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Review: Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment

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discussion of the "big questions," and publication of the second edition of this important work reminds us again of Hick's enormous influence upon religious studies and philosophy of religion. One need not be persuaded by his pluralistic hypothesis to appreciate his impact in shaping the discussions over religious diversity.

REVIEWED BY HAROLD NETLAND
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Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment. Edited by David W. Baker. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004. 176 pages. $12.99.

Biblical Faith and Other Religions is, as the subtitle states, an evangelical consideration of what is often called "the problem of religions pluralism." It is a multiauthor work, the contents of which are a result of the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto in 2002. The theme of that year's conference was "Evangelical Christianity and Other Religions." The editors and contributors to the volume are Evangelical Christians who are highly regarded in their fields. The contributors address the relationship of Evangelical and biblical Christianity to other religions. This is done in essays by Harold Netland on "Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth," Daniel Block on "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," Gregory Beale on "Other Religions in New Testament Theology," Richard Plantinga on "God so Loved the World: Theological Reflections on Religious Plurality in the History of Christianity," Tite Tiénou on "Biblical Faith and Traditional Folk Religions," and J. Dudley Woodberry on "Biblical Faith and Islam."

David Howard, who was program chair for the aforementioned annual meeting, introduces the other essays by explaining the need, purpose, plan, and development of this volume. According to Howard, a central motive for the adopted theme of the 2002 conference, the increase of religious pluralism and the attendant need for a Christian theology of religions, is a driving force behind the book. The essays are complimentary steps on the path to such a theology.

Harold Netland's philosophical contribution on religious pluralism and truth focuses on the epistemological aspects of the problem of such pluralism. He points out that the phrase "religious pluralism" can be used in at least two ways: it can refer to the fact of religious diversity, or it can refer to a theory on the nature of religions as equally legitimate responses to the divine (à la John Hick). He briefly describes the shift from a natural theology apologetic to experiential and Reformed epistemology justifications of Christian belief. Parallel to this is a move away from focusing on the epistemic obligation of Christian belief towards attempts to show that Christian belief is epistemi-

cally permissible. He poses a number of questions that these changes raise with regards to Christian normativity and the validity of other religions.

Netland proceeds to discuss specific philosophical contributions to the discussion. He describes key aspects of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, summarizes William Alston's theory of the *prima facie* justification of most religious practices, and reviews Alvin Plantinga's contention that religious belief can be properly basic. He discusses the apparent implication that non-Christian religious belief could also be properly basic, and points out that these three lines of philosophical reflection all seem to lead to an attitude of "moderate skepticism and tentativeness" towards Christian belief.

Netland responds to this trend in philosophy of religion by posing a question that seems to side epistemologically with religious exclusivism: "Given pervasive religious diversity and disagreement, why should one accept the Christian worldview as true rather than other alternatives?" He has already bluntly stated that religious pluralism (in the second sense) is incoherent. Now he takes up Ninian Smart's call for a "soft natural theology," exhorting his readers (hearers) to persist in the defense of Christianity as the most rationally supported religion and of the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ. Such an approach must be modest in its expectations, using inductive reasoning rather than the deduction characteristic of traditional apologetic arguments. He warns of an exclusivism given to insensitivity and intolerance, but he concludes that only the Christian gospel is true and that there are "cogent reasons" to view it as such.

Daniel Block's essay on the Old Testament contribution to the question of other religions examines the subject under three headings: Yahwistic parallels to pagan religious ideas and practices, Yahwistic exploitation of pagan religious ideas and practices, and Yahwistic repudiation of pagan religious ideas and practices. He argues that although the Old Testament consistently opposes "other expressions of faith," there are common denominators between Yahwism and the other religions of the ancient near east, some of which may have been adopted by Yahwism.

Block discusses a number of features of ancient near eastern religions that seem to have been adopted by Yahwists, and theorizes that they could have originated in divine revelation that became garbled in the pagan religions, but which were restored to their original form in Yahwism through the work of the Holy Spirit. He also considers examples of Yahweh utilizing pagan beliefs, modes of expression, practices, and practitioners to bring about his desired ends. He argues that while Yahweh reserves the right to use such pagan elements, he does so without affirming their veracity. Finally, he reflects on a variety of forms of Old Testament hostility towards idolatry. Block states that the Old Testament prohibition of the worship of other gods by Israelites is clear, but poses the salient question, "Does the Old Testament contemplate two ways to relationship with God, one way for the Israelites and another way for non-Israelites?" After an interesting discussion of this issue, his (somewhat oblique) conclusion is that it does not, a conclusion rooted in his examination of overt idolatry in the Old Testament. It would be interesting to consider whether the same arguments can be used to answer a similar question regarding the veracity and soteriological efficacy of religions of the twenty-first century that do not involve such (overt) idolatry.

Gregory Beale's contribution on other religions in New Testament theology is an investigation into New Testament allusions to pagan religions or non-Christian philosophies that are combined with references to Old Testament passages that treat similar religions and/or philosophies. He discusses at length Paul's speech on Mars' Hill, and more briefly the letter to Thyatira in the book of Revelation, Revelation 1:4 ("the one who is and who was and who is coming"), the use of the "Alpha and Omega" ascription in the book of Revelation, and Revelation 1:19 ("what you have seen, and what is and what is about to come to pass"). He argues that when New Testament authors consider pagan religious and philosophical elements, they turn to Old Testament sources that are similar to the pagan claims, and in doing this, show that the divine attributes ascribed to pagan deities are true only of the God who has revealed himself in Christ. This leads him to the conclusion that, if we are to follow the example of the New Testament writers in responding to other religions, we must "evaluate the primary claims of the non-Christian religion or philosophy that is confronting us, and then go to those parts of the Bible that most specifically speak to those claims." Beale seems to assume that pagan references to deity are references to a false god rather than references to the true God incorrectly understood (see especially page 88). It would be both interesting and relevant to see this position substantiated rather than presumed.

Richard Plantinga's contribution on attitudes towards the situation of religious pluralism throughout the history of Christianity is in effect an extremely succinct summary of the book he edited, *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). As one would expect from Plantinga, it is a very philosophically informed piece of historical theology. He discusses two approaches to non-Christian religions that were prominent in the centuries before Christianity became a dominant religion: mediation and criticism. Mediators saw some continuity between pagan antiquity and Christian thought. Examples of this approach include Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. Critics viewed pagan thought as heresy and emphasized the discontinuity between pagan thought and Christianity. Tertullian is an example of this approach, while Augustine is said to take an intermediate position. From the period in which Christianity was a dominant religion, Plantinga discusses Aquinas, portraying him as allowing that unbelievers have truths of reason but lack the needed truths of revelation.

From the post-Christian period Plantinga discusses a much wider range of thinkers: Nicolas of Cusa, Luther, Calvin, the Council of Trent, Jean Bodin, Descartes, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Lessing, Kant, Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, Rahner, Vatican II, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Hick. Among these thinkers, opinions about the soteriological situation of adherents of non-Christian religions range from exclusivism through inclusivism and pluralism to universalism. Plantinga states that pluralism is not an option for orthodox Christianity because it denies the necessity of belief in the Trinity and compromises the doctrine of Christ. He also rules out universalism on the grounds that "significant biblical and theological evidence counts against it." Hence, exclusivism and inclusivism are the viable options for orthodox Christians.

Plantinga strives for balance in his assessment of the situation of the adherents of other religions. He takes into account both the universal and the particular soteriological indicators in the scriptures, the evidence of both continuity and discontinuity in the history of religions, and the similarities and dissimilarities between Christian and non-Christian faith and practice. These considerations lead him to a nuanced position on the problem of religious pluralism. With regards to the question of revelation, he concludes that at one level Christians should be inclusivists, recognizing that general revelation is available to non-Christians as well as Christians, though Christians have the additional benefit of special revelation, which affords them greater knowledge of God. In answer to the question of salvation, though, he concludes that orthodox Christians should be rigorously exclusivist, while moderating this position by stating that, "although Christ is the sole *means* of salvation, this truth does not necessarily entail that the *scope* of salvation must be exceedingly narrow; Christians have grounds, in fact, for hoping that the scope of salvation may be lovingly and gracefully expansive." This caveat makes one wonder if Plantinga's "rigorous exclusivism" is in actuality closer to inclusivism than it is to exclusivism as Plantinga has described these positions.

Tite Tiénou's contribution focuses on African folk religions. Its tone is very positive: Tiénou clearly finds value in the indigenous religions of his natal continent. He argues that all theologians need to study other religions in order to avoid Christian provincialism. However, he is also aware of the danger that African folk religions pose to African Christians, and grants that at the heart of folk religion lies an anthropocentrism that is at odds with biblical Christianity. The upshot of his short chapter seems to be that Christians (and especially Christian theologians) should study folk religions in order to avoid provincialism, to avoid syncretism, and to better present the gospel to the practitioners of folk religion.

Dudley Woodberry's contribution on Islam addresses the variety of attitudes, beliefs, and practices within Islam, and stresses the need to appreciate this diversity when considering Islam within the context of the issue of religious pluralism. He argues that, at one level, Christians and Muslims do worship the same God, the One Creator God, the only Supreme Being, though they disagree on some of the things that they predicate to him. On another level, he argues that Muslims have given the glory that is due to Christ to Muhammad. Furthermore, the Muslim understanding of the human plight differs significantly from that of orthodox Christianity: the Qur'an views human nature as good or at least neutral, while the Bible depicts it is fallen. Therefore according to Islam humanity is not in need of a savior, but rather has the ability to follow the law and achieve its own destiny through works. Nonetheless, there are places where the Qur'an points out the carnal side of humanity and the need for Allah's mercy. Woodberry discusses other areas of similarity and difference between Islam and Christianity. He concludes that while Islam has many truths, it is lacking the most central truth, the truth of the person and work Jesus Christ. He closes by asserting that Christians must use the points of agreement between Christianity and Islam as opportunities to share with Muslims those central truths that Islam is lacking.

David Howard, who authored the introductory essay to this volume, closes his essay with the assurance that "the affirmation of the truth of the Christian message, which is made explicitly in the first essay, is to be found in all the essays in one form or another . . . each author believes passionately in the truth of the Christian message and has devoted his life to it." This is in fact the case. The book is an evangelical interaction with a variety of facets of the issue of religious pluralism. It is not a systematic treatment of the issue, but it is a rich and thought-provoking collection of essays that is well worth reading. It will be of use to theologians, Christian philosophers, missiologists, pastors, students, and anyone who, out of love for the multitudes of adherents of other religions, is interested in probing the question of how God's plan of salvation relates to those who have not accepted the Christian message.

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The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus. By Gary Habermas and Michael R. Licona. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004. 351 pages. $19.99.

Habermas and Licona have compiled many years of research in this volume to provide the Christian community with a thorough defense of the resurrection of Jesus that is at once both scholarly and accessible to the lay apologist. The book is, in fact, a handbook for training Christians in presenting the evidence for the Resurrection to sincere inquirers.