

ENCOUNTERING

GOD

A Spiritual Journey
from Bozeman
to Banaras

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“Is Our God Listening?”

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

IN CHAIM Potok’s novel *The Book of Lights*, a young rabbi from Brooklyn, on leave from his post in Korea during the Korean War, travels for the first time in Japan. One afternoon he stands with a Jewish friend before what is perhaps a Shinto shrine with a clear mirror in the sanctum or perhaps a Buddhist shrine with an image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. We are not told which, and it really does not matter. The altar is lit by the soft light of a tall lamp. Sunlight streams in the door. The two young men observe with fascination a man standing before the altar, his hands pressed together before him, his eyes closed. He is rocking slightly. He is clearly engaged in what we would call prayer. The rabbi turns to his companion and says,

“Do you think our God is listening to him, John?”

“I don’t know, chappy. I never thought of it.”

“Neither did I until now. If He’s not listening, why not? If He is listening, then—well, what are we all about, John?”¹

Is “our God” listening to the prayers of people of other faiths? If not, why not? What kind of God would that be? Would the one we Christians and Jews speak of as maker of heaven and earth not give ear to the prayer of a man so earnestly, so deeply in prayer? On the other hand, if God is listening, what are *we* all about? Who are we as a people who cherish our own special relationship with God? If we conclude that “our God” is not listening, then we had better ask how

we are to speak of God at all as people of faith in a world of many faiths. But if we suspect that “our God” is listening, then how are we to speak of ourselves as people of faith among other peoples of faith?

Is our God listening? It is a disarmingly simple question, a Sunday school question, not the sort most proper academic theologians would care to pursue. But this simple question leads us into the most profound theological, social, and political issues of our time. We all know that this is not solely a question about God’s ears, the capacity of God to listen, or the destiny of our prayers. It is a question about the destiny of our human community and our capacity to listen with openness and empathy to people of faith very different from ourselves. It is a question about how we, whoever we are, understand the religious faith of others.

The question of religious difference elicits a variety of responses. A collection of Gandhi’s writings on religion is published under the title *All Religions are True*, and that assertion is certainly one way of responding to difference. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those that assert that all religions are false and are fundamentally misguided—look at the wars and violence, the atrocities perpetrated in the name of God. A third option is to insist that one religion is true and the rest are false. Or one might claim that one religion is true and the others are partially true. Most of us have operative ideas about the diversity of religious traditions that fall somewhere along this spectrum. We carry these ideas along with us as we encounter people whose religious faith is different from ours. Even those who consider themselves quite secular employ some such set of evaluative ideas about religions in order to interpret the meaning of religion and of religious difference. We also carry with us notions of what it means for something to be true—literally true, metaphorically true, true for us, universally true.

While the interpretation of religious difference and plurality has long been a question, the close proximity of people of many races, cultures, and religions in urban environments has decisively shaped our response to this question today. In 1965, Harvey Cox began *The Secular City* with the observation that “the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related.”² In the urban environment from which the gods have fled, he argued, secularism was the dominant worldview, relativizing and bypassing religion, rendering it irrelevant and a private affair. In 1985, Harvey Cox noted “the return of religion” with *Religion in the Secular City*. The demise of religion had been prematurely announced. Sud-

denly there were Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority; one in five adults in the United States weighed in with the Gallup Poll as an evangelical or pentecostal Christian.

In the “secular city” of the 1990s, we would have to report the rise of *religions*, in the plural. We just might be tempted to turn Cox’s sentence wholly around and postulate that today the collapse of urban civilization and the rise of traditional religions are the two main hallmarks of our era. It is not that secularism is now no longer an issue, for the privatization and relativization of religion is still a reality to contend with. The challenge today, however, is not so much secularism, but pluralism. If one of the great issues of the secular city was anonymity, the great issue of the multicultural city is identity—ethnic, racial, and religious identity, African-American, Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, Buddhist, Muslim.

In both the urban and global contexts we rub up against the new textures of religious diversity with increasing frequency. The question *Is our God listening?* poses in a blunt way the challenge of our encounter with real difference. Responses to this question take theological, social, and political forms. There are many types of responses, but we will explore just three possibilities, indicative of the range of interpretation within almost every religious tradition.

First, there is the exclusivist response: Our own community, our tradition, our understanding of reality, our encounter with God, is the one and only truth, excluding all others. Second, there is the inclusivist response: There are, indeed, many communities, traditions, and truths, but our own way of seeing things is the culmination of the others, superior to the others, or at least wide enough to include the others under our universal canopy and in our own terms. A third response is that of the pluralist: Truth is not the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one tradition or community. Therefore the diversity of communities, traditions, understandings of the truth, and visions of God is not an obstacle for us to overcome, but an opportunity for our energetic engagement and dialogue with one another. It does not mean giving up our commitments; rather, it means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation.

Put in terms of our question, in the view of the exclusivist “our God” is not listening to those of other faiths. For the inclusivist, “our God” is indeed listening, but it is our God as *we* understand God who does the listening. The pluralist might say “our God” is listening, but he or she would also say that God is

not ours, God is our way of speaking of a Reality that cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition, including our own.

The most significant difference between the inclusivist and the pluralist is the self-consciousness of one's understanding of the world and God. If we are inclusivists, we include others into a worldview we already know and on the terms we have already set. If we are pluralists, we recognize the limits of the world we already know and we seek to understand others in their own terms, not just in ours. In the final chapter, I will suggest that pluralists go beyond this, however, for the terms of “the other” are no more sacrosanct than our own and the point of our encounter is to bring the terms in which we understand the world into dialogue with one another—even into the dialogue of mutual truth-seeking critique.

Mere plurality—diversity—is not pluralism, though often the two words are used as if they were interchangeable. We can interpret diversity as exclusivists, as inclusivists, or as pluralists. One might argue that the greatest religious tensions in the world in the late twentieth century are not found between the Western and the Eastern traditions, between the prophetic and the mystical traditions, or indeed between any one religion and another; they are the tensions that stretch between those at opposite ends of the spectrum in each and every religious tradition. Exclusivists and pluralists, fundamentalists and liberals, wall-builders and bridge-builders—are there in a variety of forms in every religious tradition. *Intra*-religious tension is today as powerful as *inter*-religious tension. Very often the religious conflicts that flare up have less to do with *what* one believes than with *how* one believes what one believes.

The last few years have seen a burst of Christian theological discussion of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This is important work because it amply demonstrates the tremendous diversity within Christian thinking. There is no one Christian view of other faiths. Even in the statements of today's churches there is a wide range of Christian interpretation. For example, the 1970 Frankfurt Declaration of the Evangelical Church of Germany explicitly rejected “the false teaching that nonchristian religions and worldviews are also ways of salvation similar to belief in Christ.”³ This declaration is clearly an exclusivist statement. At the other end of the spectrum, members of the United Church of Canada meeting in Naramata, British Columbia, in 1985 crafted a clearly pluralist statement, insisting, “If there is no salvation outside the church, we reject such a salvation for ourselves. We come to this notion of the salvation

of others through being loved by Christ. We would be diminished without the others as others.”⁴

Since there are many theologians who have laid out typologies of the various Christian theological positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, I will not do that here in anything but a skeletal and suggestive form. My point is a wider one: that these three ways of thinking about the problem of diversity and difference are not simply Christian theological positions, but are recognizable in the thinking of people of other religious traditions and in the thinking of nonreligious people. All of us—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others—struggle to interpret the experienced facts of diversity to ourselves and to our communities, and our interpretations have social and political reverberations. Theology is not isolated from its context. If “our God” has no regard for our Muslim neighbors, why should we? Or, put the other way around, if we have no regard for our Muslim neighbors, why should God?

While we may be interested in exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as theological viewpoints, it is all too clear that they are also social and political responses to diversity. We can recognize them in our churches, in our communities, and in our world. And while we speak of exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists as if they were entirely different groups of people, let us remember that these ways of thinking about diversity may well be part of the ongoing dialogue within ourselves. Since they represent attitudes, ways of thinking, the move from one position to another is often more of a sliding step than a giant leap. One of the continual challenges and dilemmas in my own writing and thinking is recognizing the ways in which I move back and forth along this attitudinal continuum, coming from a context of Hindu-Christian dialogue, understanding myself basically as a pluralist, and yet using what some will see as inclusivist language as I widen and stretch my understanding of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to speak of my Christian faith in a new way. I cannot solve this dilemma, but I can warmly issue an invitation to join me in thinking about it.

“In No Other Name . . .”

Every time I speak to a church group about religious diversity, someone inevitably raises a hand to confront me with a passage mined from the New Testament to illustrate the exclusivity of Christianity. If she were there, Grandma Eck would certainly have her hand up, too. “It says in the Bible, ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by

which we must be saved.' So how can you speak of the Buddha?" The statement quoted is that of Peter in Acts 4:12. It is true that it says "no other name." In those remarkable days following Pentecost, when the energy of the Holy Spirit made Peter bold in his faith, he healed a man lame from birth, saying, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Peter was asked by the elders and scribes of the temple, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" He was unambiguous. It was not in his own name he had healed the man, nor was it in the name of a foreign god, as the council of elders perhaps suspected. It was in no other name than that of Jesus Christ.

Krister Stendahl has often remarked that phrases such as this one "grow legs and walk around out of context." The words "no other name," despite the spirit of affirmation in which Peter must have uttered them, became words of condemnation: only those who call upon the name of Christ are saved and all others perish and suffer eternal punishment. Actually, Christians have disagreed through the ages on the meaning of "no other name." From the time of Origen in the third century, to John Wesley in the eighteenth century, to C. S. Lewis and Paul Tillich in the twentieth, there have been those who have insisted upon the universality of God's grace and the omnipotence of God to restore all creatures to Godself. And there have likewise been those such as Augustine in the fourth century, John Calvin in the sixteenth century, and the fundamentalists of the twentieth century who have insisted upon the eternal damnation and punishment of unbelievers. In the past few years two books have been published that attempt to summarize the range of meanings implicit in these words. In *No Other Name?* Paul Knitter sets forth the array of Christian interpretations of other religions across the Protestant, evangelical, and Catholic spectrums, questions the adequacy of exclusivism as a response to the religious plurality of today, and develops his own pluralistic position.⁵ John Sanders's *No Other Name* retains the phrase as a declarative, not a question; it is what the author calls "an investigation into the destiny of the unevangelized," and it also presents a full range of Christian views on the subject.⁶

In the decades and centuries following Jesus' death, many Christians gradually transferred their Spirit-filled affirmations about Christ to affirmations of allegiance to "Christianity" and "the church." Over time, their positive affirmations about Christ somehow became sharply negative judgements about any religious community other than the church. By the time of Cyprian, in the third century, we have the famous dictum "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*"—"Outside the

church there is no salvation.” This church-centered exclusivism dominated Christian thinking for many centuries. In the sixth century, for example, we hear, “There is no doubt that not only all heathens, but also all Jews and all heretics and schismatics who die outside the church will go to that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”⁷ In the early fourteenth century we hear Pope Boniface VIII insist even more strongly on church-centered salvation: “We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.”⁸

As a Methodist, it is always somewhat disquieting to recall that with the Protestant Reformation, Protestants were also numbered among those who would die outside the Church and be plunged into the fires of hell. Gradually the official papal view on the salvation of Protestants began to change, but as late as the 1950s a notorious Catholic chaplain at Harvard, Father Leonard J. Feeney, fulminated in Harvard Square against both Jews and Protestants in boldly exclusivist terms. “Outside the *Catholic* church there is no salvation” meant just that. Finally, after months of heated controversy, Pope Pius XII confirmed in a papal encyclical that Feeney had gone too far, contravening the papal view that those who belong to the church “with implicit desire” might also be eligible for salvation. Father Feeney, unwilling to change his views, was excommunicated in 1953.⁹

Protestants have also had their share of exclusivism. Luther returned the condemnation of the Roman Catholic church with his own brand of exclusivism. He insisted that all worship apart from Christ is idolatry and that “those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians although they believe in only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition.”¹⁰ The “false Christians” were Roman Catholics.

The great twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth takes a different starting point, insisting that “religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man.”¹¹ Religion is here opposed to revelation, and revelation is God’s initiative; it is Christ alone. All the world’s religions are human attempts to grasp at God, to understand God and are set in radical distinction from God’s self-offering and self-manifestation. According to Barth, the truth of the Christian message has nothing to do with its structures of “religion,” it is the gift of revelation. Barth did not know much of other religious traditions, or of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic claims to the gift and the grace of divine revelation. When asked by the Asian theologian D. T.

Niles how he knew for certain that Hinduism is “unbelief,” given the fact that he had never met a Hindu, Barth is said to have responded, “*A priori*”—it is a given; it derives from revelation, not experience.¹² The Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer followed Barth, writing forcefully of the “radical discontinuity” between the Gospel and all other religions. In the influential book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, which Kraemer prepared for the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Tambaram, India, in 1938, he speaks of other religions as but “human attempts to apprehend the totality of existence.”¹³ He poses two alternative ways of thinking about religious diversity. “The first maintains the continuity between the essential tendencies and aspirations to be found in the ethnic religions and the essential gift of the Christian religion. . . . The second position stresses the discontinuity, and takes this as the starting point of its thinking.”¹⁴ Kraemer finds the second position “inescapable” and Christian revelation the “sole standard of reference.”¹⁵

Of course, Christianity is not the only religion with an exclusivist streak of interpretation. Not surprisingly, however, the exclusivist position has been most extensively developed by the monotheistic Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, each with its “sole standard of reference.” These prophetic Western traditions have uncompromisingly emphasized the oneness of God, the oneness of truth, and the exclusivity of the way to truth and the community of truth.

The idea that the human apprehension of truth is multi-sided, a view developed so extensively in the traditions originating in India, is quite alien to the monotheistic consciousness of the West. “I am the Lord, and there is no other!” rings like a refrain through the biblical books of Deuteronomy and Isaiah. The Psalmist, too, addresses God in exclusive terms: “You alone are God” (Ps. 86:10), “You alone are the Most High over all the earth” (Ps. 83:18). The exclusivity is reciprocal. God says to Israel, “You alone have I chosen of all the nations on earth!” (Amos 3:2). Even though Jews also affirm the universality of God’s covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity, Israel’s chosenness and covenant with God through Abraham is finally an exclusive covenant.

Christians pick up on this chosenness, this covenant, transforming the language of the old covenant into a “new covenant” made with humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The new covenant is also held to be exclusive: Christ is *the* way, the truth, and the life. Similarly, Muslims affirm the finality of the One God’s revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. The *shahadah*, or “testimony” of faith, is a clarion affirmation with an exclusivist ring about it: “There is no God but God and Muhammad is God’s messenger.” There is noth-

ing that can be likened to or compared to God—no image, no icon, no partner, no incarnation. The human response to this message of God is “the straight path”—Islam. And since the One God is universal, so is the path of human righteousness.

It is important to realize, however, that these religious foundations of Western monotheism are not in themselves exclusivist, for they have also been the religious foundations for inclusivists and pluralists. The emphasis on God’s oneness, for example, can also lead to a sense of the wideness of God’s mercy that undergirds both the inclusivist and the pluralist position. Even so, it is clear that monotheism has often produced the kind of monolithic mindset and dogmatic language that has readily lent itself to exclusivist interpretations. One God alone, one Son of God, one Seal of the Prophets—and none other. And along with the oneness goes onliness, the sense of surety about God’s will that can be seen in groups like the Christian Embassy in Israel, the Gush Emunim, and the Islamic Jihad. Even outside the monotheistic traditions of the West, however, there are strains of exclusivism. In Japan in the thirteenth century, for example, the sectarian Buddhist teacher Nichiren insisted that *only* the name of the Lotus Sutra was salvific. Sheer faith in the name of the Lotus Sutra alone, exclusive of all others, would lead to salvation.

Oneness and *onlyness* are the language of identity. The exclusivist affirms identity in a complex world of plurality by a return to the firm foundations of his or her own tradition and an emphasis on the distinctive identity provided by that tradition. This identity is in part what social theorists call an “oppositional identity,” built up over against who we are *not*. Exclusivism is more than simply a conviction about the transformative power of the particular vision one has; it is a conviction about its finality and its absolute priority over competing views. Exclusivism may therefore be the ideological foundation for isolationism. The exclusivist response to diversity, whether theological, social, or political, is to mark ever more clearly the boundaries and borders separating “us” from “them.” It is little wonder that exclusion has been one of the tools of racism and ethnocentrism. The series of Asian exclusion acts that erected walls around a Eurocentric idea of America were an attempt to define an American identity, as were the 1920s Supreme Court discussions of the meaning of “Caucasian” or “white person” as qualifications for U.S. citizenship. The language of interrelatedness and interdependence that has come increasingly to the fore as nations and peoples struggle with issues of plurality is experienced by the exclusivist as compromising and threatening to identity and to faith.

The very fact of choice can precipitate a sense of threat to identity. My own grandmothers and great-grandmothers made many pioneering choices. Anna Eck pulled up stakes in Sweden. Hilda Fritz left her windswept farm in Iowa for a homestead in the Pacific Northwest. Ida Hokanson Fritz set out for college, the first in her family to do so, and landed a teaching job in the lumber camps of Washington State. But for all the choices they made out of necessity and creativity, they did not have to choose whether to be Christian or Buddhist. They did not even have the opportunity to think about it. At most they chose to be more or less actively Christian. For many people, this is still the case today; for our society as a whole it is not. We *do* have to choose our religious affiliation more actively than those who lived a generation ago. Most of us have some opportunity to know other ways of faith and to see them for what they are—powerful life-changing and world-ordering responses to the Transcendent. I see this opportunity as a positive thing. It is clear, however, that many people experience the fact of difference as a failure of the church’s mission to the “lost” and “unreached,” and experience choice as threatening. The crisis of belief generated by the plurality of religions and the problems of secular culture has made the certainties of Christian exclusivism, indeed of any kind of exclusivism, more attractive.

Today’s exclusivism, with its variety of fundamentalist and chauvinist movements both ethnic and political, may be seen as a widespread revolt against the relativism and secularism of modernity. This does not mean that all “fundamentalists” are conservative or traditional in rejecting the modern world. But they have not made peace with modernity or made themselves at home within it.¹⁶ The Enlightenment heritage of modernity—the inquiry into the sources of scripture; the critical academic study of society, culture, and religion; the historical comparison of truth claims; the evolutionary claims of science—is by and large rejected by fundamentalists. Religious truth is “a given” and is plain, simple, and clear.

In America, the burst of Christian fundamentalism in the 1970s and 1980s grew amidst the threat of burgeoning plurality and choice in virtually every arena of life, including sexuality and religion. Nothing could be taken for granted as a given. One could choose a hometown, an occupation, a “lifestyle,” a worldview, and even a religious tradition—choices people in traditional societies do not confront as individuals. In *The Heretical Imperative*, sociologist of religion Peter Berger has pointed out that the word *heresy* has its root in the Greek word for choosing on one’s own, apart from the community. Today such individ-

ual choice in matters of religion, formerly "heretical," has become the modern imperative. Individual choosing is expected and necessary—even in matters of religion.

A new wave of exclusivism is cresting around the world today. Expressed in social and political life, exclusivism becomes ethnic or religious chauvinism, described in South Asia as communalism. Religious or ethnic identity is the basis on which a group campaigns for its own interests against those others with whom it shares the wider community of a city, state, or nation. As we have observed, identity-based politics is on the rise because it is found to be a successful way of arousing political energy, as was clear with the rise, however brief, of the Moral Majority in the United States, the rise of the Soka Gakkai in Japan, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) in India.

The new Muslim resurgence has somewhat different roots. The affirmation of Islamic culture against the tide of Western capitalist, materialist culture finds its voice in the new sometimes strident assertiveness of Islamic identity. It is little wonder that the old colonial West and its new heir, the United States, are cast in a negative light. Over forty countries with substantial Muslim populations have gained independence since World War II and in various ways have found Islam to be the foundation of nation building. And yet the post-colonial era has left social and political problems, and sometimes chaos, that are quite dissonant with the Islamic vision of society. This too stimulates the call to a reassertion of Islamic fundamentals. For most interpreters, these fundamentals do not permit the bifurcation of the world into the "secular" and the "religious," for the *shari'a*, the Muslim "way," is a whole comprehensive worldview which creates a transnational community and challenges that community to a life of obedience, a life aligned with the truth God has revealed in the Qur'an.

Exclusivism often arises among minorities, or those who have a minority consciousness even if they are not numerical minorities. While some minorities are content to be minorities and to experience themselves as the salt or the leaven that improves the whole, it is nonetheless often the case that the sense of fear and threat that are especially powerful among minorities gives rise to fundamentalist or exclusivist movements. The sense of being pitted against a dominant and engulfing "other" that threatens one's identity leads to the assertion of self over or against the "other" as a form of self-protection. The exclusivism of the early church, the beloved community of which the author of the Gospel of John writes, is a good example of the way in which minority conscious-

ness engenders a very clear sense of boundaries and some strongly exclusivist language.

There are many places where such an exclusivist, fundamentalist, or communalist position is enacted by minorities in public affairs. The sense on the part of Sikhs of being gradually engulfed in a dominant and increasingly secular Indian culture has surely contributed to the anti-Hindu rhetoric of militant Sikhs and the demand for a separate Sikh state of "Khalistan." The militant Jewish leadership of the late Rabbi Kahane and of the Gush Emunim often takes the form of anti-Arab Zionist chauvinism, gaining strength from the sense among Israelis of being under seige in an engulfing Arab world. In both cases, minority consciousness gives rise to an unbending exclusivism. This is even more the case with smaller and less powerful minorities than Jews or Sikhs. In South India and Thailand, for example, the minority Christian churches are often extremely fundamentalist theologically and exclusivist socially, in part because Christians feel they are too few to permit an attitude of openness and interrelatedness without being submerged by the majority culture.

Minority consciousness is not entirely a rational matter of numbers, however. In Sri Lanka, for example, the Buddhist Sinhalese majority has a minority consciousness. Even though the Tamils are a small minority in Sri Lanka itself, the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, a short distance across the straits, presents a large Tamil population and a wide context of Tamil culture and influence. In India, the recent rise of Hindu chauvinism is fueled by the sense that Hindus, though they are the majority numerically, have no power in their own land because of the proliferation of special privileges and reservations given to minorities. A new exclusive sense of Hindu identity is in the process of formation.

It is important to note, however, that some numerical minorities do not have an exclusivist consciousness at all. The native peoples of the Americas, for example, while being protective of their rites and lifeways, also see the truth in other ways and paths. Over forty years ago, Chief White Calf of the Blackfeet of Montana offered a critique of Christian exclusivism that was very expressive of Native American attitudes. As an old man, in the summer of 1958 he told the story of creation to one Richard Lancaster, whom he called his son.

I am Chief White Calf of the Blackfeet, and I am one hundred and one years old, and I give you this story that I got from my father, Last Gun, who got it from the old men of the tribe. . . . You are my son and I give it to you.

Only once before I tried to give this story. There was a missionary and I called him son and gave him a name and tried to give him this story but he would not take it because he said that this is not the way things were in the beginning. But I was not proud to have him for my son because he says there is only one path through the forest and he knows the right path, but I say there are many paths and how can you know the best path unless you have walked them all. He walked too long on one path and he does not know there are other paths. And I am one hundred and one, and I know that sometimes many paths go to the same place.¹⁷

Deep conviction about one's own path need not be exclusivist. It might be simply the evangelical or neo-orthodox enthusiasm for one's own roots, one's own people, or one's own tradition. Traditions and people of faith are continually revitalized by the return to roots and energy of new revival movements. But exclusivism is not just ardent enthusiasm for one's own tradition. It is coupled with a highly negative attitude toward other traditions. Like the missionary who would not even listen to White Calf's story, the exclusivist does not participate in dialogue, does not listen openly to the testimony of others. Exclusivism has to do not only with how we hold our own convictions, but also with how we regard the convictions of our neighbor. In a world of close neighbors, the exclusivist has a real problem—one will likely meet those neighbors. One might discover they are not anathema after all. Or one might discover that they are equally ardent exclusivists.

Is "our God" listening? The exclusivist, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, feels no qualms in speaking about "our God" or speaking about "the truth." The use of the possessive with reference to God does not seem peculiar. Nor is there reticence in saying that "our God" does not listen, at least appreciatively, to the prayers of others; as Bailey Smith, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, put it bluntly in 1978, "God Almighty does not hear the prayers of the Jew." The Christian exclusivist insists that the truth of Christ excludes all others: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—outside the church, no salvation. This voice has sounded long and loud in the churches—so much so that many imagine it is the only way Christians think about the matter.

"One Great Fellowship of Love"

While the exclusivist response may be the most loudly expressed, most Christians are probably inclusivists. The evangelical message of Christianity is not ex-

clusive, they would argue. No indeed—the invitation is open and the tent of Christ is wide enough for all. As the words of an early-twentieth-century Protestant hymn put it, paraphrasing Galatians 3:28, “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth.” The hymn was written for an exhibit of the London Mission Society in 1908. At least one strong stream of the mission movement was fed not by an exclusivist theology that deemed all non-Christians to be lost heathen, but by an inclusivist “fulfillment theology” that held non-Christians to be genuine seekers of a truth found fully in Christ. That is, other religious traditions are not so much evil or wrong-headed as incomplete, needing the fulfillment of Christ. In some ways other religious traditions have prepared the way for the Good News of Christ. While not wholly false, they are but partially true. All people of faith are seekers, and Christ, finally, is what they seek. All can be included in the great fellowship of love.

In such a view, the plurality of religions is not experienced as a threat, and “others” are not seen as opponents. Rather, the diversity of peoples and traditions is included in a single worldview that embraces, explains, and supersedes them all. For Christians, inclusivism at its best may mean articulating a sense of the mysterious workings of God and of Christ among people of other faiths. Such a view, however, often hides within it a hierarchical acceptance of plurality, with one’s own view of things on top. It is also a hierarchical view that goes, often unreflectively, with power. Everyone is invited in, and we are the ones who put up the tent. Others are gathered in, but on our terms, within our framework, under our canopy, as part of our system.

Is “our God” listening? C. S. Lewis, a Christian inclusivist, would say, “I think that every prayer which is sincerely made even to a false god . . . is accepted by the true God and that Christ saves many who do not think they know him.”¹⁸ The inclusivist attitude is, of course, much more open than the exclusivist, but the presupposition is that in the end ours is the truth wide enough to include all. Ours are the terms in which truth is stated.

Recall for a moment how, at the close of the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, John Henry Barrows expressed great satisfaction that each day of the Parliament included the “universal” prayer of Jesus, the Lord’s Prayer. J. N. Farquhar, a missionary in India, studied the Hindu tradition with respect, but concluded in his book *The Crown of Hinduism*, published in 1913, that Christ is the fulfillment of the highest aspirations and aims of Hinduism. Not surprisingly, such inclusivism is a way of thinking that is common to people of faith in virtually every tradition. Many a Hindu would surely think of Vedanta as the

culmination and crown, not only of Christianity, but of all religious paths. And it is common to hear Muslims say, as did a Muslim taxi driver who took me from downtown Washington, D.C., to the mosque on Massachusetts Avenue, "To be a good Muslim, you first have to be a good Jew and a good Christian. Islam includes everything that is there in Judaism and Christianity."

There is a dilemma here, for to some extent all religious people are inclusivists insofar as we use our own particular religious language—God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Buddha, Vishnu—and struggle with the limits and meaning of that language. As long as we hold the religious insights of our particular traditions, cast in our particular languages, to be in some sense universal, we cannot avoid speaking at times in an inclusivist way. It is important to recognize this. For instance, my Buddhist friends at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center do not perceive their understanding of the nature of human suffering and the potential of human freedom as a peculiarly Buddhist truth, but as a truth about the human condition which is universal and accessible to all who would look clearly at their own experience. "*Ehi passika*," "Come and see," was the invitation of the Buddha. Wake up and see for yourself. For Muslims, the revelation of the Qur'an in the "night of power" is not a parochial revelation meant for the ears of Muslims alone, but a revelation to all people, before which the proper response is *islam*, literally "obedience." For Muslims, aligning one's life with the truth God has revealed, which is what Islam means, makes all believers *muslims* with a small "m." Similarly, when Hindus quote the words of the Rig Veda, "*Ekam sat viprahā bahudhā vadanti*"—"Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names"—they are not claiming this to be the case only for Hindus, but to be universally true. Similarly, Christians who speak of the Christ event do not speak of a private disclosure of God to Christians alone but of the sanctification of humanity by God, a gift to be claimed by all who will but open their eyes to see it. In the words of Charles Wesley, "The arms of love that circle me would all mankind embrace!"

In the West, inclusivism has taken the particular form of theological supersessionism, as we see clearly in the progression of the prophetic monotheistic traditions from Judaism to Christianity to Islam. We not only come from the same stock, we are perpetually interpreting one another. The Christian tradition contains within its scriptures and traditions an interpretation of Judaism. For a long period, Christian theological orthodoxy held that the Christian community supersedes the Jewish community in a "new covenant" with God. The Muslim tradition, acknowledging the validity and prophecy of the Jewish and

Christian traditions, claims to have superseded both of them as the final revelation of God, clarifying the distorted vision of both with the corrective lens of the Qur'an. My Muslim cab driver in Washington was right, in a sense, about Islam including an understanding of the Jewish and Christian traditions. He would no doubt object, however, to the further revelation claimed by Baha' Ullah in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, just as Christians would reject the postbiblical revelation claimed by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. No one wants to be superseded.

In my own Methodist tradition, the theological foundation of inclusivism is John Wesley's conviction that universal love is the heartline of the Christian message. No one could say, according to Wesley, that the "heathen and Mahometan" would suffer damnation. Far better to leave this matter to God, "who is the God of the Heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made."¹⁹ And who is this God? Charles Wesley's famous hymn "O Come Thou Traveller Unknown," written on the theme of Jacob wrestling with the unknown God, exclaims, "Pure Universal Love thou art!" The refrain repeats throughout the hymn—"Thy Nature, and thy name, is Love."

On the Catholic side, exclusivism has gradually yielded to an inclusivist view, seeking ways to include in God's salvation those "outside the church." It perhaps began with the discovery of what was called the New World, but which was clearly new only to the newcomers. The indigenous peoples had been there for many centuries and had never heard so much as a whisper of the name of Jesus. How was the church to think of the destiny of their immortal souls? Could a merciful God, whose providence extends throughout all creation, have condemned to hell all these who died outside the church but had never even heard of Christ? Finally, in 1854, the Vatican launched the doctrine that would later be the nemesis of Father Feeney, the doctrine of salvation to those individuals of godly faith handicapped by what was termed "invincible ignorance." "Although juridically speaking they are 'outside' (*extra*) the Catholic church and formally not its members, yet in a vital sense they are 'inside' (*intra*) . . . invisible members of the Catholic church."²⁰

With closer acquaintance, however, it became clear—often through the missionaries who knew them best—that the wisdom of native peoples, Hindu philosophers, and Buddhist monks could not simply be classified as the "invincible ignorance" of those who did not have the opportunity to know Christ. Even when they did have the opportunity to be acquainted with Jesus through the Gospel and the sometimes unappealing witness of the church, they were often

not persuaded to cast off their own traditions of wisdom or spirituality. Indeed, the missionaries themselves sometimes glimpsed the wisdom of the Hindus or Buddhists among whom they worked and began to raise questions. The new attitude took a long while to ripen. It was really with the fresh air of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that a new strain of inclusive thinking was born. The council drew up a statement, “The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” known by its first two words as *Nostra Aetate*.²¹ It begins, “In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions.” This remarkable document starts with the affirmation that all people “form but one community,” citing the reference of Acts 17 that God made from one stock all the peoples of the earth, in order that they should seek after God and find God. The statement allows that God’s “providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men.”

Nostra Aetate is an appreciative statement of the depth of various traditions. Hindus, it affirms, “explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy.” Buddhism “testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world” and proposes a way of life which leads to liberation. Muslims “highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting.” Jews and Christians especially “have a common spiritual heritage,” and Jews “remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.”

The most quoted paragraph of the document sums up the inclusivist position:

The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5:18–19), men find the fulness of their religious life.

Nostra Aetate goes on to affirm that the suffering of Christ was not just for Christians, but for all people, and the cross of Christ is “the sign of God’s universal love

and the source of all grace.” The document says, “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God’s image.” The Catholic theologians of Vatican II do not propose that there is salvation outside the church, but do affirm God’s “saving designs” and the universality of “general revelation” through which grace is made available to all. Yet in and through all such revelation, it is the cross of Christ that is both “the sign of God’s universal love and the source of all grace.”

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner went a step beyond Vatican II in his inclusivism. Like John Wesley, he takes as his starting point the central message of the Gospel: God’s universal love, the gift of God’s grace, and God’s desire to save all humankind. Rahner uses a splendid word, *heilsoptimismus*, “holy optimism,” inviting us to “think optimistically” about the possibilities of salvation outside the church. Among the channels of God’s grace, according to Rahner, are the great religions. They are “positively included in God’s plan of salvation.”²² Rahner’s most famous phrase is “anonymous Christians,” by which he means faithful people of non-Christian religions who do not “name the name” of Christ, but who are nonetheless saved by his power and grace, even though they do not know it. Christ is the “constitutive cause” of salvation, and wherever God’s saving grace abounds in the world, Christ is present, whether in name or not.

Inclusivism is an appealing way of looking at things and there is much to appreciate in inclusivist viewpoints. Whether it is Christian, Hindu, or Muslim inclusivism, this bent of mind is mostly benign toward other traditions or faiths. The inclusivist does not exclude or condemn others, is not usually chauvinistic, defensive, or self-aggrandizing. Granted, an inclusivist uses his or her own language and conception—God’s universal love, for the Christian, or perhaps Krishna’s omnipresence and omnipotence, for the Hindu—as a way of understanding the other, but would insist that, realistically, we can only understand the world in and through the language and the symbols we have inherited from our own traditions. So in Rahner’s inclusivist scheme my Hindu friends are baptized “anonymous Christians” and Muslims are saved by the mediation and grace of Christ, even though this certainly violates their self-understanding. And yet, to be fair, Rahner states explicitly that the term “anonymous Christians” is not intended for dialogue with others, but only for what we might call internal use as Christians set their own understanding aright.²³

There is still something unsettling here. While it preserves the integrity of

my own self-understanding, inclusivism often dodges the question of real difference by reducing everything finally to my own terms. The problem with inclusivism is precisely that it uses *one* language—the religious language of one’s own tradition—to make definitive claims about the whole of reality. What about the self-understanding of the Muslim? What about her testimony of faith? What about the Jews who do not speak of being “saved” at all and would object strenuously to the notion of being saved by Christ behind their backs, making them anonymous Christians whether they like it or not? What about the Hindus who would find it an extraordinary theological sleight of hand to attribute all grace to Christ? Mr. Gangadaran, my Hindu friend from South India, is a Shaiva Siddhantin. His life is infused with a sense of God’s love and grace, as conveyed in the hymns of the Tamil saints, which he sings with as much gusto as any Methodist sings those of Charles Wesley. But the voices of people like Gangadaran do not really count in the Christian inclusivist frame of reference. The inclusivist viewpoint would be challenged by the independent voices of other people of faith, people who do not wish to be obliterated by being included in someone else’s scheme and on someone else’s terms without being heard in their own right.

The inclusivist viewpoint would also be challenged by the encounter with other inclusivisms. The Muslim, for example, who would argue that all who bow their heads and bend their wills to the one God are *muslims*, with a small “m,” is an inclusivist. So is the Buddhist abbot of Mount Hiei in Japan, who, when he met Pope John Paul II, included him in the Buddhist family by pronouncing him a reincarnation of the Buddhist monk Saicho. So was my Hindu friend in Banaras who was certain that I had been a Hindu in my past life, which explained my affinity for the holy city. So is the Vaishnava Hindu who sees all truth and all paths as leading up to Krishna. In the Song of God, the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna vows to receive all prayers offered, to whatever god, in whatever name, for he is the recipient and lord of all worship.

I am the way, sustainer, lord,
witness, shelter, refuge, friend,
source, dissolution, stability,
treasure, and unchanging seed.

For those on the receiving end of the inclusivist’s zeal, it often feels like a form of theological imperialism to have their beliefs or prayers swept into the interpretive schema of another tradition. The inclusivist, however, is often not aware

of how it feels to be "included" in someone else's scheme. Inclusivists often simply assume, either in innocence or in confidence, that their worldview ultimately explains the whole. From each inclusivist point of view, it does. Mission, in its positive sense, whether Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim, is an outgrowth of such inclusivism—the "other" is not so much dangerous as immature and in need of further enlightenment. It was this way of thinking that lay behind Kipling's sense of "the white man's burden" to be the bearer of civilization. It was also this thinking that lay behind Swami Vivekananda's mission to bring spiritual growth to the immature and materialistic West.

Those of us who are English-speaking women readily recognize inclusivist strategies through our own experience of language. We are said to be included in terms and locutions that do not mention our name, like the "brotherhood of man." Women learned the rule of thumb men provided to cope with this problem: "men," of course, means "men and women," except in those instances in which it does not mean "men and women." The problem with inclusivism is clear. Inclusivism is a "majority consciousness," not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in terms of power. And the consciousness of the majority is typically "unconscious" because it is not tested and challenged by dialogue with dissenting voices. The danger of inclusivism is that it does not hear such voices at all.

The inclusivist, wittingly or unwittingly, thinks of himself or herself as the norm and uses words that reduce the other to that which is different: non-Christians, non-whites, non-Western. The economic inclusivist speaks of "developing" countries, as if all will be well when they are "developed" like us. The hierarchies built into inclusivism enable the inclusivist to assume uncritically that racial minorities, or "third-world" peoples, or women will come someday to share in "the system," and that the system will not change when they do. Inclusivists want to be inclusive—but only in the house that we ourselves have built. Such inclusivism can easily become the "communalism of the majority." Its presuppositions are unchallenged by alternatives. When the inclusivist really begins to listen to the voices of others, speaking in their own terms, the whole context of theological thought begins to change along the continuum toward pluralism.

Is "our God" listening? Of course, "our God" listens to the prayers of all people of faith, but it is "our" God who does the listening in the inclusivist view. We, after all, know perfectly well who God is, and if God is going to listen to the prayers of the Hindu uttered before the granite image of Vishnu, it is the God *we* know.

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

For the Christian pluralist, there is no such God as "our" God. Humility or simple honesty before God requires that we not limit God to the God we know or to the particular language and image through which we know God. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has repeatedly put it, God transcends our idea of God. We sing the hymn "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. . . ." But what does it really mean to take seriously the wideness of God's mercy?

Religiously, the move to pluralism begins for Christians the moment we imagine that the one we call God is greater than our knowledge or understanding of God. It begins the moment we suspect that the God we know in Christ "listens," if we wish to put it that way, to the earnest prayers of people whose religious language and whose God we do not even understand. It is our understanding of the wideness of God's mercy that provides the theological impulse toward pluralism. And, as we shall see, it is also our confidence in Jesus, the Christ, who was open to all people regardless of religion or status, that pushes Christians into the wider world of faith.

For Christians, to stress God's transcendence does not take away the precious particularity of the Christian tradition, but it does take away our ability to claim the comprehensive, exhaustive universality of our own tradition. There are "other sheep," as Christ himself affirms, who are not of this fold (John 10:16). There are faces of the Divine that must lie beyond what we ourselves have glimpsed from our own sheepfold. It is God's transcendence which drives us to find out what others have known of God, seeking truly to know, as it was put at the Parliament, "how God has revealed himself in the other." It is God's transcendence which drives us to inquire more deeply into the insights of those Buddhists who do not speak of God at all.

In a Christian pluralist perspective, we do not need to build walls to exclude the view of the other, nor do we need to erect a universal canopy capable of gathering all the diverse tribes together under our own roof. We do not need to speak of "anonymous Christians." From a Christian pluralist standpoint, the multiplicity of religious ways is a concomitant of the ultimacy and many-sidedness of God, the one who cannot be limited or encircled by any one tradition. Therefore, the boundaries of our various traditions need not be the places where we halt and contend over our differences, but might well be the places where we meet and catch a glimpse of glory as seen by another.

This does not mean we cease speaking in our own language and adopt some

neutral terminology, but it does mean that we cease speaking only to ourselves and in the terms of our own internal Christian conversation. We will speak in the context of interreligious dialogue. For example, as a Christian, I will continue to speak of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. I may speak of the "wideness of God's mercy," even though the Buddhist will see this as a particularly Christian or theistic way of understanding the grounds for pluralism. The Buddhist will continue to speak of the Buddha and the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. And some Buddhists may insist that the "positionless position" of a nondogmatic Buddhism is what clears the ground for pluralism. But my primary concern will not be to "include" the Buddhist in my terms, but to understand the Buddhist in his or her own terms, to test and broaden my own self-understanding in light of that encounter. Neither of us will speak as if the other did not exist or were not listening or could be absorbed into our own religious worldviews. And each of us will begin to understand our own traditions afresh in light of what we have learned from the other.

In the Christian pluralist perspective, the plurality of religions is not interpreted as a "problem" to be overcome. It is a fact of our world. And it is one we must encounter creatively if we are to make sense of the world. People have always and everywhere responded to what Christians would call "God's presence" among them. Perhaps this great human movement of seeking, and of finding, is part of what we speak of as "the providence of God." Saint Paul reminded those to whom he preached in Athens that "from one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'" (Acts 17:26–28).

Despite Paul, there are many Christians who are happy to see people of other faiths as "searching and groping" for God, but are not so sure about the finding. In 1983, at the Vancouver General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, there was a heated debate over a single sentence in a report which recognized "the work of God in the lives of people of other faiths." Is God really at work in the lives and faith of others? Many delegates were not sure. A dozen substitute formulations were offered. There was scarcely time to consider the matter fully at the end of a steamy week in August. Finally, the assembly settled for a watered-down recognition of "God's creative work in the *seeking* for religious

truth among people of other faiths.”²⁴ In the confusion of plenary debate, delegates were finally uncertain about the “finding.” But the apostle Paul was not uncertain. He did not leave others groping after the Divine. He acknowledged the finding as well as the seeking. How many Christian missionaries, like Paul, have thought to “bring God” to some part of Africa or Asia, only to find that the one they called God was already there. So if there is a “finding,” is it not the imperative of the Godward heart to inquire after what has been found?

In January of 1990, the World Council of Churches called a theological consultation in the little village of Baar in Switzerland to address the theological confusion among Christians about what it means to speak of God’s presence among people of other faiths. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox theologians formulated a statement of current thinking on the matter, beginning with an understanding of creation and the implications of affirming God as the creator of heaven and earth.

We see the plurality of religious traditions as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind. We affirm that God has been present in their seeking and finding, that where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, and love and holiness in their living, this, like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . .

This conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God’s saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of peoples. A refusal to take seriously the many and diverse religious testimonies to be found among the nations and peoples of the whole world amounts to disowning the biblical testimony to God as creator of all things and father of all humankind.²⁵

In some ways it is not so unlike the Catholic language of *Nostra Aetate*. There is much that is necessarily inclusivist in such a recasting of Christian language. And yet there is an important point of departure here. For if Christians acknowledge—as do those of us who forged this language at Baar—not only the “seeking” but the “finding” of God by people of other faiths, then the encounter with the Hindu or Muslim is truly an opportunity to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the one we call God. It is an occasion for truth-seeking dialogue—to offer our own testimony, to hear the testimonies of others in their own

terms, to wrestle with the meaning of one another's terms, and to risk mutual transformation.

Within each tradition there are particular religious resources for the move toward the active, truth-seeking engagement with others that is the distinguishing mark of pluralism. And there are people in each religious tradition attempting to think afresh about their own identity within the context of inter-religious dialogue. I speak of what I call “Christian pluralism,” exploring the wider world of faith as a Christian. Jews who seek a context for pluralistic thinking often speak of God's ancient and unbroken covenant with the whole of humanity—the covenant with Noah signaled by the rainbow and spanning the earth as the sign of God's universal promise. Muslims also begin with the sovereignty of God, the creator of the universe, the sole judge in matters of truth, and the one who challenges the diverse religious communities to “compete in righteousness.” As the Qur'an puts it, “If God had so willed, He would have made all of you one community, but He has not done so that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete in goodness. To God shall you all return and He will tell you the Truth about what you have been disputing” (5:48). Buddhists often refer to the Buddha's teaching of the interdependence of all things and remind us of the Buddha's simple statement about the raft of *dharma*, of religious practice, as a way of crossing the river; it is a vehicle, not an end in itself. Only the fool would reach the far shore and then, out of loyalty to the raft, pack it along with him. Hindus begin with the oneness and transcendence of what they call Sat—the Real, Truth. It is that which becomes known to human beings through many names and forms. It is that which human beings can no more comprehend as a whole than the blind men of the parable can comprehend the entirety of the elephant.

The aim of all this religious thinking is not to find the lowest common denominator or the most neutral religious language. Far from it. The aim is to find those particular places within each tradition that provide the open space where we may meet one another in mutual respect and develop, through dialogue, new ways of speaking and listening. The aim is not only mutual understanding, but mutual self-understanding and mutual transformation. As the Jewish scholar Jean Halperin put it at an interreligious consultation held in Mauritius in 1983, “We not only need to understand one another, we need one another to understand ourselves.”²⁶

The British philosopher and theologian John Hick has been a pioneer in pluralist thinking. He speaks of pluralism as the “Copernican revolution” in

contemporary theology. From a "Ptolemaic" Christian inclusivist position in which other traditions of wisdom or devotion were understood to revolve around the sun of the Christian tradition, their validity measured by their distance from the center, the Christian pluralist makes a radical move, insisting that as we become aware of the traditions of Buddhists or Muslims, we must begin to see that it is God or Ultimate Reality around which our human religious traditions revolve—not any one tradition or way of salvation. As Hick puts it, "We have to realize that the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. [God] is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways."²⁷ For Christians this means that others cannot simply move into our own orbit, but must be seen and appreciated on their own terms, moving, as we ourselves do, around that center which cannot be fully owned or claimed by any one tradition alone.

The World House:

Toward a Practical Understanding of Pluralism

The Copernican revolution is a good image for dramatizing the revolution in religious understanding that we are now experiencing. It is as dramatic as Copernicus's discovery that what we thought was at the center of our universe turned out not to be. God always transcends what we humans can apprehend or understand. No tradition can claim the Holy or the Truth as its private property. As Gandhi put it so succinctly, "Revelation is the exclusive property of no nation, no tribe."²⁸

Every image has its limitations, however, and that of the Copernican revolution and the new solar cosmos is no exception. We know today, for example, that ours is but one of a number of solar systems, so even the heliocentric universe has its limits. Anyway, the paradigm of all the great religions sailing around the center on their own particular orbits is not entirely satisfactory. It lacks the dynamic interaction of the world in which we live. Our worlds and our worldviews are not on separate orbits, but bump up against one another all the time, even collide. People of different religious traditions do not live apart, but are in constant interaction and need, if anything, to be in more intentional interrelation. A theocentricity patterned after the solar system will not carry us far as an image for our new world, for our problem is not only our understanding of

Truth, but our relationship to one another. We need a more interactive way of thinking.

If the move toward pluralism begins theologically in the places where people of different traditions find an openness—and even an imperative—toward encounter with one another, it begins historically and culturally with the plain fact of our religious diversity, our cultural proximity to one another, and our human interdependence. In very practical terms, how are we all to live with one another in a climate of mutuality and understanding? Is it even possible? Those who live according to an exclusivist paradigm frankly do not wish to live closely with people of other faiths and would prefer to shut them out—which is increasingly impossible—or to convert others to their own view of the world. Those who appropriate differences, as do the inclusivists, assume that the worldview of others looks very much like their own, and the ground rules are presumed to be “ours.” But those who think about life together as pluralists recognize the need for radical new forms of living together and communicating with one another.

What, then, is pluralism? The word has been used so widely and freely as a virtual synonym for such terms as *relativism*, *subjectivism*, *multiculturalism*, and *globalism* that we need to stop for a moment and think clearly about what it does and does not mean. Pluralism is but one of several responses to diversity and to modernity. It is an interpretation of plurality, an evaluation of religious and cultural diversity. And finally it is the ability to make a home for oneself and one's neighbors in that multifaceted reality.

First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality. Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple—splendid, colorful, maybe even threatening. Diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe it. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to *participate* in pluralism. I can't just stand by and watch.

Religious and cultural diversity can be found just about everywhere—in Britain and Brazil, in the ethnic enclaves of the former Eastern bloc, in New Delhi and in Denver, in the workplace and in schools. Pluralist models for successfully engaging diverse peoples in an energetic community, however, are relatively rare. In the Elmhurst area of Queens, for example, a *New York Times* reporter found people from eleven countries on a single floor of an apartment building on Justice Avenue. There were immigrants from Korea, Haiti, Viet-

nam, Nigeria, and India—all living in isolation and fear—each certain that they were the only immigrants there.²⁹ Diversity to be sure, but not pluralism.

Mere cosmopolitanism should also not be mistaken for pluralism. In Cambridge, Massachusetts—which, like Queens, is highly cosmopolitan—Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Buddhists live along with many people who have no active or passive identification with any religious faith at all. The whole world seems to live in this small city. There is cultural diversity and diversity of style; anyone sitting in the sidewalk cafés of Harvard Square will observe the parade of Cambridge life. But again, the mere presence of wide-ranging religious diversity is not itself pluralism. Religious pluralism requires active positive engagement with the claims of religion and the facts of religious diversity. It involves not the mere recognition of the different religious traditions and the insuring of their legitimate rights, but the active effort to understand difference and commonality through dialogue.

Second, pluralism is not simply tolerance, but also the seeking of understanding. Tolerance is a deceptive virtue. I do not wish to belittle tolerance, but simply to recognize that it is not a real response to the challenging facts of difference. Tolerance can enable coexistence, but it is certainly no way to be good neighbors. In fact, tolerance often stands in the way of engagement. If as a Christian I tolerate my Muslim neighbor, I am not therefore required to understand her, to seek out what she has to say, to hear about her hopes and dreams, to hear what it meant to her when the words “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate” were whispered into the ear of her newborn child.

Tolerance does not take us far with ideas that challenge our own. For a majority people, tolerance is simply another expression of privilege. As the philosopher Elizabeth Spelman puts it, “If one is in a position to allow someone else to do something, one is also in a position to keep that person from doing it. To tolerate your speaking is to refrain from exercising the power I have to keep you from speaking. . . . And of course I don’t have to listen to what you have to say. . . . Tolerance is easy if those who are asked to express it needn’t change a whit.”³⁰

Tolerance is, of course, a set forward from active hostility. When the mosque in Quincy was set ablaze by arson, when a mosque in Houston was fire-bombed at the time of a Middle East airplane hijacking, when the Hindu-Jain temple in Pittsburgh was vandalized and the images of the deities smashed, and when a group of youngsters soaped swastikas on windows and cars in Wellesley, people called for tolerance—an unquestionable virtue under the circumstances. There

are many places in the world where the emergence of a culture of tolerance would be a step forward—when religious, racial, and ethnic rivalries flash into violence in Northern Ireland, in India, in the Sudan or Nigeria, or in Los Angeles or Miami. But tolerance is a long way from pluralism.

As a style of living together, tolerance is too minimal an expectation. Indeed, it may be a passive form of hostility. Christians can tolerate their Jewish neighbors and protect their civil liberties without having to know anything about them and without having to reconsider some of the roots of Christian anti-Semitism. Tolerance alone does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another by building bridges of exchange and dialogue. It does not require us to know anything new, it does not even entertain the fact that we ourselves might change in the process. Tolerance might sustain a temporary and shaky truce, but it will never bring forth a new creation.

Third, pluralism is not simply relativism, but assumes real commitment. In a world of religious pluralism, commitments are not checked at the door. This is a critical point to see plainly, because through a cynical intellectual sleight of hand some critics have linked pluralism with a valueless relativism—an indiscriminating twilight in which “all cats are gray,” all perspectives equally viable, and as a result, equally unconvincing. In saying that pluralism is not simply relativism, I do not wish to side with today’s slippery critics of relativism, such as Allan Bloom, who stigmatize openness and cultural relativism as new academic dogmas. My main point is to distinguish pluralism from certain kinds of relativism. While there are similarities between pluralism and relativism, the difference between the two is important: Relativism assumes a stance of openness; pluralism assumes both openness *and* commitment.

Relativism, like pluralism, is an interpretation of diversity. It is also a word with many meanings. On the whole, relativism simply means that what we know of the world and of truth we can only know through a particular framework. In this, the pluralist would agree—what we speak of as truth is relative to our cultural and historical standpoint as well as the frame of reference through which we see it. What is true is always “true *for*” someone, for there is always a point of view—conditioned in multiple ways by whether one is Christian or Muslim, American or Asian, male or female, rich or poor, a prosperous farmer or a homeless refugee. Matters of truth and value are relative to our conceptual framework and worldview, even those matters of truth that we speak of as divinely ordained.

Relativism, then, to a certain extent is a commonsense interpretation of di-

versity. It is clear that what I hold as truth is historically relative. If I had lived in the fourteenth century, I would likely have held the world to be flat. What I hold as truth is also culturally and religiously relative. As a Christian, I know that the Muslim who speaks of justice and human community appeals to the authority of the Qur'an as energetically as I appeal to the authority of Jesus or the Bible. It is indisputable that certain "facts" of my childhood learning, such as "Columbus discovered America," were accurate only from a European point of view. From the standpoint of the native peoples of this continent, "the discovery" was perhaps more accurately an invasion. And as for morality, it is clear that in some frames of reference, the Hindu or Jain for instance, any willful taking of life, including animal life, is rejected; vegetarianism is religiously enjoined and culturally presupposed. Through other frames of reference, including ours in most of the Christian West, there is little religious debate about the moral dimensions of what we should eat. But when it comes to the taking of human life—through war, capital punishment, or abortion—there are religious people lined up on both sides of every argument with evidence to support their views.

A thoughtful relativist is able to point out the many ways in which our cognitive and moral understandings are relative to our historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. So far, the pluralist would be a close cousin. But there are two shades of relativism that are antithetical to pluralism. The first is nihilistic relativism, which denies the very heart of religious truth. One of the common strategies for diffusing the challenge of religious and ideological difference is to insist that there is no ultimate centering value, no one life-compelling truth. For the nihilistic relativist, the impossibility of universalizing any one truth claim suggests the emptiness of all truth claims. According to Spelman, the nihilist says, "If I can't maintain my position of privilege by being the sole arbiter of truth, I at least can insist that no one is."³¹ If all religions say different things, this only proves that all of them are false. As we well know, nihilistic relativism is not the property of any one culture or continent today. It is a truly worldwide phenomenon, just as religious exclusivism and secular materialism are worldwide phenomena. As Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, "We must choose between inter-faith and inter-nihilism."³²

The second shade of relativism that must clearly be distinguished from pluralism is a relativism that lacks commitment. There are relativists who are committed Jews, Christians, and Hindus who speak of commitment to "relative

absolutes," recognizing the relativity of those symbols we hold as "absolute." There are many more, however, who are completely uncommitted, which is why relativism is equated by some critics with laissez-faire plurality. Mind you, the uncommitted certainly have a place in the dialogue of a pluralistic world, but the heart of the issue with which we struggle is the difficult, potentially explosive, and potentially vibrant encounter of people with strong and very different commitments. Pluralism can only generate a strong social fabric through the interweaving of commitments. If people perceive pluralism as entailing the relinquishing of their particular religious commitments they are not interested. Neither am I.

Relativism for me and for many others becomes a problem when it means the lack of commitment to any particular community or faith. If everything is more or less true, I do not give my heart to anything in particular. There is no beloved community, no home in the context of which values are tested, no dream of the ongoing transformation of that community. Thus the relativist can remain uncommitted, a perpetual shopper or seeker, set apart from a community of faith, suffering from spiritual ennui. Indeed relativism as a view in itself is often identified with secularism and the disavowal of any religious faith.

The pluralist, on the other hand, stands in a particular community and is willing to be committed to the struggles of that community, even as restless critic. I would argue that there is no such thing as a generic pluralist. There are Christian pluralists, Hindu pluralists, and even avowedly humanistic pluralists—all daring to be themselves, not in isolation from but in relation to one another. Pluralists recognize that others also have communities and commitments. They are unafraid to encounter one another and realize that they must all live with each other's particularities. The challenge for the pluralist is commitment without dogmatism and community without communalism. The theological task, and the task of a pluralist society, is to create the space and the means for the encounter of commitments, not to neutralize all commitment.

The word *credo*, so important in the Christian tradition, does not mean "I believe" in the sense of intellectual assent to this and that proposition. It means "I give my heart to this." It is an expression of my heart's commitment and my life's orientation. Relativism may be an appropriate intellectual answer to the problem of religious diversity—all traditions are relative to history and culture. But it cannot be an adequate answer for most religious people—not for me, nor for my Muslim neighbor who fasts and prays more regularly than I do, nor for my

Hindu colleague whose world is made vivid by the presence of Krishna. We live our lives and die our deaths in terms of cherished commitments. We are not relatively committed.

Pluralism is not, then, the kind of radical openness to anything and everything that drains meaning from particularity. It is, however, radical openness to Truth—to God—that seeks to enlarge understanding through dialogue. Pluralism is the complex and unavoidable encounter, difficult as it might be, with the multiple religions and cultures that are the very stuff of our world, some of which may challenge the very ground on which we stand. Unless all of us can encounter one another's religious visions and cultural forms and understand them through dialogue, both critically and self-critically, we cannot begin to live with maturity and integrity in the world house.

Fourth, pluralism is not syncretism, but is based on respect for differences. Syncretism is the creation of a new religion by the fusing of diverse elements of different traditions. There have been many syncretistic religions in history. In the fourth century B.C.E., the Ptolemaic kings fused Greek and Egyptian elements in the cult of Serapis to aid in the consolidation of empire. In the third century, Mani interwove strands from the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Christian traditions to create Manichaeism. The Mughal emperor Akbar's Din-i-Ilahi ("Divine Faith") brought together Hindu and Jain philosophy, Muslim mysticism, and Zoroastrian fire sacrifice in sixteenth-century India. To a certain extent what goes by the name of New Age religion today is an informal religious syncretism, piecing together a package of spiritual aids from Native American ritual, Hindu yoga and Ayurvedic medicine, Buddhist meditation, and Sufi and Christian mysticism. Of course it goes without saying that there is a process of adaptation and enculturation that is part and parcel of every tradition as it enters into the life of new peoples and new cultural contexts. The discussion of whether this is or is not "syncretism" is a long one and hinges too much on terminology to detain us here.

There are some critics who imagine, however, that pluralism is aimed at generating a new syncretistic religion knit together from the most universal or most interesting elements of various world religions. Or that pluralism is a kind of global shopping mall where each individual puts together a basket of appealing religious ideas. Or that pluralism will reduce each tradition to the bland unity of the lowest common denominator. So it is important to say, once again, that pluralism, while not plurality, is based on plurality. A pluralist culture will not flatten out differences, but has respect for differences and the encounter of differ-

ences. Its aim is quite the opposite of syncretism. While common language will be crafted out of the give-and-take of dialogue, there is no attempt to make up a common language, to produce a kind of religious esperanto that all would speak.

There are religious traditions that have an open and somewhat syncretistic flavor today. The Unitarian Universalists, for example, who hold a humanitarian view of Jesus and a wide respect for other religious teachers, often include the prayers and scriptures of many traditions in their worship. The eclecticism of some Unitarian congregations today includes neopagan and neo-Hindu influences as well as a strong Christian universalism. The Baha'is build a similar appreciative stance toward religious diversity into their various temples. In New Delhi, for example, there is a splendid new Baha'i temple built in the shape of a lotus and housing a number of shrines around its central sanctuary, one for each of the religious traditions, all brought together under one roof.

The aim of pluralism, however, is quite different. It is not to create a world-wide temple of all faiths. It is rather to find ways to be distinctively ourselves and yet be in relation to one another. No doubt there is common ground to be discovered along the way; no doubt there are common aspirations to be articulated. But joining together in a new “world religion” based on the lowest common denominator or pieced together from several religious traditions is not the goal of pluralism. In some ways, it is the very antithesis of pluralism.

Fifth, pluralism is based on interreligious dialogue. The isolation or dogmatism of the exclusivist is not open to dialogue. The inclusivist, while open to dialogue, does not really hear the self-understanding of the other. The truth seeking of the pluralist, however, can be built on no other foundation than the give-and-take of dialogue. There is something we must know—both about the other and about ourselves—that can be found in no other way.

We do not enter into dialogue with the dreamy hope that we will all agree, for the truth is we probably will not. We do not enter into dialogue to produce an agreement, but to produce real relationship, even friendship, which is premised upon mutual understanding, not upon agreement. Christians and Muslims, for example, may find we agree on many things. We share prophets like Abraham and foundational values like justice. But a clear understanding of differences is as precious as the affirmation of similarities.

The language of dialogue is the two-way language of real encounter and it is for this reason that dialogue is the very basis of pluralism. There must be constant communication—meeting, exchange, traffic, criticism, reflection, repara-

tion, renewal. Without dialogue, the diversity of religious traditions, of cultures and ethnic groups, becomes an array of isolated encampments, each with a different flag, meeting only occasionally for formalities or for battle. The swamis, monks, rabbis, and archbishops may meet for an interfaith prayer breakfast, but without real dialogue they become simply icons of diversity, not instruments of relationship. Without dialogue, when violence flares—in Queens or Los Angeles, Southall or New Delhi—there are no bridges of relationship, and as the floodwaters rise it is too late to build them.

A second aim of dialogue is to understand ourselves and *our* faith more clearly. Dialogue is not a debate between two positions, but a truth-seeking encounter. If Muslims assume that the taking and giving of interest on loans is morally wrong and Christians embedded in a capitalist framework never thought to question the matter, what can we learn from one another? If Buddhists describe the deepest reality without reference to God and Christians cannot imagine religiousness without God, what will each of us learn that is quite new, through the give-and-take of dialogue? The theologian John Cobb has used the phrase “mutual transformation” to describe the way in which dialogue necessarily goes beyond mutual understanding to a new level of mutual self-understanding.

The Sri Lankan Christian theologian Wesley Ariarajah has spoken of dialogue as the “encounter of commitments.” When dialogue was first discussed broadly and ecumenically by the Christian churches at the assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975, there was much heated discussion. A bishop of the Church of Norway led the attack, calling dialogue a betrayal of Christian mission. The church should be engaged in proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth and making disciples of all nations, not in interreligious dialogue, he said. There were many, then and now, who saw dialogue as a sign of weakness of faith. Ariarajah and many others have insisted that quite the opposite is true. What kind of faith refuses to be tested by real encounter with others? What kind of faith grows by speaking and proclaiming without having to listen, perhaps even be challenged, by the voices of others?

Discovering one’s own faith is inherently part of the human pilgrimage. What motivates us deeply, what orients us in the world, what nourishes our growth and gives rise to our most cherished values? Every human being must cope with these questions or suffer the anxious drift of avoiding them. But our challenges on the human pilgrimage are not solved once and for all by the unfolding discovery of our own faith, for we encounter other pilgrims of other

faiths. Dialogue means taking a vibrant interest in what motivates these other pilgrims, what orients them in the world, what nourishes their growth and gives rise to their most cherished values. To live together we need to know these things about one another and to risk the changes of heart and mind that may well come when we do.

There is a third aim of dialogue. Mutual understanding and mutual transformation are important, but in the world in which we live, the cooperative transformation of our global and local cultures is essential. It is surely one of the most challenging tasks of our time. Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Jews, Maoris and Christians have urgent work to do that can only be done together. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith so succinctly put it, “Our vision and our loyalties, as well as our aircraft, must circle the globe.”³³