Responding to Various Proposals Regarding Religious Pluralism

Crossings Conference, Belleville IL, Tues, 1/28/2014   Rev. Dr. Jukka Kääriäinen

INTRODUCTION

My assigned topic is "Responding to the Various Proposals Regarding Religious Pluralism." Let's clarify the parameters of my task, what I will be engaged in and what, while fascinating and worthwhile, I simply do not have time for. To that end, two important, preliminary distinctions need to be made. First, let's distinguish between responding *to religious pluralism,* which all people do either reflectively or unreflectively, and responding to various *proposals regarding* religious pluralism (the realm of theologians/ scholars). While overlapping, these should not be confused. Responding to religious pluralism begins by acknowledging our religiously pluralistic world, then elaborates various practices, attitudes, and strategies one should adopt, such as humility, empathy, understanding, hospitality, compassion, interreligious dialogue, witness, evangelism, commitment both to one's tradition and to the common good, etc. (Catherine Cornille, Brian McLaren). While noble, these are not technically the same thing as responding to various *proposals regarding* religious pluralism. For our purposes, it may be helpful to think of the proposals regarding pluralism as theological frameworks within and from which the practical strategies, responses, and practices unfold. The proposals themselves are sophisticated scaffoldings outlining a mansion; the lived practices are concrete responses, specific rooms within that mansion.

Secondly, what are the various, possible responses to pluralism? Let's map the proverbial forest within which I will focus on two specific trees. In response to the question, "Is there any basis for hope that those who do not hear of Christ in this life will be saved?"[i] Christopher Morgan offers a ninefold typology (printed in your outline), expanding the traditional threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Given time constraints, I cannot possibly address, let alone do justice to the complex nuances of, all nine positions. Nor am I competent to do so. Instead, I will limit myself to addressing proposal #6, "**world religions inclusivism**." Within this view of the world religions as legitimate pathways to God's inclusive, saving grace in Christ, I will grapple with two positions in particular: 1) the inclusive pluralism of the late Jacques Dupuis, and 2) S. Mark Heim's "acceptance model" which proposes many different salvations and radical difference as the basis for real, robust dialogue.

In analyzing and responding to Dupuis and Heim, what theological assumptions/ convictions am I working from? My Lutheran tools/ resources fall into three main categories: 1) the gospel as God's surprising, powerful promise, 2) the law/ gospel distinction, and 3) the distinction between the hidden and revealed God. As Ed Schroeder notes, "When it comes to promises, different world religions offer different promises, each calling for the hearer to have faith in that promise. The data of comparative religion is comparative promises and the comparative faiths that these promises call for." Oswald Bayer captures these classic Lutheran resources:

> There are three, irreducibly different ways in which God encounters us... a. in the conflict with the law that judges me, that convicts me with regard to my sins, that accuses me, and that delivers me over to the final judgment of death; b. in the promise of the gospel, in which God himself speaks by means of Jesus Christ on my behalf, indeed takes my place; and c. in the assault of the hiddenness of God, which cannot be understood merely as the effect of the law and which so radically contradicts the gospel in an… incomprehensible way.[ii]

Furthermore, Orthodox theologian Michael Oleksa offers a challenging claim we do well to always keep in mind--**"The Christian, while knowing where Christ is, can never be certain where he is not.**"[iii] (repeat) For Lutheran theology, the Gospel as promise, safeguarded by the law/Gospel distinction, seeks to offer a robust account of where Christ can be known and embraced: in the Gospel promise of forgiveness and mercy, and its attendant invitation to trust that promise in faith. While hopeful concerning and open to being surprised by Christ's presence in unexpected places, it nonetheless cautions theologies based on the "nature/grace" paradigm, such as Dupuis' and Heim's, as insufficiently attending to the deep reality of sin and brokenness in their articulation of Christ and the Spirit's work among the religions.

INCLUSIVE PLURALISM: GRACE AS NATURE FULFILLED (Jacques Dupuis)

In my judgment, Jacques Dupuis' position of inclusive pluralism offers the most nuanced, robust, and cutting-edge example of a Roman Catholic response to religious pluralism, based on a transcendental theology of grace fulfilling nature. In his own words:

> While gratefully acknowledging my dependence on Karl Rahner, I also claim to go beyond his open inclusivism. Rahner affirms a "transitory" saving efficacy of the religious traditions in individual cases of persons who have not yet been confronted with the mystery of Christ and received the grace of faith in him. I put no such restrictions in time or extension to the efficacy of the traditions in the order of salvation for their followers… (My perspective) is no longer limited to the problem of 'salvation'… or even to the role of those traditions in the salvation of their members. It searches more deeply… for the meaning of God's design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths with which we are surrounded… The convergence between the religious traditions will reach its goal in

the eschaton with the 'recapitulation' (Eph. 1:10) of all things in Christ… [This] is the common, final fulfillment of Christianity and the religions.[iv]

Dupuis' position, "while holding fast to faith in Jesus Christ as traditionally understood… integrate(s), in their differences, the religious experiences of the living religious traditions and assign(s) to those traditions a positive role and significance in [God's overall] plan for humanity, as it unfolds through salvation history."[v] He prefers naming the universal uniqueness of Jesus Christ as "constitutive" and "relational," rather than "absolute" or "exclusive." Dupuis insists on holding together the universal presence of Christ (via Spirit and Logos Christology) with the particularity of salvation through Christ (via Trinitarian Christology).[vi] This salvific significance of Christ, far from being exclusive, must be understood in radically inclusive terms on the basis of the cumulative effect of these five principles.

1) First, as the incarnate Son and Logos, Jesus Christ does not exhaust the mystery of God. In terms of the immanent Trinity, God has more revelation to reveal than God can and has revealed in the historical Christ event.[vii] 2) Second, not only was the pre-incarnate Logos (Logos asarkos) active throughout the world and in the history of religions, but it continues, post-incarnation, its universal ministry in the world and among the religions. 3) Third, While Jesus alone is the Christ and Son of God, "other 'saving figures' may be . . . 'enlightened' by the Word or 'inspired' by the Spirit to become pointers to salvation for their followers, in accordance with God's overall design for humankind."[viii] The role of these other saving figures, however, is inclusive in relation to Christ: ". . . their role does not consist in saving; it is limited to pointing to paths where salvation through the mystery of Christ may be encountered."[ix] 4) Fourth, the concrete mediation of divine grace happens through the other religious traditions in their historical, social forms.[x] 5) Fifth, the Spirit *may* be doing something truly different from what one finds in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God, precisely in and through other religions as social structures, yet never contradictory to the revelation of Christ. "God may have- and indeed seems to have- more to say to humanity than what God has said in Jesus."[xi] While that may be true, Jesus still serves as a safeguard on what the Spirit may say or do: "Christ, not the Spirit, is at the center as the way to God."[xii] In other words: whatever God has to say, through the Spirit, in other religions, must be understood and interpreted "in light of" Christ. Dupuis summarizes how various elements coalesce to build his theology of revelation and appreciation of the distinctive "truth and grace" other religions offer:

The Trinitarian Christological model, the universal enlightenment of the Word of God, and the enlivening by his Spirit make it possible to discover, in other saving figures and traditions, truth and grace not brought out with the same vigor and clarity in God's revelation and manifestation in Jesus Christ. Truth and grace found elsewhere must not be reduced to 'seeds' or 'stepping stones' simply to be nurtured or used and then superseded in Christian revelation. They represent <u>additional and autonomous benefits</u>. More divine truth and grace are found operative in the entire history of God's dealings with humankind than are available simply in the Christian tradition. As the 'human face' or 'icon' of God, Jesus Christ gives to Christianity its specific and singular character. But, while he is constitutive of salvation for all, he <u>neither excludes nor includes</u> other saving figures or traditions. If he brings salvation history to a climax, it is by way not of substitution or supersession but of <u>confirmation and accomplishment</u>.[xiii]

Religious pluralism is not simply to be endured as a *de facto* reality, but rather should be celebrated and embraced in principle (*de jure*) as a divine gift. Why? If the Spirit is able to grant revelation which truly, substantially differs from that received in and through Jesus, then the other religions must have a "lasting role" and "specific meaning," both for Christians and for adherents of those religions, because they demonstrate "truth and grace not made explicit with the same force and clarity in the revelation and manifestation of God in Jesus Christ."[xiv] This means that other faiths cannot be mere stepping stones, leading inevitably to Christianity (traditional inclusivism). "Jesus Christ is indeed the constitutive Savior of humankind, and the Christ event is the cause of the salvation of all human beings; but this does not prevent the other traditions from serving as 'mediations' of the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ for their followers within God's design for humankind."[xv] Dupuis' Trinitarian framework seeks to overcome the pitfalls of both exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms without falling into the pluralist paradigm, seeking to combine a robust, Christological inclusivism with an affirmation of religious pluralism in principle.

Building on all this, the pinnacle of Dupuis' argument is a distinctive view of the Reign of God as a reality that all the religions, as co-heirs, are already participating in and together working to build. As Dupuis puts it:

> The presence of the church-as-sign of the Reign of God in the world bears witness, therefore, that God has established in this world his Reign in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as efficacious sign, the church contains and effects the reality which it signifies, giving access to the Reign of God through word and sacrament. However, the necessity of the church is not of such a nature that access to the Reign of God would be possible only through being members of it; the 'others' *can be part of the Reign of God and of Christ without being members of the church. The presence of the Reign of God in the church* is, nevertheless, *a privileged one*, for it has received from Christ '*the fullness of the benefits* and means of salvation' (*Redemptoris Missio* 18).[xvi]

In conclusion: Dupuis' inclusive pluralism, building on Rahner's transcendental theology, seeks to present the eschatological vision of all things being reunited under Christ by synthesizing a Trinitarian, constitutive Christology with a robust pneumatology. Thus far Dupuis. I now turn to explain Mark Heim's position.

SALVATIONS: THE GOSPEL AND MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS ENDS (S. Mark Heim)

S. Mark Heim proposes a complex, challenging approach to religious pluralism which, following Paul Knitter, I'll call the "acceptance model." What does Heim propose or insist we "accept"? Radical, deep differences between the religions. Various religions, rather than being merely different means to the same religious goal, different paths up the same mountain, in fact aim at and offer different religious ends. There is no single fate/ destiny for all humanity. Heim answers the crucial question exclusivists and inclusivists struggle with, "How can non-Christians who have never heard of the one Savior find salvation?" by dissolving the question: just add an "s" to salvation, making it plural! His book title, "Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion," makes this abundantly clear: the religions, rather than pursuing one destiny or salvation, offer different truths and paths to achieve different salvations or religious goals. Buddhists arrive at enlightenment, Hindus arrive at nirvana, Christians arrive at union with the triune God, and all are happy or fulfilled in their own right. "There is no way to live the Jewish life except the Jewish way; there is no way to the Buddhist end but the Buddhist way." In other words: different truths, different paths, different goals, multiple religious ends.

How is such radical diversity possible? Because the Trinity is unity in diversity. According to Heim, real religious differences are grounded in differences in God, or Ultimate Reality. Following Nicholas Rescher's orientational pluralism, Heim lays out three logical possibilities in approaching Ultimate Reality: 1) There is only one Ultimate, which either excludes or includes all other religious ultimates (exclusivist or inclusivist position). 2) There is only one Ultimate, equally present and revealed in the different religions (pluralist position). 3) There is a "multiplicity of Ultimates," multiple absolutes, which forms the philosophical basis for Heim's "acceptance" approach. This complex philosophical claim admittedly stretches the bounds of logic. As a Christian theologian, Heim seeks to ground the unity of religious diversity within the framework of the Trinity. "Just as none of the three divine persons are 'better' or 'fuller' or 'more absolute' than any other, so none of the diverse religions can be said to be 'more absolute' than any other… Can't [we] say the same of the religions?"[xvii]

Paul Knitter summarizes Heim's approach succinctly: "What is true of God is true of the world God created: to affirm the being of God as Trinitarian—a community of differences in relationship—is to also affirm that all beings must draw their [life] from differences that give rise to relationship… Just as there is a variety of relations within God, so there is 'the possibility of a variety of distinct relations with God.' We can expect… that there will be multiple, really different (just as the divine persons of the Trinity are really different) ways in which creatures will relate to, and find their fulfillment in, God… and we can expect those different ways of relating are going to take concrete, living form in the religions of the world."[xviii] As Heim puts it, "The Trinity is a map that finds room for, indeed requires, concrete truth in other religions."[xix]While the "permanently co-existing truths" of different religious ways form parallel paths toward different fulfillments or multiple absolutes, nonetheless Heim also speaks of a gradation or "hierarchy" of such religious ends. From a Christian perspective, "Communion with the triune God is thought to encompass dimensions of other fulfillments, to be better because more consistent with the nature of the ultimate and so more inclusive." In other words, while "there is a 'hierarchy' between full communion with the triune God and lesser, restricted participations," nevertheless "there is no loss. There is no evil in such plenitude." Rather than a strict dichotomy of heaven and hell, the overflowing plenitude and depths of the Triune God's loving purposes is analogous to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, resulting in circles of paradise or layers of heaven. While other religious ways may find their fulfillment in different corners of Christian heaven, and while "this may seem inferior to what Christians have in their experience of God as personal and triune, but that is not at all the way… it is felt by-others."[xx]

I conclude my brief summary of Heim's "acceptance" model by letting Heim speak for himself. First, "this approach shifts the focus away from flat claims of truth and falsehood and toward concrete religious alternatives. We ask not, 'Which religion alone is true?' but 'What end is most ultimate, even if many ends are real?'… in approaching religious differences, emphasis falls on the contrast of their *positive* ends. The Christian gospel is not just preached against false religions, but it is witnessed as an alternative among other true religions."[xxi] In conclusion, "The decisive and universal significance of Christ is for Christians *both* the necessary ground for particularistic witness *and* the basis for recognizing in other religious traditions their own particularistic integrity. We are only beginning to appreciate the ways in which this conviction must be embodied in our theology and

practice. But the way forward lies *through* this conviction, not around it. Therefore, the way forward lies equally *through* the distinctive convictions of my neighbors, not around them."[xxii]

RESPONDING TO AND EVALUATING DUPUIS' AND HEIM'S PROPOSALS

In evaluating Dupuis' inclusive pluralist proposal and Heim's acceptance proposal, I believe it's important to engage them on their own terms rather than criticize them for not being Lutherans and therefore not using beloved Lutheran categories such as law and gospel, grace and promise. Before engaging in constructive critique from Lutheran convictions, it's crucial for us to affirm what we can learn from these two thinkers, what insights we can appreciate, what gifts they offer that we can receive. I believe they deserve and we owe them that much. To that end, I see both Dupuis and Heim offering us six strong insights.

First, both proposals are creative, robust attempts to flesh out postmodern Christian responses to pluralism embodying both a robust commitment to Jesus and a bold openness toward other religions. Both Dupuis and Heim seek to *take both poles of the universality-particularity paradox* (how God's universal will to save the world should be balanced with the particularity of salvation through Christ) *seriously*, without compromise. Secondly, both thinkers are rigorously *Christocentric* in the sense that they insist Jesus Christ is the constitutive cause and source of salvation. Third, both proposals demonstrate a vibrant, creative *recovery of the Trinity* as crucial for a Christian theology of religions. Fourthly, both proposals underscore the truth that, while our approaches to religious pluralism may differ, we are all inevitably *inclusivists*. From the position of our "confessional ultimate reality" (Catherine Cornille), we inevitably "judge the truth of the other… on the basis of our own particular worldview and norms. This "becomes a matter of hermeneutical necessity rather than theological triumph."[xxiii] As Paul Knitter notes, "We are always—incorrigibly and incurably—going to view, hear, and understand the [religious other] from our own religious perspective. That's simply how things work."[xxiv]To claim otherwise is misleading and dishonest. Fifthly, both Dupuis and Heim affirm the abiding *value of enduring religious differences*. Religions truly, deeply, and forevermore are different, period. These differences are not just to be tolerated, or exploited as bridges for contextualizing the Gospel, but rather affirmed and celebrated as inherently valuable, as "more life-giving and more God-revealing than similarities."[xxv] We should resist our natural urge to harmonize differences. Finally, sixthly, both proposals stress the *inherent value of dialogue*. We ought to

inductively engaging in interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, rather than merely deductively formulate a theology of religions without lived knowledge or experience of other religions. Efforts to build a theology of religions must begin with dialogue. The danger in theologizing before dialoguing, theorizing before engaging, or mapping the territory before exploring it is that we inoculate ourselves against "the power and novelty of other religious traditions."[xxvi] From this perspective, dialogue doesn't merely have instrumental, practical value as a means to the greater end of Gospel proclamation; dialogue is inherently valuable.

Having affirmed these contributions, I now move to a constructive critique and engagement with both proposals. While Dupuis' and Heim's proposals are distinct, I believe enough overlap exists between them at certain key points to warrant evaluating their commonalities together. I will constructively critique/ evaluate both proposals in terms of a cluster of related concerns centering on 1) theological method/ framework, 2) Christology, 3) how to relate inductive and deductive approaches, especially in how one practically relates dialogue and Gospel proclamation, and 4) how language functions in the cultural-linguistic approach, whether it's a connecting bridge toward other religions (my approach) or a prison isolating the various religions into linguistic ghettoes (Heim).

1)We begin with *theological method and overall framework*. I'll first direct a distinctive critique toward Heim's foundational argument (philosophical method), that there are multiple religious ends and salvations. This method entails some significant, unresolved tensions. All religions, Heim claims, are to be recognized as being completely right in their own terms, and these claims are epistemically justified, even if they may be mistaken. But how can this be? Can all be right?[xxvii] *On the one hand*, many salvations would seem to imply many absolutes. But talk of "many absolutes" is a logical contradiction. As Knitter notes, "to suggest that there are many absolute expressions of truth is to imply that there are no absolute expressions of truth."[xxviii] *On the other hand,* "one of these absolute truths—Christian revelation—will, in the end, prove more absolute than all the others, for it will be only on the Christian mountain that we can understand the Trinitarian nature of God and see how all the other religions can be understood and ranked."[xxix] This tension remains unresolved in Heim's thought, for *full commitment to Christ seems to preclude full openness to other ways*.

Furthermore, both Dupuis' and Heim's theological methods exemplify *revelationism*, a particular way of relating the categories of revelation and salvation based on the Rahnerian, "nature/grace" paradigm. Such an

approach marginalizes the revelation of sin and law, rejects the nuanced distinction between revelation and salvation, and insists that "revelation is universal, even as is the offer of salvation."[xxx] Their choice of a Trinitarian framework is understandable, since it provides both Dupuis and Heim a broad enough, umbrella category which unifies the diversity of other religious ways. While they employ different pathways for advancing communion of religious others with the Trinity (Dupuis emphasizing the reign of God, Heim emphasizing diversity within the Trinity), both employ the Trinity as a foundation for grounding the paradoxes of universality and particularity, unity in diversity. This is understandable.

In contrast, a Lutheran theology of religions, like Lutheran theology in general, rightly is concerned to identify and utilize the Gospel as the promise of grace/ mercy in Christ, if not as the starting point, at the very least as a guiding principle in engaging religious pluralism. The nature of the Gospel and grace, and the proper recognition of their counterparts, law and sin, would seem to be essential for a Lutheran response to pluralism. As I've argued in my doctoral dissertation/ book, if the Gospel is essentially a promise of God, and if the nature of the Gospel ought to shape and direct the nature of mission, then the Church's mission should also be grounded in and an extension of God's gracious promise in Christ. Therefore, to the extent that Dupuis and Heim make the eschatological recapitulation of all in Christ (Dupuis) and the Trinity (Heim) their overarching framework, and to the extent that they apply a theology of grace based on Rahner's transcendental theology, to that extent it is not surprising that their theology of grace, from a Lutheran perspective, is insufficiently nuanced.[xxxi] In their articulation of how God's loving grace is mediated through the diverse religions, Dupuis and Heim not only pay insufficient attention to the reality and relevance of sin, but also fail to account for the accusatory function of the law (*lex semper accusat*). Gerhard Forde's reminder, "Love is not served by attempting to erase wrath from the system,"[xxxii] cautions these proposals not to completely forego grappling with sin, the law, and divine wrath, lest in their eagerness to affirm grace and spiritual fulfillment in the religions they end up with a God other than the Biblical "God of grace and truth."

2)My second cluster of concerns centers around *Christology*. Do Dupuis' and Heim's understandings of how Christ is Savior, how He relates to the Spirit and the Church, *undermine* the need for Gospel witness or the necessity of Christian conversion? If not, how so? Their Christologies seem to me to have this, perhaps

unintentional, consequence. As a missiologist living in a predominantly Buddhist context, this is an urgently practical question for me. In their elaborations of Christ as "constitutive" and "unique," but not "absolute" or "exclusive" Savior, I sense some unresolved ambiguity.

Let's begin with Heim. In claiming, "The Trinity teaches us that Jesus Christ cannot be… the exhaustive or exclusive act of God to save us," Heim boldly moves beyond George Lindbeck and others who stress that all salvation is "only through Christ." In affirming *both* Jesus as the "constitutive cause" of salvation for Christians *and* the possibility of other, different mediators or saving figures for the different salvations in other religions, does Heim not compromise the normativity and universality of Jesus as Savior? It sure seems that way to me. If other mediators or saving figures are possible, and Jesus is merely the cause of salvation for Christians, why would anyone ever convert to and embrace the Christian gospel? Heim claims: "The fact that this unity [of God's plan] has been manifested to us in Christ… means that Christians will look for a convergence [of all religions in communion with the triune God], but this in no way requires [such convergence]."[xxxiii] Again, a seeming tension exists between the Heim's Christian desire for convergence and his stated conviction of multiple religious ends.

Let's now consider Dupuis' Christology: How can Jesus Christ be both "constitutive" for salvation and "relative" at the same time? How does Jesus' fullness as "qualitative, not quantitative," and the affirmation of other saving figures, square with his affirmation of Jesus as unique, universal Savior? Does Dupuis' understanding of the relationship between the reign of God and the Church undermine the Church's role of Gospel proclamation? If other religions and their adherents are already co-heirs of the reign of God, is explicit conversion to Christianity still a valid goal and activity of the Church's mission? If so, why, and on what grounds? In articulating the relationship between reign of God and Church, Dupuis seemingly downplays the role of the Church. As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen notes, "Dupuis [seems to believe] that linking salvation and the role of Christ too closely to the church would make the church take the place of Christ. This is an unnecessary and theologically less than convincing fear.... If the church is made the instrument of salvation only for Christians, then the biblically based view of the church as the sign of the unity of humankind and the coming of the new creation (Rev 21) is compromised."[xxxiv]

Furthermore, for both Dupuis and Heim, does the Gospel and Christian faith need to be supplemented/ complemented by other religions in order to be complete? Heim claims, "The testimony of the religions is essential

for internal Christian life."[xxxv] In what way, on what grounds? Does such testimony simply enhance our understanding and empathy toward the religious other, deepen our witness, or is Heim talking about something more substantial and internal to Christian life? How does such testimony help us live as disciples of Christ?

3)My third set of concerns revolves around balancing *deductive vs. inductive approaches* to religious pluralism, especially in how one relates *dialogue and proclamation*. While Heim seeks to prioritize lived dialogue and the inductive practice of comparative theology before a deductive theology of religions, Knitter notes an unavoidable tension here and asks whether comparative theology can ever be "theology-free": "Aren't there also certain dangers in trying to engage in a dialogue with religions *before* we think about our theology of religions? Don't we always bring certain attitudes, perspectives, and convictions to any conversation with [another]? And don't these general predispositions influence the way we carry on the conversation?"[xxxvi] Yes, they are! Therefore a balance between deductive and inductive approaches is inevitable and necessary. Dupuis agrees: "I try to combine an inductive and a deductive method… This means that a treatment of the theology of religions cannot proceed simply a priori in a deductive way, but must first be based on contact with the concrete reality of religious plurality through interreligious dialogue. . . . [However], my way of proceeding remains largely *a priori*. . ."[xxxvii]

Moving now to dialogue and proclamation, while Heim eagerly advocates for dialogue, he says surprisingly little about actual, concrete Christian proclamation and witness. I would appreciate hearing more from him about his understanding of the nature, content, form, and motivation for Christian witness. For example, in a chapter entitled "Wisdom and Witness," Heim states: "There is ample room to commend Christ [when] rightly expressed in relation to the neighbors' actual religious aim."[xxxviii] What does commending or necessitating Christ (Reformation dipstick) actually entail for Heim? Is Christian witness limited to a positive affirmation of the "true and good" in other religions, or is there room in Christian witness for commending what is "new" and "necessary" in Christ because it is deficient or lacking in the other?

Turning to Dupuis, as one of the chief architects behind the Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, he advocates for an "orientation" of dialogue toward proclamation, analogous to the mutual, yet asymmetrical complementarity between the religions and Christianity. While both are legitimate, necessary, and difficult tasks, nevertheless "[dialogue] cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation, in so far

as… the Church's evangelizing mission reaches in [proclamation] its climax and fullness."[xxxix] "The 'orientation' of dialogue toward proclamation in fact corresponds to the 'orientation' of the members of other religious traditions toward the church."[xl] Explained in terms of the reign of God: while the "not yet" aspect of God's reign necessitates ongoing dialogue, its "already" aspect in Jesus Christ equally necessitates Gospel proclamation.[xli] Dupuis explains further: "Whereas the other religious traditions… are destined to find in the Christ event their fullness of meaning—without being absorbed or dispossessed—the reverse is not true: God's self-giving in Jesus Christ is not in need of a true completion by other traditions."[xlii]

In my judgment, the ambiguous tension between how dialogue and proclamation can *both* be "absolutely necessary" while dialogue is also "oriented" toward proclamation remains unresolved for Dupuis. To put it bluntly: "If one is really subsidiary to the other, can they both be absolutely necessary? If both are really taken to be absolutely necessary, can one of them be considered to be subsidiary to the other?"[xliii] I submit that the hiddenness of God is a more fruitful category for relating dialogue and proclamation, but I'll elaborate on that momentarily.

4) Fourthly, my final set of concerns revolves around issues of how George Lindbeck's *cultural-linguistic model*, which both Heim and myself advocate for, uses *language*. While the cultural-linguistic insights that language profoundly shapes reality, that religions are self-contained "language games" with their own rules, is invaluably fruitful, Lindbeck himself realizes the potential danger of language becoming a confining prison, turning "religions… into self-enclosed and incommensurable intellectual ghettoes."[xliv] A real danger of Heim's proposal is this: in his zeal to affirm enduring religious differences, does the distance between religions preclude any common meeting place, platform, or language for dialogue? How can incommensurably different, diverse religions find a unified meeting place? Or are they doomed to remain isolated ghettoes? To quote Knitter: Is language a *prism* [that] influences and colors all that we see and know, or is it a confining *prison*, a restrictively unchangeable perspective we are stuck with, preventing us from truly encountering others?

HIDDENNESS OF GOD- DIALOGICAL POINT OF CONTACT

I believe that a common platform and meeting place for meaningful interreligious dialogue exists. I submit that a broad range of common, overlapping human experiences can be intelligibly described and compared under Luther's notion of divine hiddenness. The category of "the hidden God" (*deus absconditus*) serves as a bridge

between a Lutheran theology of grace and the broader context of religious pluralism. As a theology centered on promise, my Lutheran approach is best able to establish a dialogical point of contact with others when it engages them through the category of God's hiddenness,[xlv] a fruitful category in at least three ways: 1) When grounded in a theology of the cross, it facilitates an ecumenical approach toward religious pluralism; 2) It connects "Lutheran talk" with the wider, philosophical discourse, with thinkers like Dupuis, Heim, and Knitter. 3) It offers, in the Gospel, a hopeful word in the midst of ongoing distress.

While all religions have hopeful words to say, they also wrestle with whether such words of "grace" will indeed be the final word. I wish to contend that the most important similarities and overlaps concerning human religious experience are best described, not by categories of being or existence (ontology or anthropology), but rather in nuanced, cultural-linguistic terms as the paradoxical relationship between divine wrath and promise, sin and grace, law and Gospel, human brokenness and divine healing. Because human religious experience *is* ambiguous, left to our own devices, we don't really quite know how to "read" or interpret nature. The "hidden God" whom nature ambiguously reveals requires unveiling, in and through the revelation in Christ, if humanity is to have a gracious relationship of trust with this God.

God's "alien work" of judging human sin in the cross (the Law) serves God's "proper work" of justifying and reconciling sinners (the Gospel). Brian Gerrish describes the paradoxical nature of divine hiddenness in the cross: "In Christ, [God's] wisdom is hidden under folly, his strength under abject weakness. He gives life through death, righteousness to the unrighteous; he saves by judging and damning. The Hidden God is God incarnate, crucified, hidden in suffering."

While much remains hidden about God despite the revelation of the cross, and while adherents of other religions may be reluctant to consider a Christian theology of the cross as having any relevance to their experiences, a Christian stance toward dialogue on the topic of divine hiddenness and experiences of suffering seemingly cannot help but commend divine hiddenness as an illuminating resource for such dialogue. Luther's emphatic claim, "The cross alone is our theology,"[xlvi] directs us to focus our attention on God's paradoxical absence and presence, hiddenness and revelation, wrath and loving mercy, as those realities are conveyed in and through a theology of the cross.[xlvii] A theology of the cross helps us Lutheran Christians interpret, apply, and

commend the Gospel as promise to our non-Christian dialogue partners in their grappling with divine hiddenness and human suffering. A Lutheran approach affirms, as Luther notes, that while all people *may* worship the one true God, albeit anonymously, their worship, apart from Christ, lacks many benefits, such as confidence in God's benevolent attitude toward them and practical comfort arising from trusting the promise of divine, loving mercy in the cross. Faith in the Gospel promise offers these benefits, even as we and our non-Christian friends grapple with God's often perplexing, disconcertingly hidden ways in our struggles and sorrows.

CASE STUDY AND CONLUDING REMARKS

I wish to conclude this talk with a case study of responding to religious pluralism in Taiwan, how we relate dialogue and proclamation. From 2000-2003, my institution, China Lutheran Seminary, engaged in a series of rounds of interreligious dialogue with the modern Zen [Buddhist] society of Taiwan. These events included witness of life and doctrine in a cordial, respectful atmosphere. Seminary president Dr Thomas Yu noted that what fascinated the Buddhists, what they found most intriguing, was the distinctiveness of the message of the cross. Two practical results arose. First, the dialogues were published as a book by CLS. Secondly, an unexpected friendship developed between Dr. Yu and Master Li Yuansong (Believer in the Buddha), the society's senior leader. As a token of his appreciation and sign of their friendship, Master Li sent Dr. Yu a plaque engraved with this inscription: "*'Justification by grace' are words from heaven that touch me deeply and move me to tears*." What an incredible, astounding confession by a Zen Buddhist master! Was Master Li an "anonymous Christian," as Rahner puts it? Only God knows.

Shortly after these dialogues, the modern Zen society changed their affiliation to become a Pureland Buddhist society. Pureland Buddhism, with its doctrine of enlightenment as trusting in Amida Buddha's merits on one's behalf, bears remarkable affinities to justification by grace through faith. While this "Protestant branch" of Buddhism lacks concepts of holiness/ wrath in relation to their Ultimate Savior Being, its concept of mercy is tantalizingly close to our Lutheran view of divine mercy. Should we can expect a mass conversion of Zen Buddhists to Christianity in Taiwan in the near future? I doubt it. What this attests to, I believe, is the deeply emotive, intellectual, and spiritual power of the Gospel promise. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," St Paul asserts,

"for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16)." Powerful? Yes! Promising? Yes! Perturbing, unsettling? Yes.

On Dec 8th, 2013 a memorial gathering was held to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Master Li's untimely death at age 46. President Yu was invited to attend and pay tribute to his friend, and I was able to tag along. The society's current leader opened his remarks with a Buddhist meditation on Matthew ch 25, how we might see our master in others. Nelson Mandela's death three days earlier caused the Buddhist speaker before Dr Yu to ponder whether forgiveness is possible. Astonished, I could hardly believe what I was hearing! Having earned the right to speak truth in love through his patient listening and friendship with the society, President Yu seized this opportunity, proclaiming the promise of the forgiveness of sins in Christ which Mandela's forgiving spirit attested to. That's how China Lutheran Seminary does dialogue and proclamation in this Buddhist, Chinese context.

Where does all this leave us? **"The Christian, while knowing where Christ is, can never be certain where he is not."[xlviii]** Catholic missiologists Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali remind us, "Jesus says both, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6a) and 'As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34b). Both these words of Christ must guide us..."[xlix]As the "one for *all* others," we can trust in Jesus Christ and His promises never to turn away anyone who comes to Him, to go with us as we bear witness to His loving mercy in word and deed, and to make all things new. While Dupuis' and Heim's complex proposals elaborate how we might expect a convergence of "all in one" (the triune God), a Lutheran exhortation might urge us to follow our Good Shepherd into the religious marketplace, respectfully pointing others to Jesus as the "one for all," "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Thank you very much!

i Christopher W. Morgan, "Inclusivisms and Exclusivisms," in *Faith Comes by Hearing: a Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, 25-36 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008). Morgan's nine positions are as follows: 1) Church exclusivism- No, outside the church there is no salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*); 2) gospel exclusivism- No, they must hear the gospel and trust Christ to be saved; 3) special revelation exclusivism- No, they must hear the gospel and trust Christ to be saved, unless God chooses to send them special revelation in an extraordinary way—via dreams, visions, miracles, or angelic messages; 4) agnosticism- we simply cannot know; 5) general revelation inclusivism- yes, they can respond to God in saving faith through seeing him in general revelation; 6) world religions inclusivism- yes, they can respond to God through general revelation or their religion; 7) postmortem evangelism- yes, they will have an opportunity to trust Christ after death; 8) universalism- yes, everyone will ultimately be saved; 9) pluralism- yes, many will experience "salvation" as they understand it because they embrace their version of the Real, though the question is erroneous because it assumes that Christianity is ultimate

ii Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: a Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 42.

iii Michael Oleksa, "Orthodox Missiological Education," 86.

iv Jukka Kääriäinen, *Mission Shaped by Promise* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 151, 154, 153

v Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 1.

vi Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 89-95.

vii For a fuller discussion of this point, see Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 235-253, and Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions,* 138-162.

viii Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 298.

ix Dupuis, "'Christianity and the Religions' Revisited," 374.

x Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 218.

xi Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 388.

xii Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 197.

xiii Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 388.

xiv Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,* 211.

xv Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions,* 253.

xvi Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 214-215.

xvii Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 234.

xviii Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 195.

xix S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 167.

xx Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 196-197.

xxi Heim, "No Other Name: the Gospel and True Religions" in *Can Only One Religion Be True: Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue,* ed. Robert B. Stewart, et. al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

xxii S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 229.

xxiii Catherine Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 79.

xxiv Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 217.

xxv Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 220.

xxvi James Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 167.

xxvii Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 463.

xxviii Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 234.

xxix Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 233.

xxx Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 115.

xxxi Implied in this critique is an implicit critique of Dupuis' theology of sin. Whereas I found only four explicit references to sin in Dupuis' work, his treatment and theology of grace, as well as his explicit admission that he is indebted to Rahner's theology while aiming to extend its missional implications (see chapter four, opening paragraph), lead me to conclude that his doctrine of sin is similar to Rahner's. To the extent that is the case, my critique of Rahner's theology of sin also applies to Dupuis.

xxxii Gerhard Forde, *Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 197.

xxxiii Heim, *The Depth of Riches*, 269.

xxxiv Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: the Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 65.

xxxv Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 291.

xxxvi Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 235.

xxxvii Dupuis, "'Christianity and the Religions' Revisited." *Louvain Studies* 28/4 (Winter 2004), 364-365.

xxxviii Heim, *Salvations*, 229.

xxxix Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," (1991), in *Redemption and Dialogue,* ed. William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1993), 116.

xl Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 221.

xli "Dialogue and Proclamation" 117-118.

xlii Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 257.

xliii Jacques Dupuis, "A Theological Commentary: Dialogue and Proclamation," in *Redemption and Dialogue,* ed. William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1993), 154.

xliv George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 128.

xlv Given that divine hiddenness is most readily understood in monotheistic traditions such as Judaism and Islam, my project is most directly applicable to dialogue with these fellow "religions of the book." However, while non-theistic religions like Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism do not recognize a personal God whose hiddenness can be intelligibly discussed, I contend that this category may potentially be translated into the framework of these religions in a meaningful, intelligible manner. The theoretical and theological justification for such a claim, however, remains beyond the scope of this study.

xlvi Luther, *Luther's Works*, 25: 287.

xlvii I am acutely aware of the immensely complex nature of issues related to the hiddenness and unknowability of God, apophatic and negative theologies, theology of the cross, and theodicy. While the limits of this study do not allow for more in-depth treatment of divine hiddenness and unknowability as they have been classically articulated by early Christian theologians as Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Meister Eckhardt, nor theologies of the cross of contemporary theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, John Stuart Hall, and others, my aim is very modest: simply to suggest how the hiddenness of God, interpreted within the framework of a theology of the cross, can serve as a missiologically fruitful topic for interreligious dialogue. Such a focus on the missiological implications of a theology of the cross in no way minimizes or negates an emphasis on a theology of the resurrection.

xlviii Michael Oleksa, "Orthodox Missiological Education," 86.

xlix Karl J. Becker and Ilari Molaria, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: a Comprehensive Study* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 511.