

Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions*

Minneapolis, USA: Fortress Press, 1992. Paperback: 146 pp. including endnotes and index.

The place of Christianity among the religions of the world is an *au courant* subject in philosophy of religion. Many books have been dedicated to this topic, and it has also been accorded space in philosophy of religion textbooks and anthologies. It is a very important issue, since it bears directly on how Christians ought to comport themselves when interacting with members of other religions and on how members of other religions will view Christianity. The subject has other theoretical and practical implications as well.

A number of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion have championed the view sometimes referred to as «the pluralistic hypothesis.» John Hick has published a number of books advancing a neo-Kantian religious epistemology that supports this interpretation of religious pluralism.¹ According to Hick, religions are manifestations of the human reaction to the transcendent. These reactions are as much a product of the person having the ex-

perience as they are a product of the transcendent that is being experienced. Each religion, including Christianity, is a response to the transcendent, and every such response is molded by the categories and context of the person responding. Hick's proposal offers a theoretical basis for an explanation of the similarities and differences between religions. All religions share in being responses to the same transcendent reality, but their responses differ because of circumstantial differences in their memberships. According to this interpretation of religious pluralism, all (or at least most) religions enjoy approximately equal justification.

Other contemporary authors who have taken similar stances include Wilfred Cantwell Smith,² Frithjof Schuon,³ Leonard Swidler,⁴ and Paul Knitter.⁵ One thing that stands out as an interesting shared feature of all of these authors is that they all work within a broadly Christian tradition. They are Christians (in the broad sense) arguing that Christianity is not the only true religion.

Knitter's book, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, highlights this last aspect of the pluralistic hypothesis. Knitter argues that Christianity is similar to other major religions, and that Christians are not in a position to assert either the finality or the normativity of Jesus as the Christ.⁶ He closes his book with the moving promise that if the world's religions (Christianity included) will cooperate and dialogue with each other, «the central hopes and goals of all religions will come closer to being realized. Allah will be known and praised; Lord Krishna will act in the world; enlightenment will be fur-

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thered and deepened; God's kingdom will be understood and promoted.»⁷

As one would expect, there have been reactions from the right to the new pluralism. More conservative theologians and other Christian thinkers have rejected the suggestion that the world's religions are more or less on par with Christianity. Some of these have argued that non-Christian religions are false human creations and that only Christianity is divinely revealed and therefore true. Others have recognized the similarities between Christianity and many other religions, and have acknowledged that other religions have benefits to their adherents and have legitimate claims to truth, while still maintaining the importance and validity of the uniqueness of Christianity. This position can be seen as a moderate position lying between the pluralistic hypothesis and the more traditional Christian exclusivism.

One recent defender of this moderating position is Carl E. Braaten. Braaten is professor emeritus of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, the executive director of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, and founding editor of *dialog: A Journal of Theology*. He has authored many books, including *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (2003), *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (1998), *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (1990), and *Christian Dogmatics* (1984). He is no mean scholar.

In *No Other Gospel*, Braaten acknowledges both the growing positive reception of the pluralistic hypothesis and the validity of certain important considerations that have contributed to this reception.

He embraces these considerations as necessary to a balanced theology of religions. An implication of this is that there are also important considerations on the exclusivist side of the issue. Braaten embraces these as well, and the interest of his book lies in how he reconciles the two positions.

It must be stated that many pluralists acknowledge and embrace the doctrines and considerations that lead others to exclusivism, and many exclusivists include the arguments of the pluralists in their exclusivist solutions to the problem. In each case, what is at issue is how the various arguments are weighted and how they should be harmonized in a consistent theology of religions. Braaten makes it clear from the outset that his preference is for weighting the arguments towards the more theologically conservative side of the issue, «My preference is to put a big question mark to the pluralist position that holds either that the exclusive claim of the gospel can be attributed to the outdated cultural situation in which New Testament Christianity originated, or that we can maintain continuity with the identity and substance of the Christian faith without it, or that it can be written off as mere hyperbole of the heart.»⁸

However, one should not make the mistake of supposing that Braaten does not feel the weight of the other side of the argument. In particular, Braaten seems to find consequential the argument from the universal extent of God's plan of redemption, as expressed in Biblical passages such as Ephesians 1:8-10. He acknowledges that the soteriology proposed by traditional exclusivists is «inadequate to the task of realizing God's universal

goal of salvation»⁹ and results in a soteriology that is both «pessimistic» and «morally repugnant.»¹⁰ The problem that Braaten proposes to address is «how to conceive the attainment of the universal goal of salvation by means of God's particular revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.»¹¹

Braaten sharply criticizes the pluralistic proposals of the likes of Hick and Knitter, comparing them in one place to the Gnosticism that confronted early Christianity,¹² and in another place calling their Christology a new form of Arianism.¹³ He traces the history of the contemporary pluralistic hypothesis back to German philosophical theology, discussing the theories of Feuerbach,¹⁴ Troeltsch,¹⁵ and Bultmann,¹⁶ These thinkers preceded Hick, et. al., in interpreting Christianity as being historically relative like the other religions of the world. Braaten states that Hick's interpretation carries Troeltsch's relativistic interpretation of Christianity to its logical conclusion,¹⁷ collapsing «the unique revelation of God in Christ into the general experience of divine revelation in the non-Christian religions.»¹⁸ Braaten's proposal preserves the uniqueness of Christ while at the same time acknowledging the legitimacy of the human striving toward the transcendent that bears fruit in the world's religions.¹⁹

Braaten proposes that non-Christian religions «are looking toward union with the divine mystery that the Christian gospel announces is ultimately the same divine reality as that revealed in the person of Jesus.»²⁰ Part of this interpretation of the situation is the admission that Christianity, as a religion of human beings, is relative just as are other religions. Only God is absolute. The God that is absolute, how-

ever, is Jesus, recognized as such by Christians, unrecognized by non-Christians.

This proposal resembles other Christian interpretations of religions, such as those suggested by Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, and Heinz Schlette. The most significant difference between these other proposals and Braaten's lies in the area of salvation. According to Rahner, Tillich, and Schlette, adherents to religions other than Christianity can experience salvation based upon Christ's sacrifice and their own faith-response to God's general revelation (or something theoretically similar) regardless of the fact that their faith is not specifically placed in the person and work of Jesus. After an investigation of Barth's Christology and the particularist and universalist poles of Barth's soteriology, Braaten follows Barth in accepting universal reconciliation as a theoretical possibility, and even seems to find it appealing,²¹ but conscientiously refrains from committing to this view. He is reticent in this regard because the possibility of reprobation of the disobedient and the unbelieving cannot be positively ruled out.²² However, he concludes that, «The scale tilts decidedly toward the hope of universal reconciliation on account of (the victory of) Christ.» Because of Christ's victory, reprobation becomes an «impossible possibility.»²³

What distinguishes Braaten from Rahner, et. al, is Braaten's cautiousness in asserting that salvation extends to those who have not heard or accepted the Gospel. There is a greater contrast between Braaten and Rahner, et. al., and thinkers such as John Hick and Raimundo Panikkar, who argue that all (or most, many, some) religions are soteriologically equal. Braaten maintains that the

Christ-event is absolutely necessary in order for the provision of salvation, whether that salvation is communicated through Christian preaching of the Gospel or through some other means at God's disposal. While Braaten would grant that Christianity is a human religion similar to the other religions of humanity, and is not any more soteriologically efficacious than are other religions,²⁴ he unabashedly maintains that «outside of Christ there is no salvation.»²⁵ For Braaten, it is not Christianity, but rather Christ, that is unique.

An additional important distinction between Braaten and Hick, et. al., concerns the question of the uniqueness of Christ as Divine self-revelation. There are those who deny that non-Christian religions should be considered Divine revelation at all. Braaten argues that many leaders within Christianity have espoused the view that non-Christian religions reveal God. He specifically mentions Soderblom, Tillich, Althaus, Ratschow, Wingren, and Pannenberg (and also quotes Augustine and Luther in this context).²⁶ Furthermore, he finds support for this view in the Bible.²⁷ However, other theorists have gone beyond this modest admission and have argued that all revelations of God, including that in the person of Jesus, are equal. Braaten discusses one ancient and one contemporary theorist who espouse such a view: Nicholas of Cusa and John Hick. Although he finds their motivation charitable, he rejects their reasoning, arguing that it is allied to a «debilitating skepticism and vacuous relativism that break the very links of Christian identity....»²⁸ Braaten argues that God is revealed through other religions, and that Jesus is God's *final*, rather than *only*, self-rev-

elation.²⁹ Whether or not the revelation provided by non-Christian religions is sufficient for salvation is not clear, as was discussed in the preceding paragraphs. However, he specifically warns against the temptation to view all religions as variations of Christianity, pointing out that this view «co-opts» or minimizes what is unique in other religions.³⁰

Braaten rounds off his book with chapters on the Trinity as the model for Christian unity and mission, and the implications of theology for public life. He suggests that the Trinity is a more relational model for Christian unity than is a more strictly monotheistic conception of God, a model that values «relationship, reciprocity, and mutuality between members in a loving communion of equals.»³¹ This may be Braaten's way of indicating what he clearly views as a key distinction between Christianity and other monotheistic religions.

Braaten has provided a conservative approach to the problem of religious pluralism that is informed on the current discussion and positions of the issue, that attempts to treat the issue in a way that is sensitive to the philosophical, theological, and ethical issues involved, and that strives to be true to the core of the Christian faith. For this he must certainly be lauded. There are, however, a few criticisms that might be made of Braaten's book.

First, it is clear that in this book Braaten is writing for a Christian audience. He makes no attempt to craft a theory of religions that would be acceptable to or persuasive to members of diverse religions. His proposal, which is based squarely upon the presupposition of the truth of Christianity, is unlikely to be received by adherents of other religions.

His book might be of use to non-Christians as a way of understanding how Christians view non-Christian religions, but it will not speak to or for non-Christian readers. Furthermore, because Braaten makes no apologetic whatsoever in this book for the tradition in which he is working, his presentation is unlikely to persuade any who are not already within that tradition. In response to this Braaten could rightly reply that apologetics lies outside the scope of this particular book. However, since the book is rather short, a short explanation of why this tradition is worth expending 146 pages on would not be impossible. In the context of the truth of Christianity vis-à-vis the truth of other religions, a chapter on the justification of the tradition might be apropos.

Similarly, the latter chapters of the book presume a great deal of empathy with Lutheran theology on the part of the reader, without any apologetic on behalf of this particular stream of thought within the broad river of Christianity. Sometimes Braaten presents little argument for his suggestions other than an appeal to the plausibility of Lutheran theology. This seems unfortunate. While Braaten's proposals may well appeal to Christians from many denominational backgrounds, at times the weight of his arguments will only be felt by those within Lutheran circles. His book could effectively minister to a much larger audience if he would utilize arguments that are less narrowly denominational. I believe such arguments exist.

What makes the current «pluralistic hypothesis» so broadly appealing in intellectual circles is, perhaps, its neo-Kantian philosophical foundation. This neo-Kantianism is most vividly clear in the writings

of John Hick. Perhaps it is not coincidental that Hick is the foremost spokesman of this position. If Braaten objects to the pluralistic hypothesis, one would expect him to have a position on the philosophy that underlies it. Braaten does not address this issue in his book.

Perhaps the most serious criticism that can be leveled against Braaten's book is the lack of Bible exegesis. It seems that, for Braaten and his tradition, the issues addressed in this book must ultimately be settled by careful exegesis of Biblical texts. The Bible is the ultimate arbiter in the tradition to which Braaten is writing. It is surprising, therefore, that Braaten does not provide more discussion of relevant Biblical texts. The philosophical style of writing that characterizes this book is a pleasure to read, but in fidelity to the tradition in which Braaten is working, it should really serve as an introduction to discussions centered on exegetically oriented theology.

These several criticisms aside, Braaten's book is a welcome contribution to the issue. Contributions from a variety of perspectives are essential to the refining of the discussion of the issue. Braaten's contribution is a conservatively Christian, well-informed piece of scholarship that exemplifies sensitivity to other religions while attempting to maintain fidelity to the Christ-God of traditional Christianity.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*. London: Macmillan Press, 1973. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*. New York: The New American Library, 1965.

³ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Wheton, Il: Quest/Theosophical Publishing House, 1984.

⁴ Leodanrd Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.

⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985.

⁶ Knitter, 145-204, 230-1. Knitter does not argue that Jesus is neither final nor normative, and states that it may one day be discovered that he is. What he argues is that we are not currently in a position to know whether or not Jesus is final and/or normative.

⁷ Knitter, 131.

⁸ Braaten 2

⁹ Braaten 3

¹⁰ Braaten 3

¹¹ Braaten 3

¹² Braaten 13

¹³ Braaten 21

¹⁴ Braaten 23

¹⁵ Braaten 31ff

¹⁶ Braaten 38

¹⁷ Braaten 38. Braaten does criticize Hick's view as lacking the «fullness and complexity of Troeltsch's vision,» 39.

¹⁸ Braaten 46

¹⁹ Braaten 47-48, 54ff

²⁰ Braaten 47; see also 75ff

²¹ «If we take into account God's love, we know he would have all to be saved. If we reckon with his freedom, we know he has the power to save whomsoever he pleases. This does not lead to a dogmatic universalism; but it does mean that we leave open the possibility that, within the power of God's freedom and love, all people may indeed be saved in the end.» Braaten 61.

²² Braaten 61, 80

²³ Braaten 61. Braaten makes the very contemporary admission that his position «waffles» between the two poles of Christian soteriology, and concludes «this waffling implies that the salvation of those who do not believe in Christ in this lifetime is ultimately a mystery which (sic) we cannot unveil by speculation.» Braaten 80-81

²⁴ Braaten 75-76

²⁵ Braaten 78, 91

²⁶ Braaten 67-68

²⁷ Braaten 69-70

²⁸ Braaten 65-67

²⁹ Braaten 67ff

³⁰ Braaten 98

³¹ Braaten 116