

# Responses to Non-Western Theology

Colleagues,

Several responses have come in to last week's posting (ThTh 136). Two of you called my attention to S. Mark Heim's article in last week's issue [January 17, 2001] of CHRISTIAN CENTURY: "The pluralism of religious ends: Dreams fulfilled." I don't subscribe to CC any longer, so I went to the library to read it. There I also found Heim's sequel in this week's issue [January 24]: "A trinitarian view of religious pluralism. God's diversity."

Response #1

Here's what one of you told me:

*"Heim talks about different religions having differing goals (versus the old 'all roads lead to Chicago' idea). I like what he says to some extent. His last couple of lines are intriguing: 'My interest in the hypothesis of multiple religious ends is grounded in part in the way that it validates particularistic Christian confession, but as such the hypothesis also supports those in other religious traditions who are committed to the distinctive truth of their confession. I believe that the true order for religious diversity is rooted in the triune God of Christian confession.' The article is very abstract and I'll need to read it again to pick up details. I assume it's out of his new book: THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES: A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGION."*

So far respondent #1.

A few years ago I reviewed—in the journal MISSIOLOGY [XXV, No.2. April 1997]—Heim's "big bang" book where he trotted out

the thesis that in differing world religions we have offers for different salvations (note the plural "s"). Buddhism's Nirvana is not "fellowship with the Triune God."

I can't remember if I ever posted that review on this listserve. [I'm saying those first three words more often these days.] My quick check of the Crossings webpage showed no sign of it in prior postings. So I'll post it below as the main text for this week's ThTh. For Thursday postings in the days ahead we can take a closer look at Heim's latest work.

Response #2

that Avery Dulles, S.J. (who just got a cardinal's cap from John Paul II) also said something about different salvations. Here's the text I received:

*The other response that came my way about Heim's CC article went on to say "Some months ago Avery Dulles had a review of JDDJ [= the Roman Catholic – Lutheran "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"] in the journal FIRST THINGS, in which he helpfully pointed out that what is at work in Rome and Luther are two systems of salvation. He could also say that Luther is not Rome. But he seemed to leave the door open for further discussion, since they need not be incompatible. I have long thought that there is a semantic difference between Lutherans and Rome. We Lutherans are SAVED (justified, but still short of being sanctified into exerting sanctified effort) by grace through faith; Catholics are SAVED (expanded notion of being justified to include also being sanctified into exerting sanctified effort) also by grace through faith. Whether it is more than a semantic difference is the problem which I am not systematically clever enough to solve."*

So far respondent #2.

I may not be clever enough to solve that question either. But Dulles may indeed be talking semantics. Like this: For Luther the term salvation covers just so much territory; for Rome it

covers that much and more. Nevertheless it is a tease to wonder if Heim's thesis about different salvations also applies to different options among Christians. Might Dulles also be hinting that the salvation announced in Lutheran "Augsburg" catholicism is not the same as that in Roman Catholicism? If you wind up at different destinations when you get to the end of the salvation line, then it is "more than a semantic difference."

And that reminds me of an episode earlier this week. I was one of two Bible study guides for an ecumenical event attended by a hundred-plus folks, most of them Roman Catholics. In the discussion someone mentioned JDDJ, which prompted a woman to ask: "What is this justification business? I've been a Catholic all my life and I think this is the first time I ever heard that word." My RC colleague at the podium said: "This one's for you, Ed." So I took it. I think my opening words were "I thought you'd never ask. I wish Lutherans would too." Most of you can guess what followed.

So what is salvation really? That is the question. Even among Christians. Even among Christians wearing the same name tags. When respondent #2 above talks about "being saved," I recall that Semine colleague Ed Krentz badgered us in those days to be more precise when talking about salvation. For one simple reason: in New Testament usage, the verb "to save" was regularly in the future tense. So that if someone asked you on the street corner: Are you saved? the best NT answer was: Not yet; but I trust that I will be. Salvation, said Krentz, was the NT term for the event at the end. Redemption now, yes, Justification now, yes. Atonement now, yes. Reconciliation now, yes. But, as Peter preached to his Pentecost congregation: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord Jesus [now] SHALL BE SAVED when the Day of the Lord comes." Salvation is the NT term for surviving the final judgment, passing the Final Exam. Just as Christians have not yet been resurrected from the dead, but they trust it will be so, so also salvation. It is the event at the end.

Well, all of that is another item for more discussion. It'll probably surface if/when we take a look at Heim's recent

work. Herewith the book review on his debut volume.  
Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## **SALVATIONS: TRUTH AND DIFFERENCE IN RELIGION**

**By S. Mark Heim**

**Faith Meets Faith Series (no number)**

**Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books**

**1995, x, 242 pp., paper.**

The very first word in this book's title "Salvations"—in the plural—telegraphs Heim's message. Different religions are proposing different salvations. The pluralist perspective (many religions = many different ways to salvation) is currently popular in academic study of religion. It cheerfully grants that there are many religious roads going up the mountain to salvation. But Heim calls our attention to the fact that in this widely accepted pluralism the salvation at the end of these many roads is seen to be the same salvation. No pluralism there.

"Why not?" he asks. Why not many different mountain tops? Why not a pluralism of salvations? Buddhist Nirvana is not really the same salvation that Christians call communion with the triune God. What Hinduism offers at the end of the line is not what Christians call eternal life. So what would that mean for Christians in inter-religious dialogue if we started with the premise that the salvation at the end of the road is different in different religions? Each religion might well have its own distinctive "mountain top."

Heim proposes here a Christian theology of religions that grants, yea welcomes, a pluralism of mountain peaks too. That's the import of the word "difference" in the book's title.

Salvations are not all the same. With the other key word in his title, the term "truth," Heim wants to acknowledge that Buddhism may well be the true way to Nirvana, but Christian salvation is something else. Christianity is the true way to communion with the triune God, but that's not Nirvana, nor is it what Islam offers as salvation.

He wants a "more pluralistic" pluralism. To get there he begins with penetrating critiques of today's "big three" pluralist models, each done in a distinctive way. John Hick proposes a pluralism grounded in philosophy. W.C. Smith's is existentialist, and Paul Knitter builds his on liberation theology. Despite their discrete profiles, all three bear the marks of being 20th century "Western" constructions. They build on the Enlightenment mythos for the meta-theologies (the larger picture in which each seeks to incorporate all religions) they offer. So they are vulnerable to post-modernism's critique that every meta-theology is marred by the vested interests of a particular culture, or class, or individual. So Hick, Smith, and Knitter are each adding one more proposal in today's multi-cultural supermarket of religious options. At root they are three additional brands added to the pluralism of possibilities on today's religion shelves.

Heim's "more pluralistic" model draws on the "orientational pluralism" proposed by Nicholas Rescher in the field of philosophy. Philosophy today is just as plagued by pluralism as religion is. Rescher says: It's because of the perspective each philosopher has right from the start. If you stand here—from this perspective—and look at reality, you'll get a picture that looks like this. If you stand somewhere else, thus taking a different perspective, you'll get a different picture. Rescher does not anticipate that you could put all the perspectives together and get the complete picture. Facets may be combined, but not perspectives. "Perspectives are one (at a time) to a

customer.” When philosophers assert a thesis, they are also commending that we adopt the orientation, the perspective they have, which makes that claim sound true.

Heim applies this to religion. What he gains from that, he claims, is a better pluralism. Better in that it 1) doesn’t add another religion package to the already overloaded shelves, but is a definitely Christian Trinitarian proposal for acknowledging “truth and difference” in other religions—all the way to the salvation they propose at the end of the road, 2) offers better impetus for religious dialogue by supporting the “one and only” testimony of various traditions, 3) doesn’t leave religion immune to critique and challenge (an immunity, Heim says, no religion deserves), and 4) offers better prospects for the “practical and ethical goals of [current] pluralist theologies.”

Heim is professor of theology at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Boston and has done extensive studies of religious movements in India and Asian Christianity. Thus his case for plurality of salvations has been tested in the dialogue world he lives and works in. His claim that his is a Christian proposal startles at first, but he argues it cogently and persuasively—though seldom ever with nickel words! Anyone claiming to offer something “better” than Hick, Smith or Knitter is saying a mouthful. Thus his book is a must for missiologists.

This reviewer’s question is one from inside the camp of Christian dialogue partners. Let’s admit that there are many “paths” among Christian denominations, and maybe even different salvations—or at least different labels for the salvation at the end of those paths that different Christians talk about. Then why pick “communion with the Triune God” as the name tag at the top where the paths meet? Why not some more basic, more original, term from the Christian scriptures themselves, such as forgiveness (the synoptic Gospels), or reconciliation (Paul), or

the life that lasts (John)?

Heim chooses “community with the Trinity.” From the doctrine of the Trinity he zeroes in on “plenitude,” fullness, which gives him a Christian umbrella, he says, for friendly approach to other religions. This fullness of God, overflowing fullness, leads to Christ’s incarnation, of course, God’s openness to everything in the world—even our religions. But there Heim stops, as though Christ’s incarnation, the event of Bethlehem, was the grande finale of the salvation Christians talk about. He doesn’t actually utilize (or maybe even need?) Christ’s cross and resurrection. Wouldn’t Heim’s “better” pluralism be better yet with a “better” Christian salvation, one that included, yea “needed,” a crucified and risen Messiah? I think so.