, but dialogue is by no means subsumed under it. The church, in dialogue with the religions, desires to discover the *evangelica spermatika* (seed of the Gospel) hidden among the various traditions, that "ray of Truth" which enlightens all of humanity.[37]

According to the International Theological Commission's 1996 document "Jesus Christ and His mission of love and service in Asia," the theocentric pluralism so commonplace in recent times comes in large measure as a result of Immanuel Kant's dichotomy of the "noumenon" and the "phenomenon."[38] Since God is so utterly transcendent that He is inaccessible to humankind, God can be experienced only on the level of phenomenon that is necessarily conditioned by history, geography and culture. That there would result a plethora of images representing the same reality *a priori* is to be expected. The Commission identified epistemological relativity as a key stumbling block for interreligious dialogue, since such relativity reduces truth to secondary status,

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[36] *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 9.
[37] D'Costa, "Roman Catholic Reflections on Discerning God in Interreligious Dialogue"; *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 99–142.
[38] Synod of Bishops: Special Assembly for Asia, "Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'"

in addition to removing truth from any discussion of the soteriologic value of one religion over against another.[39] This further demonstrates the contemporary religious presupposition that the "truth question" has been fully addressed by the religions each providing their own unique set of criteria for truth. Interreligious dialogue has, in most respects, become less a pursuit of truth and more an exercise in pragmatism, leading to cultural and political tolerance to the expense of theological verity.

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendour* (the principle of truth) warned specifically against moral judgment acting as a surrogate for truth. When moral judgment forms the nexus of religion, the great traditions become little more than subjective concepts focused loosely on an absolute foundation that lacks identity and concern for humankind. Kant's noumenal understanding of the divine, by making God inaccessible to humanity, results in the contention that "all religions are relative, not because they tend towards the Absolute, but in all that they say and do not say."[40] The God that is relative cannot be immanent, condescending to presence in and with His creation. Therefore, when Christianity abandons truth in favour of a more existential, subjective concept of God, a central pillar of the faith, the presence of Christ and His Spirit in the church on earth, evaporates.

Then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger addressed these and many issues as the amanuensis for Pope John Paul II in the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. In it Ratzinger laments that the theological reality of the modern epoch is one of ambiguous thought, a crisis of consciousness the limits the human spirit to its own immanence, or interiority.[41] Interreligious dialogue, on the other hand, is a means by which the truth becomes

[39] Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 40.
[40] Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 43.
[41] *Fides et Ratio*, 83.

apparent today, because of the conviction that dialogue carries within it the truth that participants seek.[42] When the church desires dialogue and views it as a necessity, prejudices diminish, and unity and friendship between people is promoted.[43] *Fides et Ratio* identifies the Christian who lives by faith, not by sight, as the one who seeks truth regardless of where such truth may lead. The path to truth is not traversed alone; we need others to travel along with us.

Fides et Ratio places into words Roman Catholicism's attitude toward conversation with the religions—"interreligious dialogue today increasingly appears to be an integral part of faith in Jesus Christ and the mission of the church."[44] In fact, there would be no Christian faith except in contrast to the religions. This implies that the quest for truth must come from many directions simultaneously. This is not to aver that the quest for truth and the recognition of otherness are differing aspects of the same ontological content.

> There are two opposing distortions of interreligious dialogue. On the one hand, otherness is repudiated and demonized in order to safeguard the absolute value of truth. On the other hand, otherness has been emphasized to the point of doing away with truth. *Now there can be no true dialogue that does not take account of the challenge posed by the Christian claim to uniqueness.*[45]

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[42] Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, 27–35.

[43] "...this reveals the whole paradox of the Catholic Church. It is the pure tradition of Christ into the world, and, in order to radiate, it must also be a structure. It is both in motion 'away from itself' and abiding 'in itself.' It is both wave and particle, dynamic and static. It is not an association that is registered as an entity and pursues aims 'for the benefit of members.' The reconciliation of the world has already been achieved, and Christ's selection of the individual messengers...is simultaneous with this work of reconciliation...the Church *is* first and foremost the radiation of the redemption (far beyond all structure), and in order to be this radiation it *has* structure." Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith: On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic*, 47.

[44] Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 46

[45] Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 46. Emphasis mine.

The question to which this reality leads is this: Can there be dialogue between Christians and non-Christians that presupposes both the otherness of the partners and the unity of truth to which both sides aspire?

Fides et Ratio presupposes that all persons possess *a priori* a yearning for truth. If there exists a light that enlightens all persons, then there must exist a path on which those who crave the truth may seek after it.[46] In that act of seeking sinners become truly human, but only insofar as they remain in the ambit of truth. Removed from this region, humankind's very existence becomes suspect and fraught with uncertainty, and therefore has a future, but with no discernible meaning. For this reason *Fides et Ratio*, echoing *Gaudium et Spes*, opined that "intelligence . . . is not limited to the sphere of phenomena alone, but can also attain intelligible reality with true certainty, even if, as a consequence for sin, it is partially darkened and debilitated."[47] Human intelligence is the ground on which persons make their quest for true religion, which is their first vocation—the one who seeks the truth is simultaneously the one who lives by faith.[48] Ratzinger, writing for Pope John Paul II, declares that

> When the why of things is investigated with integrity, in search of the ultimate and most complete answer, human reason reaches its summit and opens to religion. In fact, religion represents the highest expression of the human person, because it is the culmination of his rational nature. It springs from man's profound aspiration for the truth and is the basis of his free and personal search for the divine.[49]

All this considered leads Ratzinger and the Holy Father to the conclusion that religious truth is dialogical, and can serve to create points of tangency between those within the

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[46] *Fides et Ratio,* 2.
[47] *Fides et Ratio*, 15.
[48] *Fides et Ratio*, 83.
[49] *Fides et Ratio,* 33, 28.

Christian tradition, and those who are engaged in an authentic and sincere search for the truth.

Interreligious dialogue must occur from a position of respect, as each party allows the other to search for common truth which, exclusivist Roman Catholics, Protestant and confessional Lutherans contend, is grounded solely in the merits of Jesus Christ.[50] Such participation is by no means optional; all Christians testify to the supreme dramatic event of the cross and empty tomb (John 18:37–19:13), and the truth personified in the God-man (Eph 4:21; Col 1:15–20; John 14:6). The Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* declared that the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the entire content of the eternal Word.[51] The body of Christ, His entire person, reveals the gracious heart of the Father.[52] "While the church, speaking through the magisterium of the current pope [John Paul II], affirms that dialogue is intrinsically necessary to the proclamation of the Gospel, it [sic] also insists on the need to achieve man's call to unity, which is realized precisely through truth animated by love."[53] No person, therefore, comes to know the personal face of God through any means other than through Jesus Christ, in Whom resides all truth in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Truth is a unique event whose manifestation is the primary catalyst for dialogue.

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[50] "The Christian is called to *cooperation* and *"dialogue"* with all men. The world "dialogue" that [the Second Vatican Council] uses so much seems to many people to have a note of something that does not commit one to anything and relativizes everything....In reality, dialogue is harder than a mere one-sided proclamation. It means: holding fast, taking up one's position against inevitable opposition....This is the "dialogue of salvation," which must be characterized by the unity of truth and love, of clarity and humility, of prudence and trust." Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology Volume III*, 254.

[51] *Dei Verbum*, 4.

[52] "This personalization of Jesus being the 'way, the truth, the life' rules out any purely phenomenological and functionalist interpretation of Christ's extraordinary claim to be the 'truth.' Jesus is thus not only 'the truth relative to men,' as if he had made known to us nothing about his person. Jesus is not only a revealer or preacher of truth like the ancient prophets or the apostles who were only instruments of revelation. None of them ever claimed to be the truth. Jesus is the only way because he is identical with the truth itself and is thus the very fullness of revelation. He is, in his person, the total and definitive revelation of the Father par excellence." Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 69.

[53] Bordoni, "Christology and Truth," 55.

6.5 Toward a Confessional Lutheran Theology of Dialogue

Dialogue is communication between persons of differing beliefs with the intent of investigation of one or more issues of certain value to each. In discussion the parties attempt to gain increased appreciation for the other's beliefs, as well as the rationale for holding those beliefs.[54] Self-expression, though of value in the longer term, must be subverted so that the beliefs held by the other may be given proper consideration. Among dialogue's many benefits are augmented self-understanding, improved dialogue and relations with others, and broad-based information-gathering beneficial to all those involved. What is not required of the participants is that one or both dialogue partners give up their own system of beliefs in favour of a doctrinal *via media*. It is essential, however, that the participants repudiate any claim on truth to the exclusion of others. Each must be open to consider the possibility of error within their system, as well as the existence of pervasive truth in their dialogue partner's system.[55]

Michael Jones points out that dialogue often brings a greater degree of objectivity with regard to personal beliefs. If this is so, Jones opines, then dialogue is potentially the only means by which a person can avoid destructive epistemological relativism.[56] Dialogue also challenges the Western notion of truth by correspondence, or the view that any held theory is true insofar as it pertains to something in reality—in other words, a

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[54] In addition to a high view of Scripture and supernatural knowledge of God, a proper Christian understanding of dialogue is characterized by respect for non-Christian traditions which notes well their reasonable elements, as well as allowance for different approaches among different cultures which depend on many factors. Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," 518.

[55] "Religions and ideologies describe and prescribe for the whole of life; they are holistic, all-encompassing, and therefore tend to blot out, that is, either convert or condemn, outsiders even more than other institutions that are not holistic. Thus, the need for modesty in truth claims and for acknowledging complementarity of particular views of the truth is most intense in the field of religion." Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, 21.

[56] Jones, "Evangelical Christianity and the Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue," 378–96.

statement or doctrine is true if it has referents outside of itself that have been taken as true. In a globally inter-dependent age, and the emergence of religious pluralism as incontrovertible fact, dialogue allows for disparate ideologies to communicate not as rivals, but as neighbours, with the hope that such conversation will facilitate peaceful coexistence between even the most diametrically opposed systems of belief. Thus, in my view, interreligious dialogue has become absolutely indispensable, and can achieve social, political and ideological benefits that cannot be expected in any other manner.

Confessional Lutherans are deeply concerned about truth, as it informs theology and as it is transmitted between religious systems. At the core of this concern is the belief that the Scriptures contain the only completely reliable source for truth in doctrine. At the same time, however, Lutherans realize that these Scriptures must be interpreted, and that the limited faculties of the interpreter may lead to errors of a greater or lesser degree. Lutheran pneumatological thought declares the Holy Spirit to be the fundamental guide to Scriptural hermeneutics, if not on a constant basis.[57] For example, Scripture speaks to the reality of the earth and its creation, but does not comment on whether the earth is round or flat. For that humankind turns to evidence from experience to prove, as much as is practically possible, which of these theories is true. As was presented in chapters one and two, Christians cannot be absolutely certain as to the nature of the will, whether it is fully free or subject to some form of causal determination. Lutherans have decided upon the latter, but unimpeachable proof for the position does not exist.[58]

All Christians, in fact all persons, are engaged in a constant pursuit of truth, so far as it can be ascertained by finite intellects. We wish to have certainty that the system of

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[57] Luther, *LC* II, III, 38–46.
[58] Luther, *De servo arbitrio.*

belief to which we cling is ostensibly true. Since infallibility is unavailable to human beings, the only means to assess the relative truth of Christianity is in the realm of comparative symbolics, or interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue allows for Christians to consider the persuasiveness, logic, and viability of their faith by comparing it on many levels to available religions and worldviews. Lutherans largely have not been effective on this score, preferring to remain largely insulated from dialogue with the religions in favour of protracted debate and scholarship on key Lutheran motifs, namely the nature of the Sacraments and the implications of church and ministry.[59] It is my desire that confessional Lutherans will take a greater interest in the religions, for to avoid contact with them is to be obscurantist, and leads inevitably to a lack of perception of secularized believers and their unique spiritual needs. If Christianity is epistemologically and soteriologically true, as I have argued, then fear of the other is unwarranted and damaging.

Luther himself was anxious to persist in the truth, as it creates and maintains certainty of salvation and freedom in the Gospel. Thus, if Lutherans wish to remain true to Luther's legacy, they should be absorbed in assisting non-Christians to find the same truth. The Christian's efforts to share the Gospel in dialogue with the religions should prompt those religions to begin to think critically about their own traditions. All human beings' worldview is shaped by the presuppositions they hold, whether they are aware of their presence or not. Without an objective source to observe us, it would be virtually impossible for us to detect, identify, and determine the relative value of our presuppositions. Christians can learn great and valuable lessons only through recognition

[59] For an excellent treatment of theology in context see Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," 531–54.

of their presuppositions, and such is available only from outside the Christian tradition, namely, among the religions.

Given the interdependency of all persons, especially as products, services, and ideologies are easily exported, many opportunities for dialogue with the religions present themselves daily. Religious pluralism, once considered nonsense, is now commonplace. Lutherans daily find themselves in situations and among persons of other religious traditions wherein they are in the minority. We should never eschew contact with these persons, particularly since the Gospel demands our commitment to their spiritual needs. Unfortunately, the Canadian context has in recent years become an increasingly hostile environment to evangelical Christianity. "Freedom of religion," for Christian and non-Christian alike, does not have the same ring as it may have a generation past. In engaging seriously in interreligious dialogue, Christians can demonstrate that freedom of religion means, among other things, the availability of choices about which one is allowed to make an informed decision. And in order for choices to be accessible, each religion must have at least a working knowledge of the others so that those choices are never choked off or relativized. For Lutherans, freedom of religion at its most basic level means freedom from coercion to religion, Christianity or otherwise.[60]

At the very least, all persons wish to be treated with a modicum of respect, and when in need, with compassion. The so-called "Golden Rule" (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) implies that if everyone would simply act in a manner consistent with how they would wish to be treated, suffering in the world would decrease dramatically, and immediately. In addition to respect, persons desire to not be treated as ignorant of basic truths of logic. Why, then, should so many, Christian and non-

[60] Luther, *SC*, Preface, 1–3.

Christians alike, treat others as though the religions to which they cling are baseless, and they are fools for following such blatant untruth? Confessional Lutherans have been known to attack the beliefs of others without endeavouring to truly comprehend what those beliefs actually are. It is commonplace in discussing religious belief for participants to have no idea why they believe as they do, they just do. This does not mean their beliefs are trivial, and their religious tradition meaningless. Lutherans should desire to present their beliefs confidently but humbly, and be open to hearing, rather than simply listening, to the declaration coming from their dialogue partner.

Interreligious dialogue is a universal Christian vocation, as much a component of a life of faith as *philia* and *agape* loves.[61] Scripture declares that to love one's neighbour is to simultaneously love God. To love God outwardly is to seek justice and peace for all neighbours local and abroad. To love God inwardly is to engage the other in dialogue in order to move toward order and genuine community built upon some form of religious unity.[62] The term "dialogue" could be interchangeable with mission, provided that it is directed toward all persons in the global community, and that its content pass beyond mere pleasantries and side-by-side existence into genuine consanguinity and fellowship. For this reason interreligious dialogue is exceedingly complex, and often discouraging. Lutherans are aware of the trials interreligious dialogue can engender, particularly with regard to historical mistrust and possible hatred for past injustices done in the name of "religion." True dialogue does not treat the partner as a combatant to be defeated and,

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[61] Bernhardt, "Coordinates for Interreligious Discernment from a Protestant View: Transcendence—Freedom—Agape—Responsibility," 64–66.

[62] "Dialogue is multilayered. Everyone who has entered into dialogue has quickly discovered this fact. It involves the human, social, and ultimate dimensions of our lives simultaneously. As we come into the presence and mystery of one another through the pathways of silence, word and action, we find ourselves touched and moved at every level of our being." Bryant, "Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue," 7.

preferably, crushed.[63] In fact, only true openness to the other and a willingness to change the process for the positive can ensure, from a Lutheran Christian point of view, that the true vivifying nature of the Gospel is present.[64] That which concerns the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf is best served not by conversion, but by patience and love through those that have been graced by Christ and desire to live life in thankfulness and praise for all that they receive.

Purposeful dialogue with the religions cannot and should not be conducted from a position of superficiality, where one or both parties are committed to pedantic conversation and nothing of more substance. Since faith is the only true *shibboleth* of Christianity, Christians must come to dialogue from a position of faith. If faith is not present, all dialogue will be experienced as external, and the points optional, and nothing of lasting quality on either side will result. However, when both partners strive to communicate from the position of faith, and for Christians this is the Gospel of Christ and the mystery of the Trinity, each side can grow in self-understanding and in recognition of Godly vocation. Confessional Lutherans are cautious with respect to what passes as faith, insofar as the acknowledgement of God *qua* God is not sufficient—God must be carefully defined in a three-fold, triune sense, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and not as three discrete "persona" in God, or another unorthodox rendering of the doctrine of God. For Lutherans the Christian faith is radically theocentric; faith is both objective (in God, *fides quae creditor*) and subjective (saving faith, *fides qua creditor*). We bring these

[63] "(1) dialogue begins when people meet each other; (2) dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust; (3) dialogue makes it possible to share a service to the community; and (4) dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness." Langley, "One More Step in a Journey of Many Miles," 223.

[64] "Dialogue involves mutual transformation. For those involved in dialogue, the very process itself is transforming. It is transforming, not necessarily in the sense of forsaking old convictions, or even in the sense of abandoning long-standing patterns of action, but in the sense that through dialogue one can be raised to an enlivened and more vital way of being in the world." Bryant, "Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue," 8.

presuppositions to the dialogue table, not to preside over our discussion partner, but so that he or she may know more of the mystery of Almighty God that is present in Christian traditions of doctrine, worship and prayer.

If Christian mission is inspired by love as it is reflected from the Word, then how could mission be ignored? How could those so rich in grace withhold the gifts of God from fellow sinners in need? Lutherans have, for the most part, viewed mission as monologue rather than dialogue. For Christians to fully comprehend the religious adherent, to become aware of what is truly at play within them, we must become keenly aware of their faith postulates, and as much as in us lies, entertain their standards and values within us. We must attempt to struggle with the same issues, in fact to participate in them as human being to human being. As has been stated, evangelism and dialogue are separate, but not mutually exclusive. Evangelism, when performed appropriately, feeds naturally into dialogue, when each side trusts the other enough to participate as honestly as possible, "giving answer with gentleness and reverence" (I Pet 3:15).

> To love anyone means to esteem and seek the development of their personhood, and this entails allowing space for their creativity and trying to understand and integrate into one's own continuum of worth their unique achievements. At a recent dialogue with Buddhists, a Japanese Christian shared that it had been very painful for him as a young man, and was still, to be unable to honour the spiritual and cultural treasures of his Shinto-Buddhist heritage. He could hardly stand to think, he said, not only that his forebears had not entry into the Christian heaven, but also that they might possibly be admitted if stripped of their own concrete historicity and religiousness.[65]

6.6 Some Final Considerations

There is no exaggeration in stating that Christians have magnified religious difference with non-Christian traditions, often distorting the true teachings of those

[65] Foster, "Christian Motives for Interfaith Dialogue," 29.

traditions for personal or political ends. Humanity is a patchwork of religious persuasions to be sure, but over-zealous focus on what separates the religions can and has led to fear, jealousy, and on occasion violence. Nevertheless, to attempt to create a basic sameness among the religions to bring about an artificial "peace" can have a similarly deleterious effect, that of a damaged respect for *the other*. When religion is reduced to a common denominator, distinctive features fall away, and the very existence of the traditions themselves is threatened. Furthermore, the transformation the religions advocate would be largely unnecessary if all religious communities were homogenized. To that end, in the following I will suggest some alternative strategies for the conduct of interreligious dialogue from a confessional Lutheran perspective, leading to some recommendations.

In chapter two of this dissertation I summarized the thought of John Hick, the Scottish pluralist and a father of theology of religions scholarship. As a child Hick began to question the radically exclusivist position of his fundamentalist (his word) Christian home and church. He could not abide the seeming certainty that only properly repentant Christians would enjoy salvation. In his various writings in the theology of religions he charges that any declaration of superiority by a religious tradition is immoral, and the religions are themselves equally valid responses to an unknowable ultimate Reality. This Reality, which Hick labels "the Real," dons masks in the presence of different cultures, and allows the indigenous population to "colour" that mask to suit their culturally conditioned needs. Thus, if all religions are valid, then Jesus Christ cannot be the locus for salvation for all persons. He is, at best, an avatar, whose qualities are shaped not by scripture, but by socioeconomic histories and cultural settings. Christianity, says Hick, has no real advantage in the religious public square.

This leads to my first point, which is to say that Lutherans engaged in interreligious dialogue should try to comprehend the traditions of their dialogue partners using the nomenclature and definitions of that tradition. In addition to a "flattened" religious landscape, Hick's pluralist views show a disturbing disregard for diversity among religious beliefs and practices. Because in Hick's assessment religious particulars are of secondary importance, it is difficult to see why a conservative Jew might invite a Christian friend to Sabbath, or why the Christian should bother to accept such an invitation. His position is incoherent also with respect to religious persecution—why would someone remain pacifistic in the midst of slaughter in order to observe some religious requirement of no relative value? Hick advocates treating others as basically identical religiously to ourselves. While it is a laudable egalitarian goal, in interreligious dialogue, difference is the catalyst and fuel to move participants along to greater understanding and compassion. For example, Christians speak loudly and repeatedly of the necessity of salvation and redemption. However, while these terms are fundamental to Christian theology, they cause a myriad of challenges in dialogue with Muslims. Muslim theologian Riffat Hassan neatly summarized the problem:

> Since *salvation* and *redemption* have no particular meaning in the Islamic tradition . . . the asking of such questions points to either an ignorance of Islam . . . or an assumption that concepts which are important in the Christian tradition must necessarily be so in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. There comes a time when we have to recognize that we cannot give authentic answers to inauthentic questions.[66]

In general, we cannot assume that doctrines fundamental to Christians must be found to have meaning and purpose in the others religions as well. We should seek to appreciate our dialogue partners by attempting to understand the other religion in its own terms.

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[66] Hassan, "A Muslim's 'Dialogue' with Abraham Joshua Heschel," 157.

Second, Lutherans engaged in interreligious dialogue should move beyond mere toleration of difference, which can result in moral and doctrinal relativism. Pluralism and relativism have become the default positions for most secular students, who are taught to avoid making relative value judgments under any circumstances. Yet to communicate the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Christian tradition requires a willingness to defend truth claims with which other religions might disagree.[67] We must afford our dialogue partners the same courtesy. Lutherans are suspicious of any setting aside of original Christian convictions, such as affirming the true divinity and true humanity of Christ, in order to avoid causing offense. But Lutherans are aware that having the strength of convictions is contingent upon being truthful with oneself, the dialogue partner, and both traditions. Without such attention to the process, dialogue can never move beyond simple proselytization.

> One might say that dialogue is the other side of the obligation to proclaim our [Christian] in this world. There are millions of people in our world who are seeking God, who are looking for a way to live in accord with God's will, who want to find meaning, a reason for living in their daily situations. We have a duty to share with them the Christian faith that has given direction to our lives, that inspires us and gives us the courage to love, that sustains us and gives us reason for hope in moments of failure and desperation.
> In our world there are millions of people, who are not Christians, who are good, honest, and self-sacrificing, who are not *searching* for God, precisely because they have already *found* God and they encounter the Divine in and through the religion they already follow. . . . They love their religion. It means as much to them as our own Christian faith means to us. Do we have anything to say to such people? Do we have anything to learn from them?[68]

The third issue pertains to the concerns that proselytism raises, concerns that are compelling because the popular imagination has declared proselytism a *faux* conversation. Proselytism is uni-directional, a monologue carried out by one who is

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[67] Dickens, "Interreligious Dialogue: Encountering an Other or Ourselves," 211.
[68] Curaming, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Mission of the Catholic Church," 32.

disinterested in the opinions of the other. Dialogue, in contrast, is bi-directional, and seeks a mutually instructive and beneficial exchange between parties. Luther's theology of the cross identified religious triumphalism as unacceptable, on the grounds that it breeds self-righteousness and is needlessly provocative. In this Lutherans are in agreement with Pope John Paul II, who declared interreligious dialogue to be a unique and effective form of evangelization: "Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility, and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side."[69]

Lastly, those who are engaged in interreligious dialogue must develop respect for what is radically, even infinitely, different from themselves. This is by no means optional: treating the stranger with kindness, insofar as he or she is a stranger, is a biblical imperative (Matt 25:35; Heb 13:2). The diversity evident in humanity is more than an accident of evolution—it is the sign of a God that is able to create a remarkable variety of human beings. Not only this, Lutherans can argue that the Trinity provides a perfect analogy for the compatibility of unity with differentiation. Just as there is an acceptable unity and diversity in God, the human family need not be homogeneous. In other words, dialogue offers a mechanism by which two parties can discuss religious truth in a way that is evangelization at its core, and conversation to the naked eye. For Lutherans concerned with Christocentric exclusivism and biblical truth, this is the best of both worlds.

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[69] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 56.

Conclusion

The question I have addressed in this dissertation—what do confessional Lutherans say about the religions—is derived from that posed by Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They told Him, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus asked them, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answered Him, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13–16). Since the first century Christians have searched for answers to these most fundamental of issues, namely, who is Jesus of Nazareth, and how should we name Him? The task of preaching, both within the church and without, seeks to proclaim the truth that Jesus is the Son of God, the One about Whom we speak and confess. In general, Christians are constrained to confess Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, in order to give meaning and relevance to the situation in our world. They are prepared, in season and out, to respond to Saul's terrified cry, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5).

Lutherans actively engage in satisfying Jesus' original question, "But who do you say I am?" by communicating the Gospel to non-Christians in the winsome manner of a sick man showing another where to find the hospital. The question of whether there is salvation in the name of Jesus, and His alone, is becoming the primary issue of survival for the Christian church. As we have seen, fidelity to the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen is a most urgent matter of *status confessionis.* In addition to multiple non-Christian religious expressions there exists a multitude of "Christologies" that promise salvation independent of the historic source of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This means, among

other things, that the religions should be viewed as roughly equivalent in terms of their ability to deliver saving grace and epistemological truth.

As we have seen, in his *Larger Catechism* Luther states that

> These [three] articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [*ausser der Christenheit*], whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[1]

Here Luther declares that individuals "outside the Christian church" can or do "believe in and worship only the one true God." Luther's opinion with respect to the various non-Christian religions was a "soft" exclusivism—Christ is universal saviour, but God has not limited access to Him to the institutional church. In other words, the quality of faith held is not the compelling issue, but rather the god or gods which are the object of that faith. Only those whose hearts cling to Christ have the one, true God.

In this dissertation I have argued that while Lutherans are by no means in agreement on a theology of religions, the true, historic Lutheran position is exclusivist, tempered by a genuine desire that all persons would "be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth." Luther's distinction between the hidden and revealed God allows that "believing" and "worshiping" can be encounters with the hidden God that provides undeserved kindness to sinners.

Luther's exegesis of key Biblical referents led him to conclude that humanity requires more than a general revelation of God's existence and His activity, even when that activity is filled with grace and mercy. God's self-revelation does not generate

[1] Luther, *LC* II, III, 66.

salvation automatically. Thus, while one need not have access to the Church in order to be saved, God delivers the "good news" of His merciful attitude toward sinners there. Presence and participation in a worshiping community carry benefits, including confidence in God's love and blessing, reduced fear of death and eternal wrath, the real presence of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament, and illumination and sanctification through the Holy Spirit.

Luther's reading of Paul brought him to the conclusion that all persons, regardless of their personal morality and outward piety, have a working knowledge of the existence of God, but not of His benevolent attitude toward them and all humankind. In the strict sense, simple knowledge of God's existence is not sufficient to enjoy His salvation. Personal, saving faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ is absolutely required. Saving knowledge of God is not attainable unless the hidden God graciously wills Himself to be made known. This will to make God known is universal, and God daily, through Word and Sacrament and other means He deems appropriate, allows humankind to observe and obtain His grace and mercy. The soft exclusivism I have proposed and developed throughout this dissertation speaks clearly to the centrality of the means of grace, while allowing that God is free to reveal Himself in other ways as He is moved to do so. Christocentrism declares Christ to be the linchpin of salvation, but does not limit the manner in which He makes Himself known. Thus, confessional Lutherans are able to proclaim a Christ that is universal saviour, and desires the salvation of all persons, and is taking strides to acquire more redeemed souls *ecclesiam* and *extra ecclesiam.*

For the purposes of interreligious dialogue and Christian witness to persons of different faith traditions, Luther's attitude to the religions has valuable implications. One

cannot state categorically that the practitioner of another faith is by necessity worshiping a false god. Lutherans do not relativize religious distinctives, but rather embrace the differences as proof of religious desire and commitment. Moreover, the differences between the religions are not first and foremost doctrinal, such as concern over the Muslim concept of heaven or the idea of *karma* recognized by Hindus. Luther, ever the religious pragmatist, would simply have us ask: what is it that you have, as a practicing Buddhist? What do you receive from the one in whom you believe and to whom you pray? What is your reward for your devotion? Once compensation or its lack is identified, Lutherans should spend time comparing religious notes, as an aperture to fruitful dialogue.

The religions of the world, Christianity the only exception, are religions of the Law, whose adherents are required, for the most part, to appease any gods or reality through acts of devotion, personal sacrifice or ablution. Non-Christians, then, when they speak of "religion" they mean the antithesis of the Christian view. Non-Christians have no knowledge of the saving Gospel by definition, but have some natural knowledge of the Law that is written on all human hearts (Rom 1:32; 2:15). As a result, the entire religious attitude of the non-Christian resides in the ambit of the Law, even if the adherents claim to reject legalism.[2] To be fair, Luther found the church in his day to be a

[2] "In the ease of all men who seek to placate God by their own efforts we find that their personal relation to God is one of fear, of hopelessness and despair, resulting from an evil conscience, from the consciousness of God's wrath. The reason for this unhappy relation is that the attempt to reconcile God through works is doomed to failure; for "by the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). No man has ever eased his evil conscience through his works; Scripture states that all Gentiles without exception "have no hope" and are "without God in the world," Eph. 2:12. ("At that time"—as long as men are Gentiles, unbelievers, they are under God's wrath.) And their many sacrifices did not in the least alter their "personal relation to God," for these sacrifices were not offered to God, but to devils (1 Cor. 10:20). In spite of all his religious endeavors the heathen's personal relation to God is and remains a relation of fear and despair.—This applies, of course, also to those within visible Christendom who seek to establish good relations with God through their own works." Pieper, *CD* II, 11.

religion of the Law as well, and recognized the bondage that attempts to please god or the gods can engender. He nurtured a theology of the cross in order to focus attention away from a righteousness of work, and onto the righteousness of Christ that is by and through faith. Luther could not have known at the time, but the theology of the cross is uniquely exclusivistic, although it does not allow for claims of moral or rational primacy over the religions of the world, since all persons regardless of their station require the righteousness purchased by Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. The theology of the cross, then, encourages all persons engaged in the *missio Dei* to treat the religious other with tolerance, love, and compassion.

Scripture declares Jesus Christ to be the only Mediator between God and His creation. Since there is only one God, there can only be one Mediator, who Himself must be both divine and human. Martin Luther spoke often of a "happy exchange" that has taken place between God and humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Today Lutheran Christians are engaged in missionary encounters with the world's religions and many modern ideologies. Our thoughtful expositions on Scripture, natural theology, atonement theory, the *ordo salutis* and the like put us in a unique position to proclaim Jesus as Lord not just for those who currently believe, but also for those that have not yet grasped salvation and by faith held on tightly. We believe that the Spirit of the living God works through us and will use us to give voice to new methods of naming Jesus Saviour and Lord, among particular religions and in cultural contexts.

The Gospel entered a religiously pluralistic culture, and Christianity adopted facets of the old languages in the process of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet Lutheran Christians maintain the most basic element that Jesus Christ is the only name

by which we must be saved. We place strong emphasis on the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Christ has broken down the barriers of human sinfulness and the wrath of God, and through Christ the church communicates the righteousness of God and the justification of the sinful world. The power of God's love compels Lutherans to meet the religious other on neutral ground, and to show them there is no more separation between them and their maker, that Jesus Christ died and was raised for the justification of the entire world. The cross of Christ means that many ways of salvation might seem egalitarian, but are unnecessary, since Jesus Christ is sufficient for all.

Scripture commands that all Christians are to be "in mission," by which is meant in *dialogue* with the world at all times. To say this dialogue is a "dialogue of salvation" is by no means hyperbolic. Confessional Lutheran theology is completely informed by orthodox Christology and ecclesiology, and sees the Christian faith as universal in the catholic, not exclusive, sense. God's love is universal. Therefore, the love of Christ is universal as well, and sufficient for all, in light of the truth that He is the enfleshment of God in creation.

I have indicated that while we can move "toward" a Lutheran theology of religions, we will never arrive at one. This inability to complete a workable theology of religions need not, however, be tantamount to a declaration of failure. On the contrary, all Christians are expected to make their confession in the context of the world's religions. The missional content of 2011 is the same as in the early days of the church, but the emphasis is by necessity different. After all, the Jesus we confess has already been preached around the globe—He is by no means new to the vast majority. In addition to the question, "Who do you say I am?" Lutheran Christians must be prepared to address

the question, "Why? Why do you confess this Jesus to be the Son of God and the Saviour of humanity?" In the coming years of interreligious dialogue, we must be prepared to listen as well as lecture, to desire to learn from the central affirmations of many faith traditions, and in so doing appreciate ours to the full.

We cannot expect that persons of other faiths will show the same interest in Jesus and salvation as we do. We can, however, declare that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God Who is silently at work in the world's religions. God has not left Himself without witness, and the Spirit continues to act to reveal Christ to the nations, in Whose name we have received grace, truth, and blessing. [3]

[3] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 99.

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