

In what way does theocentric Christology express the mutuality better than do Christologies with different emphases? (3) What should be the scope of the "mutual dependence" among religions? Does it include the way in which each religious tradition constructs and enunciates social ethics?

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## THEOCENTRIC CHRISTOLOGY: DEFENDED AND TRANSCENDED

Paul F. Knitter

Having read and pondered S. Mark Heim's critical analysis of *No Other Name?*, together with the commentaries on his analysis, I am grateful and honored, as well as sobered and challenged. "Thanks, I needed that," best captures my overall feeling. I wrote the book in order to raise some roadsigns for exploring what I consider a pressing problem for Christians; and, though Heim and others think my roadsigns are pointing in the wrong direction, they certainly have carried on the exploration. Even if they have not converted me from my erroneous ways, they have enabled me, with their revealing criticisms and no-way-out questions, to clarify and redirect the way I want to go. Mainly, they have helped me recognize that the best way to defend a theocentric model for Christology and interreligious dialogue may be to transcend it. A pluralist theology of religions is still very much in the making. While I cannot respond to all the issues, both critical and supportive, that were raised in this collection, I can cover most of the principal concerns by examining what appear to be the two main roadblocks that these critics have erected to a theocentric approach. They are telling me that such an approach "does not work" and that it "is not Christian." In the terminology of Schubert Ogden and revisionist theologians, my model falters on criteria of *adequacy* to human experience and of *appropriateness* to Christian tradition. Diehard revisionist that I am, I have to take such criticisms seriously.

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Paul F. Knitter (Roman Catholic) is Professor of Theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, where he has taught since 1975, prior to which he taught at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He holds baccalaureate degrees in philosophy (Divine Word Seminary, Techny, IL) and theology (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome), and an M.A. in theology from the Gregorian. He did doctoral studies and research at the Gregorian, the University of Münster (with Karl Rahner), and the University of Marburg (with Carl-Heinz Ratschow and Rudolf Bultmann), receiving his Doctor of Theology from Marburg in 1972. His *No Other Name?* was published by Orbis in 1985, and in Korean in 1986. His articles have been published in a wide variety of journals and books.

### *It Does Not Work*

#### The Critics

Let me first try to summarize, briefly, the major planks in my colleagues' roadblocks; this might make for a bit of repetition, but it is important for me to state what I heard before I try to respond to it.

1. With his usual incisive clarity, Carl Braaten states one of his and Heim's main objections: to follow a theocentric model is equivalent to "playing a game without any rules."<sup>1</sup> Theocentrism provides no norms, no content for theology or for encounter with other traditions. Braaten asks, "Where do the new theocentrists get their idea of God?"<sup>2</sup> and Heim answers that "to be theocentric is to be centerless."<sup>3</sup> Both are pointing out that one cannot be theocentric directly, immediately, nakedly. One becomes centered on God via something/someone else, mediatedly. One needs a way to become theocentric. As Braaten points out, "... Christocentrism is simply the Christian way of being theocentric."<sup>4</sup> A major presupposition lurks behind these claims. Heim and Braaten are not only arguing that we need norms or a center to carry on theology and dialogue; they also seem to presuppose that these norms must be above all other norms and that the center be fixed. Without such a firm and fixed foundation, we cannot judge where God's truth might be found, nor can we enter the fray of dialogue with a clear self-identity. Heim states this clearly in his book *Is Christ the Only Way?:* "To say you want God to be at the center, or that you want to know and follow God, does not take you very far unless you have some *definitive* way of locating or describing this God."<sup>5</sup> Evidently, norms do not really work unless they are "definitive."

2. There is a flip-side to this first criticism: Because theocentrism is without rules and well-defined norms, it ends up as a cryptic imperialism. By setting up "*theos*" as the "common ground and goal" for dialogue, I am stuffing all other religions into my own theistic categories; I am ruling out of court any possible polytheism, any real differences—the "all-at-onceness" of individual religions. This is why John Cobb so opposes those who want to *begin* dialogue with what they have in common. Theocentrism leads not to genuine universality but to camouflaged "parochialism"<sup>6</sup> or, as Dean puts it, to "theological foundationalism." As Dean continues, when such parochialism is carried on as a "monologue" of basically liberal, first-world white males, it becomes not just a comforting opiate for the well-to-do but also a barbed-wire fence excluding and maintaining

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<sup>1</sup>Carl E. Braaten, "Christocentric Trinitarianism vs. Unitarian Theocentrism: A Response to S. Mark Heim," *J.E.S.* 24 (Winter, 1987): 21.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>S. Mark Heim, "Thinking about Theocentric Christology," *J.E.S.* 24 (Winter, 1987): 7.

<sup>4</sup>Braaten, "Christocentric," p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>*Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), p. 143 (emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup>Heim, "Thinking," p. 9.

history's victims.<sup>7</sup> Rightly or wrongly, this criticism hits me where it hurts most. I take it with utter seriousness.

### An Attempt to Converse

1. When Heim and Braaten insist that without Christ theocentrism is without content, it seems to me they are slipping into a form of *Offenbarungspositivismus* that, theoretically, they do not endorse. They are implying that we cannot truly know God outside of Jesus Christ. They are good examples of what in my book I termed the "Mainline Protestant Model" for a theology of religions, which holds that, although there is revelation outside of Jesus Christ, it is never effective, "saving" revelation; it provides no saving content. Here I detect fundamental differences between us which in this context can only be stated, not argued.

"Where do the new theocentrists get their idea of God?" (Here I am tempted to counter with Dean's teasing question: Where did the theocentric Jesus get *his* idea of God?) My answer to both questions: from the given, fundamental source from which we all always draw our experience and idea of God—our personal and societal *experience* of our selves and our world. With many contemporary theologians,<sup>8</sup> I recognize not one but two sources for theology and our Christian idea of God: human experience and the Christian fact—our own lives in this world *and* the person and message of Jesus Christ. Both are genuine sources of revelation, and both speak to us of God. Neither can be held up, aprioristically, as the norm for the other. Both are norms to each other. Our Christian lives and our theology are a constant dialogue—mutually clarifying and mutually criticizing—between our ongoing human experience and our experience of Christ. As Bultmann put it, to speak of God we must speak, and continue to speak, of humanity; or, with Rahner, we begin and continue Christology and theology with anthropology. In a sense, then, we begin theocentrically (I do not mean that chronologically). As Christians, we find in Christ our "normative" re-presentation of the God we find in our experience, yet Christ remains our norm only insofar as the Christian witness is continually "normed" by our own experience.<sup>9</sup>

To embrace theocentrism is not to abandon the uniqueness that Christ has for Christians. Heim contends that to be theocentric means to recognize that

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Dean, "The Conflict of Christologies: A Response to S. Mark Heim," *J.E.S.* 24 (Winter, 1987): 30-31.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), pp. 43-63; Schubert Ogden, "What Is Theology?" *The Journal of Religion* 52 (January, 1972): 22-40; Hans Küng, "Toward a New Consensus in Catholic (and Ecumenical) Theology," in Leonard Swidler, ed., *Consensus in Theology?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 1-17.

<sup>9</sup>I realize that much more would have to be said about *how* God speaks in our experience. Here, I can only refer to the analysis of revelation in human experience by such First World theologians as Rahner, Tillich, Tracy, Ogden, and Gilkey, as well as to the engaging descriptions by Gutiérrez, Sobrino, and Segundo of how God is known in the experience of the struggling poor.

other revelations can be “more precise and certain”<sup>10</sup> or more “adequate”<sup>11</sup> than Christ’s revelation. Not really. For Christian theocentrists, while Christ remains their adequate, precise, certain representation of God, at the same time they are open to the possibility that there may be other such representations/revelations. Koyama is right; a theocentric Christology *demand*s mutuality. These other revelations would either make known what is essentially (though perhaps unclearly) contained in Christ’s revelation, or they would open aspects of Mystery that are not contained in Christ. Christians would recognize that, while Jesus Christ adequately re-presents God, there is more to God than what Jesus Christ reveals.

However, Heim and Braaten will ask how Christians would be able to know and recognize such other revealers. I would answer: in the same way in which they themselves came to affirm Jesus Christ as their savior and revealer, namely, on the basis of their human experience. Here I can pose a question that pursued me throughout my reading of their critiques: Just *why* do Heim and Braaten proclaim Jesus as God’s normative revelation? Certainly, it is not simply because “the Bible tells me so.” Jesus Christ is their normative revelation because he so speaks to their lives, to their human experience. If in interreligious dialogue they might find other voices so speaking to their experience (even as that experience has been illumined and transformed in Christ), they might also come to recognize other “normative” expressions or lures of truth and infinite Mystery. I wonder if they have ever felt the power of truth confronting them in non-Christian religious believers.

I suspect they would be reluctant to make such admissions, mainly because, as I suggested above, for Heim and Braaten (I am not sure about Fraser) a religious norm cannot really be functional unless it is definitive and absolute, which means exclusively-or-inclusively better than others. May I venture the suspicion that Heim and Braaten are “anonymous foundationalists.” In Christ, it seems they have found an Archemedian point that stands outside the rush and change and uncertainty of history. With theocentrism, however, I hoped to propose a theological version of nonfoundationalism; theocentrism poses the sobering possibility that there are no final, absolute norms—that all norms are open to the challenge and ongoing scrutiny of experience. That is what I wanted to suggest with theocentrism—that, while we *do* know and *are* committed to the truth made known in Jesus Christ, there is always more truth to be known and new ways to know it.

Just where this further truth is to be found and by what other norms besides Jesus Christ cannot be known in advance but only in the ongoing dialogue between what we know in Christ and what we experience in history. Today, what we experience in history must include the communicative *praxis* of interreligious dialogue. As Koyama urges, mutuality calls us to move beyond all

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<sup>10</sup>Heim, “Thinking,” p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

notions of exclusivism or inclusivism. "Where do the new theocentrists get their idea of God?" I can now answer Braaten's question a little more precisely: from Christ *and* from our dialogue with others. Theocentrism argues that it can never be *only* from Christ.

2. But how can we carry on this dialogical encounter without slipping into the ploys of imperialism, without imposing our Christian norms, our God, on their experience? Tom Dean has not only greatly helped me realize more clearly how my theocentrism combined with my hypothetical "common ground" puts me dangerously close to (if not in the clutches of) a "theocentric foundationalism," but he has also helped me respond to this danger. More than Heim and Braaten, Dean recognizes that in my book I was already aware of the dangers inherent in theocentrism. In holding up *theos* as the new center for interreligious dialogue, I did not have in mind the "God of theism"—not the well-defined personal creator, or *ipsum esse subsistens*, but rather the Divine Mystery or Truth (Koyama's God of mysticism), seen in certain ways by Christians, yet open to utterly different perceptions by others. Dean helps me say what I mean: *theos* here is more of a formal structure than a material content, more of a horizon than a vision. Yet, it is not "normless"; we always view this horizon or Truth from our location or perspective. Such a perspective is our "first-order theology" that helps us formulate a "second-order theory of dialogue"—a theory of dialogue, however, which is not "above it all,"<sup>12</sup> for both one's theology and one's theory of dialogue are to be stretched and reformed constantly in the experience of dialogue.

Nevertheless, I recognize that in order not to remain "above it all," in order to respect and be shaken by the utter differentness of religions, in order to confront polytheism and the "all-at-onceness" of individual traditions, it is better not to speak of a "common ground and goal" for interreligious dialogue, especially if that ground is dubbed theocentric. Today, instead of stating as I did in *No Other Name?* that dialogue must be "grounded in the hypothesis of a common ground and goal for all religions,"<sup>13</sup> I would rather say that it must be "grounded in the common trust in and search for that which makes dialogue possible and worthwhile." Here I think I have learned from John Cobb, who warns me: "If there are similarities, these will appear during the course of conversation. *Of course*, there will be such similarities . . . The only precondition is the *belief* that conversation is worthwhile."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, though Cobb warns against pre-established similarities, he voices a preestablished certainty ("of course") that similarities *will* be found; such certainty is rooted in a preestablished trust in that which grounds the possibility and value of dialogue. Yet, whatever common ground might exist between religions, it must be discovered—or, better, created

<sup>12</sup>Dean, "Conflict," p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 208.

<sup>14</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., "Response to S. Mark Heim," *J.E.S.* 24 (Winter, 1987): 23 (emphasis mine).

—*in* the dialogue, and it will always be a “shaky” common ground, in need of further strengthening and repossession.<sup>15</sup>

But how do we act on this trust? How do we search for the shaky, common ground of mutual understanding and growth? Dean says it well: “The problem, paraphrasing Heidegger, is how to get into the circle of dialogue in the right way”<sup>16</sup>—that is, without the imperialism of either Christocentrism or theocentrism. One *conditio sine qua non* for doing so is to carry out some form of “ideological analysis of interreligious dialogue,” as proposed by Dean.<sup>17</sup> The first steps toward such an analysis will require a liberation from the cliquish monologue of First World white males who have been the patriarchs of interreligious dialogue. I have grown more clearly and painfully aware of this need over recent years. In a soon-to-be-published collection of essays proposing a new pluralist Christian theology of religions, Third-World and feminist theologians have much to say to their First World brothers.<sup>18</sup> In this volume I urge that a theology of religions can be developed relevantly and “safely” only if it itself is in dialogue with the many theologies of liberation.

Here, Fraser was entirely correct in sniffing out what was lurking in my book and what has since come into clear consciousness: “The question is whether Knitter is talking about *theocentric* Christology or some other kind of Christology. Does this term adequately describe what he advocates in his book?”<sup>19</sup> I wish she could have asked me that question earlier; it is “right on,” as is her own answer: “If God is to be named in Knitter’s approach, it would have to be on the assumption that religious commitment to God lies behind commitment to love and justice.”<sup>20</sup> This “other kind of Christology” and model for interreligious encounter I have since identified as *soteriocentric* rather than theocentric. Transcended by soteriocentrism, theocentrism can, I feel, better attain its intended goals. As I have tried to explore in greater detail elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> if religious believers could agree that the center of their dialogue should revolve not around “Christ” (or Buddha or Krishna), or around “God” (or Brahman or Nirvana) but around

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<sup>15</sup>Mark Kline Taylor, “In Praise of Shaky Ground: The Liminal Christ and Cultural Pluralism,” *Theology Today* 43 (April, 1986): 36-51.

<sup>16</sup>Dean, “Conflict,” p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralist Theology of Religions* will be published by Orbis Books in the Fall of 1987. Speaking for the Third World are Aloysius Pieris and Stanley Samartha; for feminist concerns, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki.

<sup>19</sup>Elouise Renich Fraser, “Encountering the Religions: A Response to S. Mark Heim,” *J.E.S.* 24 (Winter, 1987): 33.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>“Catholic Theology of Religions at a Crossroads,” in Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, eds., *Christianity among World Religions*. Concilium 183 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 99-107; “Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. Cf. also in that volume: Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, “In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective.”

“salvation”—that is, a shared concern about and effort to remove the sufferings that rack the human family today—perhaps the religions would have “the right of way” of “getting into the circle of dialogue.” To answer Koyama’s final question, theocentrism not only includes but should begin with social ethics.

Such a salvation-centered starting point would call on different religious believers to share not only a common concern for human suffering, however it might confront them in their environment, but also a common *praxis* in trying to remove such suffering. On the basis of such shared *praxis*, the religions would then enter into shared theoretical reflexion on how their different experiences and different beliefs motivate and direct them in this *praxis* of liberation. Shared liberative *praxis*, it is hoped, would be the basis for mutual doctrinal understanding and clarification. Such a soteriocentric approach, if it were endorsed by various religious communities, could give some practical substance to Dean’s rather vague “alternative to Knitter’s theocentric . . . [and Heim’s] christocentric foundationalism,”<sup>22</sup> in which he urges that we begin the dialogue with “certain formal principles of truth that can provide us with criteria of the universal relevance of religious traditions whose material norms of truth remain irreducibly different and particular to each tradition.”<sup>23</sup> In their struggle to promote human welfare, each religion would indicate its universal relevance, while its material norms for carrying out that struggle could (not necessarily “would”) remain irreducibly different.

This means that soteriocentrism would not so easily fall victim to Heim’s objection that here we have nothing but an “ethical absolute” instead of his more honest and upfront christocentric absolute. In a soteriocentric model for dialogue, each religion understands and is committed to its particular approach to salvation and liberation, but each recognizes that this goal of human fulfillment is ever more than what they now know or think. To describe this process, Langdon Gilkey has appealed to a paradox that is more easily lived than understood: while each religion remains *absolutely* committed to its grasp of *soteria*, at the same time it recognizes that this grasp is always *relative* and in need of further clarification and possible correction.<sup>24</sup> For Christians this means that Christ remains their *way* to which they are “absolutely” committed; yet, the center of their lives and their dialogue with others is the ongoing, communicative *praxis* of working and speaking with others in order to remove suffering and bring salvation. In more Christian terms, the center of their lives and of dialogue is, as it was for Jesus, their efforts to seek first the *reign of God*. Such a center is not fixed; it moves and refocuses as we work with others to promote human salvation—a less secure center, yes, but one that bears more challenge and demands more faith.

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<sup>22</sup>Dean, “Conflict,” p. 29.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>24</sup>In his essay, “Plurality and Its Theological Implications,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

*It Is Not Christian*

## The Critics

1. In reviewing the claims that my proposal for a pluralist theology of religions betrays Christian tradition and conviction, I must admit that especially with Braaten and Fraser I sometimes felt I was being declared, rather than proved, guilty. Fraser implies that, while I try to listen to the other religions, I am not giving full ear and respect to the New Testament and that my concern for pluralism is not matched by my concern for Christian identity. In other words, I am too easily selling out. Braaten is more direct, suggesting that I am hamstringing authentic dialogue because I am not “committed to the core convictions” of my Christian faith<sup>25</sup> or that I have abandoned the genuine Christian notion of salvation, which must include the good news that “Jesus is Lord, Christ, savior, and God.”<sup>26</sup> Somewhat rhetorically, Braaten summarizes and then ostracizes my position: “Christ must decrease in order that God might increase—what a proposition for Christian theology!”<sup>27</sup>

Heim and Braaten, with help from Dean, do offer more substantiated reasons why they think my position is incompatible with Christian tradition, mainly by trying to show that I misrepresent or misuse the New Testament witness. Their principal contention is that the world of the New Testament was not at all as “classicist” as I make it out to be; therefore, the “one and only” language about Christ was not, as I suggest, a “cultural necessity” or part of the dispensable cultural medium used to deliver an abiding transcultural message. The New Testament world was teeming with pluralism. So, when the early Christians declared that there was “no other name,” they did so consciously and counter-culturally. The early church faced an abundance of pluralist options and rejected them. Therefore, Braaten argues, my pluralist proposal delivers a ho-hum sense of *déjà-vu* that would be seen by the early Jesus followers as well as by Christians through the ages as another attempt to squeeze the image of Jesus into a mold that the early church expressly rejected. Heim further warns against basing such a squeeze on ontology; he feels that much of my reinterpretation of New Testament language naively imagines that, if we can move from a classicist ontology of substance to a processive ontology of change and multiplicity, we will automatically shed our exclusivist shackles.

Dean adds greater force to these objections when he reminds me that one cannot separate truth and language (cultural medium and essential message) as neatly as I apparently do. Language and truth are inseparable; if one is to change, it will change with the other. The hermeneutical task, therefore, must not dissect them but seek to interpret the whole package of truth-in-language. Braaten adds that, if I would accept the truth of New Testament one-and-only language, I

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<sup>25</sup>Braaten, “Christocentric,” p. 19.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.



could truly satisfy my universalist pinnings and embrace, with him, a “christo-centric universalism”; instead of having to find a saving God under every religious rock that I pick up, I could affirm that all will be saved in the end through Christ.

2. Braaten has a final trinitarian objection, which he summarizes sharply: “I do not see anything resembling the Trinity in Knitter’s constructive theology. . . . If one can speak of God who is really God apart from Christ, there is indeed no reason for the doctrine of the Trinity. Some kind of Unitarianism will do the job.”<sup>28</sup> I have abandoned a “christocentric trinitarianism” for a “unitarian theocentrism.” I am a crypto-Arian, destroying the ontological identity between Christ and God.<sup>29</sup>

### An Attempt to Converse

1. Regarding the apparent declarations of my infidelity to core Christian convictions, I would respond in general that indeed I *am* stating that maybe, just maybe, the proposition that “Christ must decrease in order that God might increase” may have some validity for Christian theology. (After all, the Gospel writers have Jesus announcing that the Father is greater than he [Jn. 15:28] or that he cannot be called good in comparison to God [Mk. 10:18].) That is why I wrote *No Other Name?*—to argue that there are sound scriptural-theological reasons why Christians can move toward a pluralist theology of religions and a theocentric (read: soteriocentric) Christology without losing their identity and core convictions and without snubbing the New Testament witness. Therefore, I greatly appreciate and have learned from Heim’s and Braaten’s critique of my assessment of the New Testament witness to Christ. I admit that I should have been more aware of the cultural-religious complexity and the *pluralism* of the New Testament *Sitz im Leben*. The cultural ambient of the early churches does not fit Lonergan’s description of classicist culture as neatly as I implied. However—and this would be my reminder to Heim and Braaten—neither is the religious pluralism of the New Testament world a mirror image of our present pluralistic experience. If I have oversimplified in one direction, they may do so in the other.

In one way, I did recognize in my book that, in making their one-and-only claims about Jesus, his early followers were taking a counter-cultural position. I described this as “survival language”—defining one’s minority identity by rubbing against the cultural grain.<sup>30</sup> However, this was primarily the grain of Graeco-Roman culture, where all breeds of pluralism abounded. In taking this counter-cultural stance, the New Testament Christians were carrying on what can be called, I think, the classicist content of their Jewish cultural background. Christianity was and remains a Jewish religion. In confronting the Gentile world, they

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>30</sup>Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 184.

carried forward their deep-seated Jewish convictions, rooted in Hebraic monotheistic convictions, that God was one, the Messiah would be one, and the Mountain from which the glory of God would shine for all would be one. For the Jesus followers, of course, this *one* God/Messiah/Mt. Sion (church) was embodied in Jesus Christ. Both as Jews and under the enduring influence of their Jewish past, the early Christians could be called classicists; they would, therefore, explicitly reject religious pluralism (though like their Jewish brothers/sisters they engaged in an implicit dialogue with and assimilated much from the religious world surrounding them). Today, however, Christians, like many contemporary Jews, are asking whether they can carry on their tradition and its message for the world without these earlier classicist claims of “one and only” or “finality.” Does monotheism require exclusivism?

There were other cultural-historical reasons why the early Christians refused to be swept up in the pluralist currents of the times. This is where the experience and intent of religious pluralism then, I would suggest, was markedly different from what it is today. In a recent study of New Testament understandings of the uniqueness of Jesus, Frans Jozef van Beeck painted much the same picture of the pluralist options available to the early Christians as do Heim and Braaten, but he added a caveat of which they seem unaware: “Let us clearly state . . . that a simple ‘return to the New Testament’ would be a historic illusion. Modern pluralism is a far cry from the pluralism of the first century.”<sup>31</sup> The primary difference is that the pluralism of the first century was far more inclined toward—indeed, ridden with—relativism and/or syncretism. Religious tolerance was disposed to tolerate anything; gods were accepted not because of inherent truth but because they were the local deities; differences really did not matter, especially in the syncretistic cults. This is indeed a “far cry” from the model of religious pluralism and dialogue that is being explored by contemporary advocates of a new Christian theology of religions; as I tried to make clear in my book, these contemporary theologians are not proposing a simplistic return to notions of “common essence” or “anything goes” or “we cannot judge.” With the early Christians, they would have been opposed to the relativizing, tranquilizing attitudes of the first-century Greco-Roman world. In the new dialogue with other religions, unity is based on difference; cooperation includes confrontation; openness to others arises from commitment to Christ. Before he stamps his *déjà vu* on these new views, my friend Carl Braaten should take a better look.

I did not think my case for the cultural conditionedness of New Testament one-and-only language is based as strongly on claims for a prevalent classicist ontology as Heim suggests. I *did* propose other reasons why Christians took up such language—for example, an initial apocalyptic mentality, survival language.<sup>32</sup> Further, I am surprised, even somewhat disappointed, that neither Heim nor Braaten took up what I think is one of the most weighty reasons why today we

<sup>31</sup>“Professing the Uniqueness of Christ,” *Chicago Studies* 24 (Spring, 1985): 33-34.

<sup>32</sup>Knitter, *No Other Name?*, pp. 183-184.

can/should reevaluate our understanding of such early claims as “no other name” – that is, Krister Stendahl’s case that these claims are confessional or love language. No matter whether one was immersed in a classicist *or* a pluralist culture, or embraced either a substantive *or* a processive ontology, the primary purpose of such confessional language was not to exclude others but to confess Jesus, not to make ontological statements on the value of other religious figures but to proclaim what Jesus Christ can really (meaning, of course, ontologically) do to a person’s life.<sup>33</sup>

This brings me to the bottom line of my present efforts to correlate the New Testament assertions of Jesus’ uniqueness with my contemporary experience of religious pluralism and historical relativity. Tom Dean helps me formulate it. I agree with him, even more now than when I wrote the book, that one cannot separate the historically conditioned language about uniqueness from the intended essential truth about Jesus, that it is impossible to remove the historical husk from essential, unchanging truth, and that much of the New Testament witness of Jesus is corrigibly exclusivistic—but, then, what does it mean to remain faithful to the New Testament witness? I think Dean is right that we don’t have to lay out an explicit, material legitimization from the New Testament for every new christological move today; we don’t have to cover all our linguistic tracks from then till now, for language and truth stand and *change* together. It is sufficient, Dean tells us, to establish “family resemblances . . . fascinating and complex historical relationships with those that have gone before.”<sup>34</sup>

Though again frustrated by Dean’s final vagueness, I agree. However, I think that a precondition for establishing such family resemblances is to bear in mind that, although one can never separate language and truth, neither should one identify them. Though we will never see the moon without the finger, neither can we take the finger for the moon. Therefore, some such distinction between what the early Christians wanted to say and how they said it is important, though always elusive. Without being too elusive, I come to my bottom line: essential for “family resemblances” with and fidelity to the New Testament witness about Jesus is that we confess that God has *really* spoken in Jesus the Christ for all peoples of all times and that this confession include and be guided by our *praxis* of working toward Jesus’ vision of the reign of God in this world. In order to confess this “really” and commit ourselves to this “*praxis*” it is *not* necessary to confess that God has spoken “only” or “finally” in Jesus. Consistent with our soteriocentric approach, we can say that it is not in the “only” but in the “really” and in our “*praxis*” for the reign of God that we are faithful to the New Testament. I agree heartily with Braaten that “the uniqueness of Jesus Christ lies in his universality”<sup>35</sup>—yes, in his universality, not in his exclusivity.

With such an understanding of fidelity to the New Testament, we are open

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 184-186.

<sup>34</sup>Dean, “Conflict,” p. 27.

<sup>35</sup>Braaten, “Christocentric,” p. 19.

to the possibility that there may be truths "for all peoples of all times" in other religious traditions and figures. Responding to Koyama's call for a "*coincidentia oppositorum*," we would be open to the "complementary uniqueness" or the "complementary finality" of Jesus and Buddha.

2. Braaten's sweeping questions concerning my trinitarian fidelity would merit more than the few comments possible here. Sometimes I think we would be better off to follow the suggestions of some Greek Orthodox theologians and base our theology of religions on the third person rather than the second person of the Trinity—on a pneumatology rather than a Christology.<sup>36</sup> Be that as it may, I simply have to disagree with Braaten, for I believe that "one can speak of God who is really God apart from Christ" and that one can do this without denying the doctrine of the Trinity and reverting to unitarianism. I can say this and still affirm that one cannot speak of the Father without the Son/Word and the Spirit. It seems that much hinges on how one understands the unity between Jesus and the second person of the Trinity. Braaten seems inclined toward a "*enhypostatic*" understanding of this unity, identifying the second person of the Trinity with the person of Jesus—and thus confining the Word to the person of Jesus. I understand Chalcedon to have affirmed that, in the one human being of Jesus, the divine and human natures were "inseparable" without collapsing their utter differences.<sup>37</sup> Inseparable *in* Jesus does not mean confined *to* Jesus. So, I follow the Logos Christology and trinitarian perspective of Raimundo Panikkar, who suggests that, while we Christians surely must affirm that Jesus is the Logos/Christ, we cannot so neatly or exclusively affirm that the Logos/Christ is Jesus.<sup>38</sup> The "incarnating" activity of the Logos is actualized in but not restricted to Jesus. The God manifested in and as Jesus of Nazareth is the only true God (so I am not an Arian), but there is more to that God than Jesus.

For this opportunity to converse on matters important to all of us, I sincerely thank the editors of *J.E.S.*, S. Mark Heim, and all the others who added their words and energy. It shows me that interreligious concerns can make for better intrareligious friends.

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<sup>36</sup>Georges Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World—The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in Stanley J. Samartha, ed., *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971), pp. 131-142.

<sup>37</sup>"... inseparabiliter agnoscendum, nusquam sublata differentia naturarum propter unionem..." (*DS* 302).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, pp. 154-156.