

**Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions**  
**Interpreting Today's Pluralistic Impulse in Light of Christ's Singular Promise**

No one feature of modern society distinguishes it from societies of the past than the diversity of religions that coexist side by side in relative peace. We dare not underestimate the significance of this fact and just how recent its development is. It is the result of a complex mix of historical, political, philosophical, and theological factors that has its beginnings in post-Reformation Europe and that is as much pragmatic in its emergence as it is ideological. We also dare not underestimate the interpretive challenge this new situation presents the “modern mind” as individuals and communities seek 1) to understand the world in which they live with depth and seriousness and 2) to respond to an inescapable and ubiquitous demand to justify their particular way of life relative to multiple options. For whatever else this religious diversity might mean, so it seems to me, it is a sign of a two-fold, innate human necessity both, to make sense of the world and to justify our human engagements within the world.

In Christian theology this interpretive challenge has given rise to a new line of inquiry called “a Christian theology of the religions.” Its specific goal is to inquire into the relationship between Christianity and other religions, but, in reality, its scope is much more expansive than that. It entails everything that Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr labeled “theology of culture,” with religion representing the “depth dimension” of human existence and culture. As such, we can expect to see the same kind of spectrum of views for relating Christ and the religions as Niebuhr found in relating Christ and culture. Therefore, the real challenge in developing a Christian theology of the religions is as much, if not more, an ecumenical challenge (a matter of negotiating the different ways

Christians interpret the Christian message) than it is an inter-religious challenge (a matter of negotiating the way Christians interpret the various religions). As such, we can expect to see something of Niebuhr's five point typology in the various proposals for relating Christianity to the religions.

Traditionally, a Christian theology of the religions has operated with a threefold typology that was first devised by Alan Race in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> As he surveyed the literature on the relationship between Christianity and other religions, he identified three basic positions or model: the "exclusivist" model, the "inclusivist" model and the "pluralist" model. Significantly, Race broached the question of the relationship of Christianity to other religions exclusively through the lens of salvation, as though that is the only function religion plays. This limiting of the definition of religion to soteriology, in my judgment, skews and confuses the discussion – especially, from the perspective of a Christian theology that sees the distinction of law and gospel as the hermeneutical key for interpreting daily life in a theological or religious way. But more on that later.

Looked at from the perspective of Soteriology then, exclusivists tend to find no soteriological connection between Christianity and the other religions. Christianity is simply a point of view that is categorically at odds with the other religions. Christ is the way, the truth and the life and nothing more can be said. End of discussion. Salvation is about acknowledging that orthodoxy and yielding to the Lordship of Christ over all things.

My guess is that anyone browsing the web-site and stumbling upon the title of our conference – "Proclaiming Christ alone in a Pluralistic Age" – could easily

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<sup>1</sup> See Duane Olson, *Issues in Contemporary Christian Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 271.

conclude, “Oh, they are exclusivists,” and move on to another point of view if they are so inclined. Of course, that conclusion is not what we intend. We intend a discussion about Jesus that is deeply paradoxical in nature. He is *singularly* the “one for all” so that humanity might *universally* be “all in one.” This is meant to be language about the good news of Jesus Christ for sinners over against the bad news of God’s Law against sinners. The good news is understood as God’s promise to reconcile the lopsided account between sinful humanity and holy God by accounting Christ’s holiness as our own. Therefore, by asserting the singularity of Christ for salvation we are not intending the kind of “revelational positivism” that Bonhoeffer saw as so troublesome in Barth’s theology: where Christ is viewed as a take it or leave it demand from God. Rather, we see the singularity of Christ not in terms of demand, but as a magnanimous promise, an unprecedented offer that is to be received as a gift by faith. True, deep discussion on such paradoxical matters is not easy to have today -- if it ever was. Above all, it entails the art of distinguishing God’s law or demand from God’s gospel or promise. Let it suffice to say for now that the religions can be quite good at identifying God’s law, maybe even better than Christians in some respects -- though even there, as we shall see, they are not without their limitations. Where they are not so good, I would argue, is in identifying and handling God’s promise in Christ.

Inclusivists, in my judgment, represent a theological outlook reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Liberal Protestantism, which has also found its way into the thought of certain twentieth century Catholic thinkers, like Karl Rahner. They tend to define salvation in terms of a feeling or an enlightened orientation of love towards the world and God. Significantly, inclusivists see all kinds of soteriological connections and points of commonality between Christianity and other religions, but conclude that Christianity is the clearest expression or fullest revelation of that

salvation. Ultimately, for the inclusivist, the religions are not contrary to Christianity as they are for the exclusivist; but rather, they are incomplete expressions of what is fully expressed in the revelation of Christ. For the inclusivist, all religions find their fulfillment in Christianity. Therefore, Karl Rahner, for example, could call members of non-Christian religions, who acquired something of this enlightened orientation from their respective religions, “anonymous Christians.”

Pluralists interpret the diversity of religion in a wholly positive way. For them, the religions do not represent competing versions of salvation, as exclusivists think, or partial visions of salvation that are clarified by Christianity, as inclusivists think. Rather, the Pluralists, all religions (or at least the major world religions) are equally valid paths to salvation. The religions are different with regard to the *path* they take, but they are the same with regard to the soteriological *destination* they will reach.

The major premise of the pluralist position is what John Hicks calls the “pluralist hypothesis.” For Hicks, two empirical observations ground this hypothesis: 1) the fact that people generally have no other option but to appropriate the religious disposition in which they are brought up and 2) the fact that all religions, or at least the great historical world religions, provide a context and a vision for human transformation that exhibit about the same degree of effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> In the view of pluralists, these empirical observations represent a kind of Copernican revolution in the way we view the world. Transformational outcomes, not *apriori* doctrinal commitments, determine the truth or correctness of beliefs., which means, for Hicks, a movement away from self-centered to other-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., , 157.

centered thinking and acting. Since there is no appreciable difference between the life of a believing Christian and the life of adherents of other religions, the religions necessarily share equally in their ability to effect human transformation, that is, salvation.

Presently, “Pluralism” has emerged as one of the dominant interpretations of religious diversity today. That does not mean there are not significant criticisms of it. For example, one major criticism has been advanced by S. Mark Heim in his book “Salvations.” Pluralists assume that all the religions mean the same thing by “salvation.” They do not, says Heim. Therefore, the “transformational” definition of salvation is NOT a common link between religious traditions. For example, some Christians might say “new creation” not simple “transformation” is the focus of Christian salvation. While some understanding of a transformational component in human life may be a part of all religious traditions (say, for example, the social need for cultivating a common sense of morality and decorum) the ultimate end, called salvation, may transcend that aim. Nirvana is not simply personal or social transformation and neither is the kingdom of God. But also Nirvana is not the same as the kingdom of God.

The Pluralist interpretation of religious diversity is not an idea that emerged out of the blue. It is part of the “pluralistic impulse” that is at the center of our modern world. We live in a pluralistic age. But what that means is not by any means settled. Indeed, a major aspect of the pluralistic impulse in modern society is the search for a philosophy of life that will support the idea of living civilly and with integrity in the face of substantive disagreement. Therefore, in what follows I will do three things:

- 1) I will seek to better understand our context by giving an historical explanation of the rise of the pluralistic impulse in modern society;
- 2) I will seek to construct a Christian theology of the religions using Paul's law-gospel outlook and discussion of Gentile religion in Galatians as my interpretive framework; and
- 3) I will make some modest suggestions on the implications of this theology of the religions for mission.

## **The Rise of the Pluralistic Impulse in Modern Society: A Historical Explanation**

For most of world history the dominant paradigm for understanding the relationship between religion and culture has been one of identity. In the Christian tradition this identity was called Christendom. It was inconceivable that a society could exist without religious agreement. Therefore, there was also a close connection between a culture's religious institutions and its state apparatus. The two worked together to ensure the stability, cohesion, and legitimacy of its culture and religious orthodoxy.

As a result societies were identified as much with their "religion" as they were with their political structure, economic arrangements or ethnic makeup. All these things were simply fused together as one and cultures were defined as Christian or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist, etc. There was no real distinction between the sacred and the profane or the spiritual and the secular. If there was a distinction, it functioned much upon the analogy of a building: with the "religion" being the underground, unseen *foundation* upon which the "secular" above ground, visible *building* set. To use Paul Tillich's pithy phrase, "religion was the substance (the foundation or mainframe) of culture and culture was the form (the facade) of religion."

Of course, if the dominate paradigm for the relationship of religion and culture is identity, then the corresponding dominate relationship between the religions was conflict. A religiously diverse society was inconceivable. Nothing brought that fact home to Western society more profoundly than the Reformation. What had held Medieval Europe together was the perception of a common Christianity. To be sure, this Medieval Christianity had its conflicts, its diversity, its discontents. Nevertheless, the basic perception was that Europe was Christendom and that its socio-political-cultural legitimacy was founded on a solid religious foundation.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation shook that foundation in an unprecedented, be it unintentional, way. As the various confessional and ecclesiastical groupings (Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist and Roman Catholic) formed, each claimed to be the legitimate heir to catholic Christianity. In addition, they also (except for the Anabaptists) formed with the support and protection of local governments, whether in the form of a nation state, a city state, or a principedom. As a result, the post-Reformation alliance of religion and culture, church and state, continued the Christendom model, only now in a state of constant conflict between competing, confessionally opposed states.

Not until the Thirty Years War (1618-48) failed to produce a clear religious victor (and exhausted the spirit, resources and population of the competitors ) did the competing confessional states concede the idea of a European Christendom. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the war, established peace essentially by forcing the competing confessional states to recognize the right of each country to independently pursue its own attempt to create a Christian society on the basis of its own confession. Significantly, this policy of tolerance between

confessional states was not based on any theological or philosophical notion of toleration. It was simply a pragmatic arrangement entered into for the expediency of the moment.

But the peace worked... and that got people to thinking. Maybe toleration of theological differences was not just a political necessity? Maybe it reveals aspects of truth hitherto not imagined by the Christian mind? Maybe religion is not the key to social stability at all? Maybe something else is? So, coming out of the disgust of the war of religions and the success of the policy of religious tolerance there emerged a new wave of thinking. Even some theologians began to see tolerance as fitting neatly within the classical doctrines of the church: especially those “separatist” minded Protestants who saw revolutionary implications for tolerance in the doctrine of “salvation by faith alone” (apart from the coercions of the law) and the Western doctrine of “the two swords” (which asserted that God had given secular authority to the state for the sake of civil order and spiritual authority to the church for the sake of salvation).

In the American colonial context, for example, Roger Williams (1603-1683) becomes a central figure in this wave of thinking as he battles the Puritan theocratic establishment in Massachusetts. At the heart of Williams’ argument is his view of “soul liberty.” Taking the Decalogue as the universal will of God, religion is about the rights and duties of persons to worship and reverence God in the freedom of conscience (the first table of the Decalogue) and that contradicts the use of any form of coercion relative to religion. Worship and reverence by definition must to be free and voluntary, a matter of faith and conscience, not of coercion and public law. Matters of the state, on the other hand, concern the rights

and duties of persons within civil society (the second table of the Decalogue) and there the state has the right and duty to use coercive means to enforce the public good. The powers of the state prevent sinful individuals from trampling on one another's rights and duties, both religious and civil, and the separation of Church and State prevents the State from trampling on an individual's right to relate to worship God according to the dictates of one's own conscience. By maintaining this distinction between religious and civic rights and duties, Williams concludes, that a "hedge or wall of separation" must be maintained "between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world." By allowing this wall to crumble, Christianity, since Constantine, has allowed the wilderness of the world to destroy the garden of the church. Therefore, religious tolerance and the separation of Church and state (which means the end of Christendom) are normative principles of the Christian religion that have been lost to Christianity for centuries.

To be sure, Williams' theological hermeneutic for grounding religious liberty and the separation of Church and State is very different, for example, from that of the Roman Catholic nature/grace hermeneutic and a Lutheran law/gospel hermeneutic. As a Baptist, Williams' thought is a creative blend of Calvinist and Anabaptist thought that, on the one hand, draws on Calvinism's notion of Third Use of the Law as the unifying principle for all things religious and civil and, on the other hand, tempers the Anabaptist principle of the separation of the religious and civil spheres by seeing the law itself as calling forth a fundamental distinction between a person's duty to God and duty to society. Because most Lutherans, Calvinists and Roman Catholics, at this time, were quite comfortable in their church-state arrangements, interests in rethinking their theological traditions in light of a situation like that in which Williams found himself was simply inconceivable. Only when they also find themselves in a situation like that of

Williams (and that, I would argue, is not until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) will they beginning to think theologically about living in a religiously plural society.

As a result, theological rationales for a policy of religious tolerance within a single society were far and few between. The only other rationale of significant note, to the best of my knowledge, comes from the Quakers. This void of theological argument for religious tolerance made space for another argument that was rooted not in theology but in philosophy, specifically, the new emerging philosophical outlook called the Enlightenment. In Williams' mind, the linchpin of his argument rested on the fact that the Decalogue is the universally revealed will of God reported in Holy Scripture. As a theological argument it is an argument from authority or special revelation. What is new is his interpretation of that revelation: namely, that civil matters and religious matters dare not be mixed. While Enlightenment figures agreed that civil and religious matters must be kept separate, they disagreed that that conclusion needed a theological premise. To the contrary, that conclusion was obvious to reason, the universal possession of all persons of good will, regardless of religious or dogmatic conviction. Indeed, reason alone became the mantra of the Enlightenment for judging the truth of all things, including religious thing. By that standard much of classical Christian doctrine was declared wanting and for many Enlightenment thinkers Deism became the religion of choice. With this development another distinction enters the stage, the distinction between the public and the private. Since classical Christian or religious claims cannot be established on the basis of pure reason, they were deemed private matters exempt from public regulation and social controls. Public or civil claims, by contrast, were subject to the dictates of pure reason and appropriately regulated by social controls.

The view on religious freedom and the separation of church and state that came to inform the American Constitutional tradition is that of the Enlightenment, specifically, as it was interpreted by John Locke. But this view was adopted not primarily for ideological reasons but pragmatic ones. That's because the colonies were themselves a patchwork of governmental arrangements that viewed the question of the establishment of religion quite differently. In that regard, the colonies essentially operated by the same principle as did Europe under the Peace of Westphalia: by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, whoever rules, his religion.

For example, on the one hand, the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut had Congregationalism as their established religion, while New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were officially Church of England. On the other hand, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania had a strong disestablishment tradition, predating the Enlightenment and rooted in the religious convictions of Baptist Roger Williams and Quaker William Penn, respectively. Still, I might add, while Roger Williams and William Penn both saw religious freedom and disestablishment as fundamental principles of the Christian religion (and gave religious freedom to each other's religious traditions in their respective colonies) that did not mean that they agreed with one another on most religious matters. Just how at odds Baptists and Quakers were on theological matters is illustrated by what is known as the "Great Quaker Debate" of 1672. Roger Williams initiated the debate when he drew up a list of Fourteen Proposition attacking principles, practices and tendencies in the Quaker religion. Religious tolerance, for them, therefore, did not precluded religious debate, but necessitated it. Tolerance is not "pluralism" as that word is ideologically defined today. For Roger Williams and George Fox (the founder of Quakerism) religious tolerance

neither relativized the importance of religious differences nor relegated it to the realm of the purely private. Rather, religious tolerance meant that religion was a matter to be advanced by personal persuasion not governmental enforcement.

In light of the differences between the colonies on religious matters, the founding fathers knew that the colonies would never unite if the arrangement meant establishing a national church. But they also knew that a federal government would never be accepted if it disestablished the church at a state level. As a result, the First Amendment's establishment clause (which states that government shall make no law with respect to establishing or impeding the free exercise of religion) applied only to the Federal Government not to the states. While the idea of disestablishment at a state level soon followed the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, part of the reason for that was due to the Pietist Movement, generally, and the Great Awakening, specifically, that had swept through the colonies in the 1730s and 40s. Better known in America as Evangelicalism, Pietism was a religious outlook that, like the Enlightenment, also emerged in horror of the European wars of religion and in criticism of the failure of Confessional Orthodoxy to bring about a simple and singularly convincing view of Christianity. But instead of retreating into rationalism as the deists had done, Evangelicalism accentuated the devotional and life-style elements of religion, generally, and of Christianity, specifically. For Evangelicalism, religion was not a matter of reason, but of emotion. Christianity was about a personal conversion experience and a corresponding amendment of life, a pious life-style. Significantly, then, Evangelicalism shared with the Enlightenment both, a *depreciation* of ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal commitment, on the one hand, and an *appreciation* of individualism (the autonomy of the individual to judge spiritual matters) and the accent on life-style, on the other.

The irony of American history, then, is that, at America's founding, Enlightenment Philosophy and Evangelical Protestantism joined forces to give rise to the modern Secular State. The ideals of the Enlightenment were enshrined in the American Constitution and governed its political life; the ideals of Evangelical Protestantism permeated the wider culture and informed its basic outlook. The result, as George Marsden has noted, is a society that is at once, paradoxically very secular and very religious.<sup>3</sup> Secular thinking and religious thinking, therefore, are not necessarily contradictory ways of thinking. Religious conviction and sound reasoning can agree on many things.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and much of the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, these two dimensions of American life, the religious and the secular, coexisted in relative harmony. You might say that the way of *pia desiderata* (pious desiring) was consistent with the way of *purus ratio* (pure reason): the pious longings out of which Evangelicals *intuited* the meaning of life was consistent with the way the pure reasoning of the secularists *deduced* it. This was true even though the two traditions rested on very different footings: Evangelical Protestantism on the Biblical text and Enlightenment secularism on the naturalistic principles enshrined in the constitution.

This harmony between the religious and the secular does not mean that there were not lively -- even contentious -- debates within the society. Abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, etc., were all hotly debated issues. The point is that the debate was as much a debate with each of these traditions as between them. The great moral debates of the age revealed no fundamental conflict

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<sup>3</sup> George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2001), 5.

between religious intuition and secular reasoning. Indeed, as long as the dominant religious outlook in society was Evangelical Protestantism, the State's responsibility to stay out of religion had the practical effect of giving tacit support to the religious status quo.

Although Evangelical Protestantism underwent a great process of diversification throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, spawning a myriad of movements and new denominations, the overwhelming perception was that America was an Evangelical Protestant nation. One reason for this perception was the way the symbols and moral vision of Evangelical Protestantism permeated both American culture and its political institutions. The week (through blue laws) and the year (through its holidays) were organized around the Christian calendar. In the schools the King James Bible was read and prayers were said. The Ten Commandments were a symbol uniting moral and political law. That perception began to change, however, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries for many reasons. I can only mention a few.

First, the immigration of Roman Catholics by the millions created a critical mass of Christians who publically opposed this infusion of Evangelical Protestant symbols and assumptions into public institutions. Although Vatican I (1870) officially put Rome on record as being opposed to such modernist ideas as religious freedom and separation of Church and State, nevertheless, the American Catholic bishops availed themselves of "these errors" to break the Protestant grip on governmental institutions and initiate a process of "secularization" of public schools.

Second, the security of religious liberty led to the rise of new sectarian religious groups (like the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses) that claimed Evangelical pedigrees but which held religious views that contradicted the hitherto harmony that existed between secular and religious life. This development began to create a wedge not only between religious intuition and secular reasoning but also between the various religious groups themselves. Defining what is normal and what is abnormal religion became harder and harder to do. Ironically, the courts were increasingly called upon to define what is religious and what is secular, placing it as judge over religious matters. For example, with regard to the Mormons, the courts decided that polygamy was not a religious matter (to be allowed on the basis of Biblical reference and religious intuition) but a secular matter (to be forbidden on the grounds of reason that such an arrangement is harmful to persons and the moral structure of society).<sup>4</sup> In response, court cases began to emerge that widened the divide between religious life and secular life on the grounds that things religious are private matters and things secular are public matters.

Third, with the rise of modern science and its naturalistic method of inquiry, a new picture of the way the world works (and by extrapolation, how it came into being) came into view. Modern Science, especially, Darwinism, called into questioned the common sense assumptions that had heretofore held religion and science together as necessary complements. Again, the schools became the locus for the conflict, beginning with the Scopes Monkey trial in 1925, and the courts the arbitrator over what is a religious idea and what is a scientific idea. Drawing on the Enlightenment principles that inform the constitution to guide its decisions, the

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court? Supreme Court Decisions on Church-State Separation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 21-2.

courts continue the process of dividing the religious and the secular into the categories of the private and the public with “science” being very much a public matter. Modern Science by definition is a secular or public thing because it reserves truth claims to “natural” explanations. The courts assert that people are free to believe whatever they want about “scientific matters,” but public schools can teach only that which has support through the scientific establishment.

Fourth, the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw not only an increase in religious diversity in America, as immigrants from non-Christian traditions also enter the country, but a growing distrust of all things institutionalized, whether secular or religious. While the so-called countercultural movement of the 60s had many sides to it and no unifying ideology, it did reinforce the value of individualism in a startling new way: it judged all institutions as essentially self-serving and it counseled all individuals to trust primarily in their own intuitions and to act in their own self-interest.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean, of course, that individuals have wholesale dropped out of society or withdraw participation from its secular institutions. But it has raised legitimation issue about modern culture and its public institutions in a significant way.<sup>6</sup> Religious institutions, which have been declining in credibility and numbers ever since, have especially been affected.

Finally, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has also seen an emergence of both a philosophical and a practical atheism that aligns itself with the emerging secularization of daily life. Small in numbers, its impact has far exceeded its size. The first Supreme Court case to come to the fore in this regard was *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962 over the issue of school led prayer in public schools. As this group has

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<sup>5</sup> See Marsden

<sup>6</sup>Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

increasingly targeted the heretofore unnoticed or lingering traces of religious expression in publicly sponsored activities, the American court system has increasingly protected their right “not to believe” and systematically restricted what might be called religious activity of any kind from governmentally sponsored events and programs. It must be noted, however, that many “believers” also support this development and do so on religious grounds not unlike those advanced by Roger Williams. Significant in this regard is the organization *Americans United for the Separation of Church and State*.

The cumulative impact for thinking about religion and the secular that this complex history has created can neither be overstated nor boiled down to a single, simple conclusion. But permit me a few unsystematic observations.

First, as George Marsden has noted, the American experiment (to organize a nation on the pragmatic principle of the First Amendment) has created a society that is at once very religious and very secular. While the catchword “separation” may suffice for defining the practical relationship between religious and public *institutions* – Church and State – it does not suffice for defining the way people themselves actually live out the relationship of the religious and the secular in their daily lives. On the contrary, they relate in a very “paradoxical” way, a way that cannot be compartmentalized. To borrow an idea from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, people are learning to be religious in a secular way. To be sure, they do not generally do this in a well thought out or a theologically unified way. But, then, that is precisely the challenge before us.

Second, this first observation gives credence, I think, to Tillich’s insight that “religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.” The

secular form that our culture has taken is not necessarily the antithesis of religion, even though some may try to make it so. Rather, it is a new expression or form of the religious. We dare not forget that in our American democracy, the State is not the same thing as “We the people” from whom the State supposedly derives its authority. Polls still tell us that “We the people” vote in a way that we think is consistent with our religious convictions -- we are not schizophrenic -- even though we generally do not want government to make a law concerning the establishment of our religious convictions, and have put constitutional restriction on ourselves to prevent it. Therefore, while there is not a linear relation between religious substance and cultural form, there is a paradoxical one – one that pure reason is hard pressed to explain.

Third, the prevailing impulse that the American experiment has produced with regard to religion is not atheism or pure secularism but religious pluralism. Martin Marty has astutely noticed that there are a variety of pluralisms at work in American culture.<sup>7</sup> In particular there is political pluralism, which is a pragmatic, political commitment to regard all religions as the same in the eyes of the law – the separation of Church and State. This pluralism is rooted in the First Amendment of the Constitution and emerged in light of the complex history we rehearsed above. But today there is also an emerging “religious pluralism,” the idea that at root all religions are essentially the same. Anecdotally, this idea is nearly ubiquitous among my under-thirty students, even among those who say they are Christians; and academically, it is emerging as *the* new idea among Christian theologians to be addressed -- hence, our conference. But the question is, “why the impulse to religious pluralism?” To be sure there are very different reasons why

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Marty, “Pluralisms,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (2007), 14-25.

my students hold to it and why some academics hold to it. Nevertheless, let me suggest two closely linked reasons that are by no means comprehensive.

First, the impulse to pluralism is rooted, I think, in a growing recognition by thoughtful academicians that the paradigm of “separation” between the religious and the secular and the idea that religion is a purely a “private matter” (a position which my students tend to hold) do not provide an adequate explanation for the role of religion in the modern world. Therefore, to its credit, the impulse to pluralism among the academicians recognizes that at some deep, basic level the religious and the secular are related in a way that is consistent with Tillich’s dictum. But how are they related? Pluralism basically sees the role of religion in terms of a moral project: specifically, the transformation of individuals and societies, making individuals less self-centered and making societies more just. I will address the weakness I see in that characterization of religion below. Second, the impulse to pluralism is further motivated among the academicians by the idea that religious tolerance (while having been helpful politically) does not supply a sufficient ground for relating the religious to the secular in a coherent, moral way. The essence of religion must correlate with the essence of the secular if it is to transform the world to make it better. Therefore, the goal of pluralism is to show that “where it matters” all religions (or at least the major world religions) consist of the same moral essence. Whatever diversity we see within and between both religion and culture is, therefore, reconcilable if it is consistent with the essential moral core of religion.

## **II. Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions: A Law-Gospel Theological Interpretation**

For help in thinking about this “pluralistic impulse” theologically, I’m going to turn to St. Paul and, specifically, to his letter to the *Galatians*. I go there because the New Testament still remains for the Ecumenical Christian community a normative witness to Christ as savior and Lord, and the touchstone for all theology, whether they see themselves as Christian exclusivists, inclusivist, or pluralists. What we will see, though obliquely, is that these categories simply cannot handle the dynamic and paradoxical event of Jesus Christ as he comes into the world and among its religions.

To be sure, Paul is not living in a pluralistic age as we are. But there are similarities. In general, the Roman Empire is a very religiously diverse place and, in general, the official stance of the empire regards all religions as basically equal and the same. In that regard, the Romans continued the idea of religious equality initiated by the Greeks and publically instituted in the Pantheon. Therefore, there was a modicum of freedom for the religions to advance their claims in the public square, even as they were expected, by force of the *Pax Romana*, to live in social harmony with one another. Paul, if I read him correctly, had no criticism of this social arrangement of the religions. Indeed, he seems to benefit from it when he appealed to the State in the face of Jewish opposition to his ministry. More importantly, his tent-making strategy for mission represents just how content he was to vie in the market place for what he called, not religion, but the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But there are also ways in which Paul’s context is significantly different from ours. He lives in an empire not a democracy. And as such, there was little chance that the Christian movement through its members (and movement is a better term for it than religion) could have any impact on social policy. Whatever

impact Christ's followers had on shaping the secular world was through acts of charity, which Paul endorsed enthusiastically. Indeed, as Paul in *Galatians* gives his account of the Jerusalem Council, he holds two aspects of the Christian life in absolute tension: Christian Freedom and Christian Charity. As he puts it, the council "asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do" (1:10). It would seem that for Paul the life of freedom and the life of charity are coextensive. To be free is to love. Freedom (from sin, death and law and for love, life and mercy) is the gift received by faith in Christ alone.

In order to orient us to the center of Paul's thought on how to relate the good news of Jesus Christ to the religious environment he found himself in, let me begin with a fairly lengthy quote from Chapter 4 (1-11):

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

My thesis is this: The religions, as Paul understands them, are truly places where God is at work in the world, but at work under the category of law not

gospel. Paul is not against religion anymore than he is not against the law. What he is against is people being left with religion alone without the addition of Christ: just as Paul was against being left with the protection of the State alone or Jesus was against anyone being left with bread alone – that is, without the addition of Christ. Therefore, for Paul, the proper distinction between law and gospel, which is his great insight into the ways of God, is at the heart of a constructive Christian theology of the religions.

No single letter of Paul gives more information about his personal journey of faith than *Galatians*. He who once had been a persecutor of the Good News of Jesus Christ in the name of the Law (for he was very zealous for the law) had now become its most passionate advocate. Why? As he himself tells us, because of “a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12), what Luke narrates as Paul’s Damascus experience. The point of Paul telling us this is part of his legitimation crisis: to let us know that the gospel he proclaims is not of human origin but divine origin. He got it from no one else but Christ himself. And what is that Good News? The singular, simple message that “a person is justified [before God] not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16).

Note! At the heart of the Good News is a conflict between two activities of God that heretofore seemed to escape notice: God’s law and God’s gospel. And as the implications of this conflict began to settle in, some Christians began to have doubts. And not just common Christians, but big name Christians, like Peter, whom Paul had to confront publically on the issue. But common Christians, too! Indeed, it is for these common Christians (Jews and Gentiles alike) that Paul writes the *Letter to the Galatians*. Paul had won them over to Christ but now they, too, were having second thoughts and returning to their old religions. Therefore, Paul

writes this letter essentially to explain this conflict at the heart of God's dealings with humanity in order to further explain why it would be disastrous for doubters to forsake Christ and rely on religion alone.

In Paul's context Jewish religion, that is, the Law as given through Moses (Paul says mediators), is the immediate focus. And the first question these doubters seem to pose to Paul is this: If faith in Christ alone is what justifies sinners before God, then, why the law?

Because Paul gives a fuller (not a different) answer to this question in *Romans* (partly because he had more time to think about it and partly because it is more general in focus) I'm going to summarize that fuller answer here. Moreover, to do that I'm going to draw on Luther's summary of the two function of the law, as expounded in his *Commentary on Romans*, for help.

For Paul, as he states clearly in *Romans*, the law is essentially an expression or a revelation of God's wrath or displeasure on human sinfulness. Through the law God gives the knowledge of sin. Philip Melanchthon's pithy way of describing this was "lex semper accusat" (the law always accuses). The law was not given to advise us, but to accuse us. The modern analogue to this is the concept of critique. Wherever critique or evaluation or demand or accusation is taking place, there the law of God is at work. Significantly, no specific knowledge of or faith in God is needed for us to be entangled in the law, or, as Paul would say, to be "imprisoned by" or "enslaved in" the law (Gal 3:22; 4:2). The law is that one universal activity of God where God may remain hidden and still be intimately and

imminently involved.<sup>8</sup> That's because it is a mediated activity of God, not a direct encounter with God. In Romans, for example, Paul identifies the Imperial State as such a mediating agent of the law (Rom 13:1-7) and in Galatians, as I will show below, he also sees pagan religion as a mediating agent of the law (Gal 4:2).

As Luther observes, this critical activity of God serves two purposes in the world: a civil or political purpose and a theological or spiritual purpose. In Galatians, Paul uses the concepts of a prison guardian and a disciplinarian to describe its civil purpose. The point is that it exists to restrain humanity's sinful, selfish inclinations so as to bring some modicum of order, peace and stability into civil society. In Romans, Paul asserts that this restraining activity of the law is a "good, holy, and just" thing (Rom 7:12). But don't think that it is giver of freedom in any real or absolute sense. It is not. True, the law does give sinners the freedom to do good, but it doesn't give them the freedom to sin. Prisoners may think of themselves as free as they go here and there within their cell, but in truth they are limited by the cell. Students may think of themselves as free to procrastinate but, note, time is limited. Their assignments must get done or else. What makes this restraining work of the law "good" is that it gives one sinner some measure of protection from another sinner. What makes it "holy" is that it has divine authorization. And what makes it "just" is that it gives people what they deserve.

In *Galatians*, Paul describes the theological function of the law by reference to "the scripture" (Gal 3:22). The singular is important. Scripture (singular) means the content of what God has disclosed to us; and for Paul that content entails the proper distinction of law and Gospel. I quote: "But the scripture has

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<sup>8</sup> By the way, Luther's notion of the hidden God can be a key resource for developing a theological understanding of the secular. It explains why we can talk law without reference to the God who is its author in secular matters.

imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Furthermore, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 4:9, the content of scripture is not simply knowledge of God whether abstract or otherwise, though it may include that too. More importantly, the content of scripture gives the deep knowledge of how God knows us. The most essential question, then, is this, does God know us through the law only or does God know us also through faith in Christ? How God knows us is the central spiritual question for Paul.

So back to the theological function of the law. While the political function of the law may leave sinners some room for imagining freedom or presuming righteousness (what Luther called “civil righteousness”), the theological function of the law intends to deprive us of that possibility. The theological function of the law simply exposes us as sinners, people who are condemned by God and liable to death. “Cursed” (Gal 3:10-14) is the word Paul uses for this in *Galatians*. In *Romans* Paul explains the interrelationship of sin, law and death at some length. In *Galatians*, he simply says “the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin.” Significantly, Paul ascribes no designated, worldly agent for carrying out this function of the law as he does for the civil function. It seems to be left up to God to bring this knowledge about as God chooses in the rough tumble of daily life. As Luther was aware, this knowledge does, at times, creep into our human consciousness. His bouts with *anfechtung* (despair) revealed this. But for the most part, humanity is deprived of this knowledge. That, by the way, as Paul says, is no advantage in the long run. For whether we know it or not “the wage of sin is death.” If ignorance of the theological function of law feels like bliss in the short run, it is ruin in the long run.

But the whole point of *Galatians* is that there is an alternative: namely, faith in God's promise that "a person is justified [before God] not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). As Paul looks back on Israel's history through the lens of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ he sees something there that he never saw before: that in God's calculus, the promise has priority over the law. Indeed, the reason Paul can speak in such a matter of fact way about such a terrifying thing as the theological function of the law is because the gospel so clearly overrules it.

Let's follow his line of argument. First, Paul observes that 430 years before the law was given Abraham was declared righteous before God by faith in God's promise to give him an offspring. Therefore, faith in that promised offspring, not works of the law is clearly what justified Abraham. Second, Paul argues, the text reads that God promised Abraham *an* offspring, singular, not many offspring. Therefore, as history has now revealed, that offspring that Abraham trusted God to give was Christ. As it turns out Christ is Abraham's righteousness. Third, integral to the promise given to Abraham is the idea that Abraham would be a blessing to the Gentiles. Therefore, Paul reasons, Christ is that blessing to the Gentiles, and everyone who, like Abraham, trusts in the promised offspring is justified before God. Fourth, the law that came 430 years after the promise did not nullify the promise, but rather revealed why the promise is necessary. It is necessary because of sin and God's curse upon it. The purpose of the law is to reveal the curse and it does this by showing that we cannot "observe and obey" (Gal. 3:10) all that the law demands. Fifth, the fact that God's curse rests on all humanity explains why the offspring, Christ, had to suffer death on the cross. He came to bear our curse so that by faith we might receive his blessing. And the blessing is this: that we are accounted righteous before God because of faith in Christ. Sixth, for Paul the

blessing translates into true freedom: freedom from sin, law and death and freedom for repentance (Gal. 6:1-5), love (Gal. 5:13), and eternal life (Gal. 6:8). Ultimately, then, for Paul, there is only one conclusion to draw from all of this: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29). Sounds like our conference theme: “One for all and all in One.”

As I said earlier, the occasion for Paul’s letter to the Galatians is precipitated by the fact that many of his converts to Christ – Jews and Gentiles alike – are considering forsaking Christ and returning to their old religions. The question is, how did Paul think about Gentile religions? You might think that he thought of them as simply evil or demonic, but he didn’t. In essence, he thought about them in the same way he thought about his Jewish critics. He thought about them with regard to the distinction of law and gospel. Paul’s qualms with his Jewish critics is not rooted in anti-Judaism but in the fact that the so-called Judaizers stripped Judaism of the promise and kept only the law. Paul’s criticism of Gentile’s religion is not that they have *stripped* their religion of the promise, but that they have never added it. Paul’s insight that Gentiles do not need to adapt Jewish laws and customs to be Christian, applies also to Gentile religion. Gentiles do not necessarily need to forsake their Gentile laws and customs, either. However, those laws and customs do need to be relativized and adapted in light of the gospel of Christ. In short, as Paul encounters the religions of his day he does not adopt a purely negative view of them, but a nomological view of them. He identifies how they carry out the functions of the law so that he can thereby show why the promise needs to be added.

I think the verses I quoted earlier (Gal. 4:1-11) support this interpretation of Paul. While the word “religion” never appears in the text of Galatians or any of the so-called authentic letters of Paul, what we typically identify today as religion does: namely, things like “observing special days, months, and seasons” (Gal. 4:10) and, of course, such ritual activity as “circumcision” (2:12). But even then we must be careful. Paul does not give us anything close to a full-blown theology of Gentile religion. But he does make three simple, salient points. First, we should not trivialize or minimize the power of these ritual practices. They are not merely a psychological or therapeutic exercise to make us feel good—though through them we may feel good. Nor are they simply a sociological exercise in community building or group support – though it may do that, too. What worship and ceremony do is bind us to the religious objects we worship. Indeed, so adamant is Paul about the power of ritual to bind us to its object that he describes it as “enslaving” (Gal. 4:3).

Second, the language that Paul borrows from Gentile religion to describe the object of their worship is “the elemental spirits of the world” or *stoicheia* in the Greek (Gal. 4:3). As Ed Krentz notes, the term has philosophical roots and designates the ordering principles of the cosmos to which people are to align themselves.<sup>9</sup> Gentile religion personalizes these principles as powers to be dealt with. While Paul calls these elemental spirits “weak and beggarly,” he does not call them evil or demonic. Why is that? Because for Paul, what the “elemental spirits” do in Gentile religion, the angels do in Paul’s contemporary Jewish theology. That is they mediate the law of God (See Gal. 3:19-20) and are a way of describing why the law of God is ubiquitous. Paul, I would argue, has no qualms with how Gentile religion might serve the civil function of the law. The works of

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Krentz, *Galatians in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 59-60.

the law done by the Gentiles in response to the elemental spirits of the world, God's mediators of the law, can be very impressive. But those works don't justify a person before God. Only the promise justifies. And that is Paul's only concern. He is not concerned that the Gentiles don't have the law in some form or understanding. They do. The problem is that they don't have the promise that redeems from what that law in its theological function does to people. It condemns them! The reason the elemental spirits, the mediators of law, are called "weak and beggarly" is because they cannot save. Gentile religion, therefore, is not simply negated in Paul's thought. Rather, what it needs is the addition of the promise.

Third, the addition of the promise to Gentile religion is not a simple addition. It entails both, a radical rethinking of God's work in the world as twofold (as law and promise) and a fundamental reorienting one's whole life with regard to both God and neighbor. Paul's word for this reorientation is "freedom" as opposed to "slavery" (Gal. 5:1). His way of describing how law and promise collide in the believer to reconfigure their whole way of life is expressed in *Galatians* 2:19-21 in a pithy and paradoxical way:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:19-21).

Before God Christians live by faith alone in Jesus Christ, who is their justification, in whom they have died and have been set free from the bondage of sin, law and death; before the neighbor Christians live by love alone and thereby become "slaves to one another" (Gal. 5:13) in thanksgiving to God. Although in *Galatians* Paul doesn't speak about the ritual reorientation that the addition of Christ might

mean for Gentile religion, he certainly does in both *Romans* and *1 Corinthians*. Essentially, the new, overall focus of religious ritual is now turned toward facilitating the believers dying and rising in Christ as the eschatological trajectory of baptism. The daily agenda of believers becomes repentance (using the law to identify sin) and forgiveness (adding the promise to take away sin). And finally, the regular gathering of the community of believers is aimed at being reconciled to God and one another through Eucharistic participation in the body and blood of Christ.

To be sure, what this eschatological reorientation might look like in any particular place is an open question. Paul was in principle content to proclaim the promise and let the spirit blow where it wills. As a result, the congregations he associated with to a large extent developed their own way of living out the dialectic of law and promise, making the Pauline churches a diverse tapestry of ritual, ethical and organizational practices, whether in Corinth or Thessalonica or Galatia. This is not a prescription for relativism or syncretism, however. Anything but! Rather, this diversity is perfectly consistent with Paul's single-minded focus on the gospel as the new orientation of the believer's whole way of life. A quick look at the passionate debate Paul undertakes concerning the meaning and implication of this addition of the gospel in the various congregations he associates reveals this.

### **III. Bringing Christ to the Religions – A Missional Suggestion**

In closing, I want to address what I think is one of the most critical challenges that modern religious pluralism presents to the Church today: Pluralism's challenge the legitimacy of Christian mission. Modern religious pluralists say that there is essentially no need for Christian mission among the

religions because the religions are all the same. Moreover, they add, if we would only recognize that fact then the world would be a better place. I would respectfully disagree and point to the difficulty pluralists themselves have in defining “religion” for support. In the tenure of my teaching of religious studies, I have not encountered a single introduction to the subject matter that doesn’t discuss the impossibility of defining “religion.” Why is that? Because, as they note, the religions disagree on too many basic things.

One of the basic weaknesses of religious pluralism, in my judgment, is that it does not know how to deal with honest disagreement as a fact of life. I’m reminded of Jurgen Habermas’ insight on honest disagreement as a fact of life. He said something like this, and I am paraphrasing him: There is no greater achievement in human communication than when two people truly come to understand one another and still disagree. He says this because usually we assume people disagree with us because they don’t understand us. But that, according to Habermas, is not necessarily so. People can truly understand one another and still honestly disagree with one another.

As I have interpreted Paul, integral to the Christian gospel is a mission imperative. That’s because the promise of Christ is not something that is naturally encountered by people in their world of law; rather, the promise of Christ is something that must be *added to* their world of law. Believers who have received the gospel are called *not* to keep it to themselves, but *to share it* with the world. We do the world a great disservice when we have help to offer and we do not give it. We have no trouble today understanding this with regard to our physical lives, but we have great trouble understanding it with regard to our spiritual lives.

Having said that, I would also agree that much of what passes off as Christian mission today is not very informed and, accordingly, not very respectful of other religious traditions. Christian mission is often triumphalistic and imperialistic. The message of Christ is often presented as a divine demand for us to meet instead of a gracious promise for God to keep. Put simply, Christians are not very adept at distinguishing God's law from God's gospel. What ends up happening, then, is what happened in Galatia between the Judaizers and the Gentiles. They begin to push their particular way of living under the law as the most important thing (their political, ritual and moral positions), rather than promote the promise of Christ as the ultimate thing. For Christians who know how to distinguish law and gospel, we can let quibbles about the law be just that: quibbles. By calling them "quibbles," however, I do not mean to say that they are not important things to be discussed. They are! What I mean is that in the grand scheme of things they are not "ultimate." Rather, they are "penultimate" to use Bonhoeffer's term or *adiaphora* to use Melancthon's term or "weak and beggarly" to use Paul's terms. Christians dare not forget that they will never meet the demands of the law; their hope rests somewhere else, in the promise of Christ, who has made the demands of the law obsolete for those who believe.

Modern pluralism, however, does teaches us an important lesson. Inter-religious dialogue and cooperation must be part of the Christian engagement with the world. Both the model of conflict and the model of tolerance must go. In my judgment, Paul's nomological understanding of the religions provides a meaningful point of departure for both inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. From the standpoint of cooperation, given Paul's understandings of religion and the civil function of the law, there is no reason from a Christian point of view why the religions could not work together on all manner of social and civil issues.

From the standpoint of inter-religious dialogue, there is no reason why Christians could not expect to learn something from other religions about the movement of God's law in the world. Indeed, the history of Christianity itself teaches us that Christians have a rich tradition of learning from non-Christians new understandings about the way of the law in the world. From the New Testaments' use of stoic philosophy in its ethical thinking to the scholastic retrieval of Aristotle from the Spanish Moors to the modern intrigue with Gandhi's method of non-violent civil disobedience by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King – Christians have learned much about the law of God from other religious and philosophical traditions.

But Christians will not only want to dialogue about the law as it is understood by their fellow religionists, they will also want to dialogue about the promise and its relationship to the law. To be sure, the promise places one major restriction on the understanding of the law: the law is not a means of salvation; Christ alone is given for that purpose. Moreover, it is very likely that this will be one of the major sticking points in inter-religious dialogue over which the fact of honest disagreement might persist. Even so, that fact does not preclude Christians from either gaining a better understanding of their fellow religionists or from understanding better the intellectual and existential challenge of trying to explain the promise of Christ in today's world.

Let me leave you with one final, irreverent thought. It presupposes the nomological definition of religion I teased out Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*. If the promise is meant for "all peoples" (the Gentiles) and the idea of "all peoples" includes not just race and culture, but religion, might not the promise also, then, be meant for all religions? Could we then not speak of something like Buddhist

Christianity, in which “Buddhist” represents the tradition of the law and “Christianity” represents the promise of Christ that has been added to it? After all, we are accustomed to thinking of Jewish Christianity. While I’m not actually proposing that we start talking this way (at the least, Buddhists should have some say in this matter) I do think that wrestling with the thought could help us to understand better, both the significance of the distinction between law and gospel in interreligious dialogue and the place of Christ among the religions.

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