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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to address religious pluralism as a belief while also examining multiple factors that have been a catalyst for the Pluralism Project at Harvard University becoming part of American culture. The theology behind and ideology of the Pluralism Project will be examined along with the writings of Diana Eck, the founder of the Pluralism Project. Outwardly, the Pluralism Project and the works of Eck give the impression of an impartial attempt to educate people on the growing religious diversity found within the United States. However, it will be shown that both the Pluralism Project and the efforts of Eck are subversive to Christian orthodoxy.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism continues to be a growing discussion among philosophers, theologians, sociologists, politicians, teachers, clergy, and the common public. It has permeated almost all facets of society and its effects can be seen in the government, civic institutions, schools, and churches. Much of the pluralism debate in America can be attributed to modern immigration, which has brought with it new religious beliefs that must be reconciled with the American ideal of religious freedom.¹ The United States' religiously pluralistic society has led many to question which religion is the correct one or whether all religions are equal.² Does one religion contain absolute truth? In addition, are different religions culturally determined expressions that ultimately worship the same God?

The phrase "religious pluralism" is generally used in two different ways, resulting in two different meanings. First, is the use of religious pluralism as a reality, a multiplicity of religious practice and belief, and has been in existence for thousands of years. Religious pluralism, defined as a multiplicity of religions, has been part of the American mindset since its formation. However, in the past, it was of a Christian nature, a plurality of Christian religions, not a pluralism that consisted of multiple world religions.³ As America became more religiously diverse, pluralism as a belief has become more prominent.

¹ Eck's *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* expands on this topic.

² See Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) and Tennent, Timothy C. *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

³ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

The other use of religious pluralism embraces a theological view, a religious philosophy, and is used as a societal ideology. Liberal academics have promulgated religious pluralism and governmental institutions have embraced religious pluralism. Pluralism is enforced as a politically correct “ideology” that one must embrace to be accepted in progressive quarters of the western world. Paul Knitter remarks, “One of the salient features of the postmodern consciousness that has pervaded much of Europe and North America is its affirmation of, and its delight in, pluralism and diversity.”⁴ This type of religious pluralism maintains that the multiplicity of religions is a cultural response to a supreme reality.⁵ Each religion is equally true, equally salvific, and no one religion can claim absolute truth over any other. Simply, there can be no right religion or wrong religion; all religions help man experience the divine.

Due to America’s freedom of religion and growing globalization, America is now home to a multitude of thriving religions. According to Eck, Harvard professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, states, “nowhere” on the globe “is the sheer range of religious faith as wide as it is today in the United States,”⁶ making America the ideal platform for the Pluralism Project. Contributing factors include freedom of religion, U.S. immigration policies, and modern liberal scholarship, more specifically, liberal scholarship that has been deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy and religion. The focus of this paper is to address religious pluralism as a belief along with examining multiple factors that have been a catalyst for the Pluralism Project to become part of American culture. The theology behind and ideology of the Pluralism Project

⁴ Paul Knitter, “Pluralism and Oppression: Dialogue between the Many Religions and the Many Poor,” in *The Community of Religions: Voices and Images of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*, eds. Wayne Teasdale and George Cairns (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Co., 1999), 199.

⁵ See Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. Reference footnote 72 regarding the non-Christian religion populations of the United States.

will be examined along with the writings of the Diana Eck founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Outwardly, the Pluralism Project and the works of Eck give the impression of an impartial attempt to educate people on the growing religious diversity found within America. However, it will be shown that the Pluralism Project and the efforts of Eck are subversive to Christian orthodoxy.

Three Views within the Theology of Religions

There are three main views within the Christian theology of religions.⁷ These views are exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.⁸ It is difficult to accurately categorize the different views held in regard to how Christians are to respond to non-Christian religions and salvation, however, each position is an attempt to describe how other religions relate to Christianity; moreover, each also attempts to define the nature of God and how a person obtains salvation.

Exclusivism

Exclusivism is the belief that Jesus Christ is the only savior for all of mankind.⁹ Netland states that the use of “exclusivism” did not come from those who held the view its denotation describes, rather it was “introduced...by those who rejected this view and wished to cast it in a

⁷ These three views are the most commonly discussed. There are other views within the theology of religions, for example, Paul Knitter proposes four views or “models”: Replacement model, Fulfillment model, Mutuality model, and Acceptance model. Knitter attempts to redefine and renames exclusivism (replacement), inclusivism (fulfillment), pluralism (mutuality), and he creates a new model called Acceptance in *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002). See also Pinnock’s use of Particularism in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 19-24, 213-270.

⁸ See Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 11-25. See also Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 46-54. See also *Harold Netland, Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), chapter 1. See also *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), Introduction.

⁹ Pinnock makes an argument for particularism in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 19-24, 213-270.

negative light.”¹⁰ This view maintains that, in order to receive salvation, a person has to make a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the Bible is considered God’s revelation to man and establishes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, proclaiming that He is the only way to salvation. The exclusivist position is based on multiple passages found in the New Testament where salvation is obtained solely through Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16-18; Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12, 16:31; Rom. 10:9, ESV). Additionally, most exclusivists maintain that some truth may be found in different religions, but what exclusivists “dispute is the eternal destiny of the adherents of these religions.”¹¹ This is also the historically orthodox view within Christianity.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism maintains that no one can be saved apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ.¹² Like exclusivists, they also hold that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is needed for mankind to receive salvation. Yet, inclusivists do not agree with exclusivists, instead believing a person does not need to make a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ as savior.¹³ They

¹⁰ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 46. Use of the term exclusivism has become a derogatory term due to how pluralists describe it.

¹¹ Michael Jones “Pluralism” in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, eds. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 393.

¹² An example of an inclusivist argument can be found with Sir Norman Anderson. He believes that the role of Jesus Christ in history was “ultimately...cosmic in its effects” and that it is the final or “finished salvation” to which nothing can be added. This is true, however, according to Anderson “it is far from synonymous with “Christendom”, for it is God’s way of salvation for the whole world.” Anderson is implying that the salvational work of Jesus Christ is not something that requires a conscious decision to confess “Jesus is Lord” as Romans 10:9 states but that Christ’s work on the cross is the final salvation that possibly allows all to be saved whether one confesses “Jesus is Lord” or not. This can further be seen when Anderson mentions several exclusivist type verses (Mt. 11:27, John 14:6, 1 John 2:23) and states that they should be viewed instead “that no-one can come to know God *as Father* except through Christ the Son, rather than that no-one can come to know God at all except through him.” Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 142.

¹³ Nash states “Inclusivists obviously believe the salvation of unevangelized people depends on how they respond to the light they have.” Nash, 124. See also Nash’s explanation between the “ontological necessity” of Jesus Christ’s redemptive work and the claim that Jesus’ work is “epistemologically necessary,” 23.

believe it generally does not matter which religion a person is practicing and one does not even need to know about Jesus Christ in order to be a recipient of his redemptive work.¹⁴ In most cases, the position of inclusivism requires sincere practice of one's own religion and the belief that, ultimately, it is by faith that someone is saved. For example, a person who sincerely follows the teachings of Mohammad will be saved, unknowingly, by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Inclusivists such as Pinnock argue that knowledge of Jesus Christ is not needed, but rather a faith that allows one to please God.¹⁶ In addition, inclusivists do not accept the doctrine of universalism since it lacks "biblical support" and does not give "justice to the biblical teaching of hell."¹⁷ It appears that inclusivism is a departure from biblical faith.¹⁸ For example, before sending out the twelve disciples Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."¹⁹ Moreover, there are other scriptures such as Romans

¹⁴ Ibid., 24, 109-112.

¹⁵ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 109-112.

¹⁶ Ibid., 124-125. See also Charles Pinnock's "An Inclusivist View" in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 95-148.

¹⁷ Nash, 115.

¹⁸ Ibid., 117-175.

¹⁹ Matthew 10:32-33.

10:9-11,1 John 2:23, 4:15, stating one must acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God.²⁰

Therefore, according to these scriptures “to disown Christ is to be disowned by Christ.”²¹

Pluralism

The pluralist position maintains that salvation can be attained through almost any practiced religion.²² In contrast to the exclusivist view, which states that all truth is found in Jesus Christ, pluralists believe truth cannot be exclusive to one savior, religion, or people group, but is shared among most people and religious groups. According to pluralistic theology, “Christians can hold that Jesus is unique and normative for them, they cannot claim that Jesus is unique and normative in an objective or universal sense. Jesus may be the savior for Christians, but he is not the one Savior for all peoples.”²³ In most cases, pluralism is depicted as “more benign, enlightened and tolerant” than both exclusivism and inclusivism.²⁴

MOVEMENTS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FORMATION OF THE PLURALISM PROJECT

As recently as forty years ago, pluralism was a minor fringe movement; most Americans would not have viewed it as a credible religious idea. However, historical forces were already at work, even then, that were setting the stage for the Pluralism Project to become mainstream.

This section will examine two meetings that have had a significant impact on the formation and

²⁰ Other supporting verses are Matt. 11:27, John 14:6-7, Acts 4:12, Phil. 2:10-11.

²¹ Tremper Longman III, and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 9 (Matthew-Mark). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 297.

²² Nash, 22 .

²³ Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 53.

²⁴ Daniel Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good New: A Reformed ‘Subversive Fulfillment’ Interpretation of Other Religions” in *Only One Way?: Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (London, SCM Press, 2011), 96.

promulgation of religious pluralism, the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions and the Vatican Council II.

1893 Parliament of the World's Religions

The 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions made significant attempts to change the predominately Christianity-centered worldview. Many of the Parliaments lectures defended the ideology of religious pluralism by arguing that all religions should share in equal rights and status.²⁵ The Parliament of World Religions was the “first-of-its-kind event in the history of the world.”²⁶ Moreover, according to Diana Eck, the modern-day interfaith movement can find its beginnings in the 1893 Parliament of World Religions.²⁷ Though this concept came too early for the broad acceptance of such an idea, it was the beginning of a dynamic and intentional approach to make religious pluralism a reality for those who had never considered such concepts; this event would change the ideological and religious landscape of the United States in the years to come.²⁸

At the Parliament, representatives from the different sects of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and one Anglo-American convert to Islam were in attendance, in addition to representatives from the religions of Spiritualism and Christian Science. Many liberal pastors, scholars, and representatives from various world religions viewed the World's Parliament of

²⁵ See John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular History* 2 vol.; also Walter R. Houghton, ed., *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions* for a comprehensive collection of the speeches given.

²⁶ Richard Hughes Seager, ed., *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions*, 1983, 8.

²⁷ Diana Eck, in *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, Richard Hughes Seager, ed., xv.

²⁸ Hans Küng, and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 85.

Religions as an opportunity to find and demonstrate the common ground between each of the world religions. One major catalyst in the formation of the World's Parliament of Religions was a Chicago lawyer named Charles Carroll Bonney; Bonney was part of the Church of the New Jerusalem, also known as Swedenborgianism.²⁹ While planning for the World's Parliament of Religions, Bonney, in a report to the General Committee, tasked the Parliament with an important mission. In front of the world stage the Parliament was "to unite all Religion against all irreligion...to present to the world...the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of religious life," and the world religions should encourage one another with "their common aims and common grounds."³⁰ Bonney possibly foresaw the growing trend toward religious pluralism when he wrote that the Parliament would help strengthen "the coming unity of mankind, in the service of God and of man."³¹ Moreover, at that time, globalization was an emerging reality that would later thrust religious pluralism to the forefront of thinking for many academics and clergy.

Vatican Council II

The second meeting to have a significant effect on the trajectory of religious pluralism is the Vatican Council II. The concluding documents of the council articulated the inclusivist position and ultimately helped accelerate pluralist theology. According to Karl Rahner, a prominent liberal German Catholic theologian, the council had such an impact on modern

²⁹ Swedenborgianism is named after its intellectual founder Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Swedenborgianism denies the doctrine of the trinity, the deity of the Holy Spirit and the vicarious atonement. The devil is not a being but is symbolic of human evil. In addition, Swedenborg maintained that God did not inspire the book of Acts and the Epistles. Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985) 628-641.

³⁰ Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

theology that it began an observable third epoch in Church history.³² Rahner is considered to be “one of the most influential figures at Vatican II” due to his work on the theory of the “anonymous Christian.”³³ His theory suggests that a person can be considered an “anonymous Christian” and be saved without any exposure to the gospel. According to D’Costa, the term “anonymous Christian” refers to “a non-Christian who gains salvation through faith, hope, and love by the grace of Christ, mediated however imperfectly through his or her own religion, which thereby points towards its historical fulfillment in Christ and his Church.”³⁴

On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced the formation of a general council that would begin meeting three years later in 1962. The council convened four times during the fall for a period of approximately ten weeks from 1962 to 1965. In the end, the council produced sixteen documents that perpetually changed the future of theology. One document in particular, *Nostra Aetate*, otherwise known as On Non-Christian Religions, addressed the rising issues of how the Church should respond specifically to Jews and other non-Christian religions. To some degree the decree addresses the pressing topic of globalization and how mankind is “drawing more closely together” as well as the reevaluation of the older, traditional teaching of “outside the Church there is no salvation” (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).³⁵

³² <http://tirprogram.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Rahner-Reflects-on-Vatican-Two1.pdf> (accessed Sept. 3, 2014). According to Rahner, Jewish Christianity was the first, short epoch. The second epoch, “that of Hellenism and of European culture and civilization began with preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul to the Gentiles and came to a close with Vatican II.” The third epoch is the epoch “of the world church” John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13.

³³ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 43.

³⁴ Nash, 110-111.

³⁵ Vatican II, Vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, *Nostra Aetate*, 738. The document actually states, “In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship

Ultimately, the council concluded that the Catholic Church could no longer ignore or reject “what is true and holy” in any of the non-Christian religions found throughout the world.³⁶ In addition, the *Nostra Aetate* states that the Catholic Church “has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines that, although differing in many ways from her own, nevertheless often reflect the ray of the truth that enlightens all human beings.”³⁷ The Vatican II document, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), plainly asserts that one does not need to hear and accept the gospel of Christ in order to obtain salvation. In the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church it states that people of non-Christian religions ultimately “can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”³⁸

Vatican II demonstrated a significant shift in historical, orthodox thinking since the first Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Furthermore, approximately 100 years before Vatican II, Pope Pius IX issued the document known as *The Papal Syllabus of Errors (Syllabus Errorum)*, which rejected similar ideas that were later embraced in the documents of Vatican II.³⁹ Vatican II

between different people are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions.”

³⁶ Ibid., 730.

³⁷ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened At Vatican II*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 308.

³⁸ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, 345, par.16

³⁹ Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. II*, 217. Pope Pius IX cites multiple church letters that condemn the following statements: 15. Every man is free to embrace and profess the religion he shall believe true, guided by the light of reason. 16. Men may in any religion find the way of eternal salvation, and obtain salvation. 17. We may entertain at least a well-founded hope for the eternal salvation of all those who are in no manner in the true Church of Christ.

acknowledged that knowledge of God might be found outside the Christian church, a notion that is also seen in the Bible; nevertheless, Christianity holds to a distinct understanding of God. The Bible gives clear evidence that a person may know about God yet not be saved.⁴⁰

Between the World Parliament of Religions and Vatican Council II, there is an observable pluralistic progression that has taken place over the past one hundred years. The World Parliament of Religions was the consummation of a century of growing awareness that other faiths are present in the world and the West needed to hear from them. The Parliament was a catalyst in forging the new reality of religious pluralism and for many the concept of religious pluralism was being addressed for the first time. Discussions and lectures given were circulated throughout the academic, religious, and public communities. This event also helped propel the concept of religious pluralism as a viable option not only for academics and religious leaders, but also for the masses. Likewise, Vatican Council II was a progressive step forward from the efforts of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. It deconstructed the traditional Catholic doctrine of salvation being found solely inside the Church and built a new doctrine of inclusivism and pluralism. Due to the pressing effects of globalization and the frequent encounters with people of non-Christian religions, the council attempted to address these concerns by articulating the verbiage religious pluralists would use to expand the theology and ideology of religious pluralism.

John Hick's Theory of Religious Pluralism

John Hick (1922-2012) is considered by many to be one of the most influential modern philosophers of religion.⁴¹ He was a religious pluralist who diligently argued against the

⁴⁰ Matt. 7:21-23

⁴¹ In regard to Hick's work *An Interpretation of Religion*, Netland states it "is without question the most

traditional beliefs held by orthodox Christians, especially evangelical Christians, and ardently defended his hypothesis of religious pluralism.⁴² Hick's hypothesis is instrumental to the practice and beliefs of religious pluralism since it systematically articulated pluralist concepts. Examining some of his basic beliefs helps to better understand the nature of religious pluralism and how his influence is intertwined in the modern interpretation of pluralism.

Hick's hypothesis of religious pluralism maintains that God exists; however, in his terms the Christian understanding of God is replaced with a broader understanding called the "Real." Hick taught that the multitude of religions were culturally different ways to try to understand and grasp the incomprehensible Real. Hick writes, "The pluralistic hypothesis is not a new religion seeking to supplant the existing religions. It is a philosophical interpretation of the global religious situation."⁴³ He proposes that a Christian who embraces the hypothesis of religious pluralism will find that he is no longer bound to an "artificially restricted vision," but will find himself with "a greater intellectual honesty and realism and a more mature Christian faith."⁴⁴ Simply, Hick believed every world religion ultimately worships the same God, or the Real; this God is just known by different names.⁴⁵ Therefore, according to Hick's theory, all world religions are equally salvific. Hick's own definition of religious pluralism is as follows:

sophisticated and rigorous model for a genuinely pluralistic understanding of the religions, and it has been enormously influential in religious studies and philosophy of religion" Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 53.

⁴² Hick has written a multitude of books regarding the subject of religious pluralism. Some examples are *God Has Many Names*, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, and *A Christian Theology of Religions*.

⁴³ John Hick, "A Pluralist View" in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁵ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 66.

And by ‘pluralism’ I mean the view- which I advocate - that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the different cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality – centeredness is manifestly taking place.⁴⁶

Salvation, according to Hick, would be better defined as “actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centered in God and manifested in the “fruit of the Spirit.”⁴⁷ He concludes that if one accepts his definition and understanding of salvation, “then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all of the world religions – and taking place, so far as we can tell, to more or less the same extent.”⁴⁸

Hick argues that each religion should not be evaluated merely on the truth of its doctrines or teachings because they are most likely flawed by culturally driven perceptions attempting to comprehend the Real, which is beyond one’s comprehension.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, according to historical, orthodox Christianity, Hick errs too far on the side of the unknowability of God. He completely rejects the historical, orthodox, and biblical view that God has revealed himself through the Scriptures and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Even though Hick presses the issue of the unknowability of God, he has much to say about the Real and humanity’s understanding of the Real. Yet the Bible teaches God has revealed himself universally (Rom. 1:18), and, with a

⁴⁶ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 91.

⁴⁷ Hick, “A Pluralist View” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁹ Hick uses Kant and the concept that religion is human perceived, a phenomenon. *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 47.

faith in Jesus Christ, God will give to each person “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” (Eph. 1:17).⁵⁰

In pursuit of his new religious paradigm, Hick declared what he called, “A Copernican revolution from a Christianity-centered to a God-centered picture of the universe of faiths seems to be demanded by the facts of human religious experience.”⁵¹ This means that one must depart from a Biblical understanding of God and embrace the idea that all religions are designed to “serve and revolve around him [the Real].”⁵² Hick also writes, “All who are open to the divine influence, within whatever human tradition, have an equal opportunity of undergoing the salvific transformation.”⁵³ Hick does not want one world religion to be formed from his theory “but a situation in which the different traditions no longer see themselves and each other as rival ideological communities.”⁵⁴ By adhering to Hick’s hypothesis of religious pluralism, one must ultimately reject any exclusivistic truth claims of his own religion and yield to the fact that it is more of a symbolic attempt to make sense of the things of God, or, the Real. Simply, Hick’s theory of religious pluralism has severe consequences. For example, if all religions are equally

⁵⁰ See also Col. 1:9, John 17:3, Gal. 4:8-9, Eph. 3:19, Col. 2:2, Phil. 1:9-11.

⁵¹ Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 148.

⁵² Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 36.

⁵³ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 196. His soteriology is an all-encompassing universalism.

⁵⁴ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 58.

salvific, then any religion that is traditionally exclusivistic such as Christianity or Islam must depart from many of its theological beliefs.⁵⁵

According to Eck, Hick's image of a Copernican revolution is good, but not completely satisfactory, since it is now known that our solar system is one of many.⁵⁶ She believes that Hick's view "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."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Eck reads too much into Hick's Copernican analogy. He was not literally saying that the Sun is the center of the universe and he was well aware there are multiple solar systems. Hick's argument is that in the theology of religions, one should shift from "a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered model" to a divine Reality model. Eck is much like Hick in that she uses language that ultimately demonstrates that religion is a culturally derived expression of God.

Egotism

Pluralists accuse Christians of egotism, of believing they are "morally and spiritually superior to all others."⁵⁸ However, in today's global, highly interconnected economy, this has

⁵⁵ It is clear that beliefs, doctrine and creeds were important to the founders of the many world religions. For example, in the Old Testament, God is constantly reminding or reprimanding the Israelites for their idol worship. The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus rejected the legalism of the religious people of his time. Jesus consistently announced that the Kingdom of God had come to earth and faith in him was required for salvation. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism believed that he had been the recipient of true religion. Siddhartha Gautama, founder of Buddhism rejected the foundational Hindu doctrine of atman and instead focused on the concept of anatman. Furthermore, Muhammad rejected the polytheism of his day, the deity of Christ, and Jesus' death by crucifixion.

⁵⁶ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, 190; Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 18-19; Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1973).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁸ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 198.

become less of an issue because of the “modern reading of history” and the “experience of meeting people of other faiths.”⁵⁹ Both Hick and Eck rely heavily on one’s experiences and encounters with people of other faiths to substantiate the theory of religious pluralism.⁶⁰

This experientially based theory attracts many people since they can observe their surroundings and make an assumption based on observable data. Pluralists argue that in light of the world’s modern interconnectedness, it is foolishness to think that one religion such as Christianity could claim absolute truth over all other religions. The pluralist challenges one to examine the life of the Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, Sikh, or any other religious person and conclude through observation that they are not generally, according to Hick, any “less loving in family and society, less caring for their neighbors, less honest and truthful, less good citizens, less devoted in their faith, than are our Christian fellow citizens in general.”⁶¹ This observation may be true in general. However, just because someone is truthful or loving does not necessarily mean that one is a faithful practitioner of his or her religion. A Christian should be truthful and loving according to the Bible yet it does not automatically equate to a saving knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ.⁶² In other words, salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ not works. Yet it can be concluded that something (in this case, Christianity) can still be true even if its

⁵⁹ Ibid., 198.

⁶⁰ Hick’s book, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) discusses in detail the idea of religious belief being based on one’s experience and cultural conditioning.

⁶¹ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 198.

⁶² Nash quotes Bruce A. Demarest in *Is Jesus the Only Savior*, “In addition to elements of truth, the great religions of the world frequently display a sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life, a persistence in devotion, a readiness to sacrifice, and sundry virtues both personal (gentleness, serenity of temper) and social (concern for the poor, nonviolence). But in spite of these positive features, natural man, operating within the context of natural religion and lacking special revelation, possesses a fundamentally false understanding of spiritual truth.”

followers do not always live exemplary lives. The work of Christ should be used as the standard, not merely the lifestyles of his disciples or even his alleged followers.

Therefore when a Christian analyzes this argument, the truth of Hick's claim (whether someone is loving, caring, honest, etc.) can be observed as generally accurate; however, it must be reconciled to the exemplary lifestyle and truth claims of Jesus Christ. If, through observation, we can determine that the lives of people from different religions are not better, nor worse, than the lives of Christians, then how can one maintain an exclusivist position and claim adherence to absolute Truth? This is a valid claim Hick makes, however, C.S. Lewis makes an argument that applies to Hick's observation,

Christian Miss Bates may have an unkindler tongue than unbelieving Dick Firkin. That, by itself, does not tell us whether Christianity works. The question is what Miss Bates's tongue would be like if she were not a Christian and what Dick's would be like if he became one.⁶³

Next, Hick proposes that the burden of proof is on anyone who claims one's own religion transforms people into "morally and spiritually better human beings than all others."⁶⁴ In spite of Hick's claims, the Bible makes it clear that a non-Christian cannot truly display the agape love found in the teachings of Scripture without a confession of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22; 1 Cor. 13:3; 1 John 4:7; John 15:13; Rom. 5:6-8).

A Multicultural, Multi-religious America

Modern immigration is another significant force in American history that has propelled America toward a diverse, multicultural, multi-religious society. New immigrants have brought

⁶³ Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 210.

⁶⁴ Hick, 198.

with them the religious traditions of their homeland and, as they settled into communities and became part of American society, their religious practices could not be ignored. The Pluralism Project has sought to trace the effects of immigration in regard to the impact it has had on religious views and beliefs, and establish a case for religious pluralism.

Within the past 50 years there has been a significant rise in immigration. A series of events that were a major catalyst in the change of American demographics started with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952.⁶⁵ Known as the McCarran-Walter Act, it ended the ban on immigration from Asia and the Pacific. Thirteen years later, however, the McCarran-Walter Act received significant modification from the updated Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, known as the Hart-Celler Act, which truly opened the door for people all over the world to immigrate to the United States.⁶⁶ This Act put an end to the National Origins Formula, which was designed to keep the United States from becoming too ethnically diverse. In addition, the Act of 1965 expanded on the previous Act of 1952 by creating even more opportunities for immigrants from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Until this point in history, America was comprised mainly of European descendants, Blacks, and very small populations of other races such as the Chinese. Eck mentions that the multitudes of Europeans who sought religious freedom in America would not have imagined the same religious freedom they were seeking would be the foundation for a nation made of many who would be religiously different

⁶⁵ For an in-depth history on the Immigration Acts of the United States visit the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian website: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/immigration-act> (accessed Aug. 12, 2014).

⁶⁶ For example, between 1965 and 1970 immigration from Asian countries to the U.S. nearly quadrupled. Asian immigration from 1961-1970 totaled 427,600 people. Asian immigration from 1971-1980 totaled nearly 1.6 million. Asian immigration from 1981-1990 totaled 2.7 million. Asian immigration from 1991-1997 totaled 2.1 million. For a detailed analysis of the arrival of different immigrant groups during the period from 1900-1997 see the 1999 U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States <http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec31.pdf> (accessed Jan. 12, 2014).

from them.⁶⁷ As America was forming it was clear that even though many of its founders were of a Christian heritage, they were committed to forming a “civic space that would not be dominated by their own faith or any other,”⁶⁸ and, as different races immigrated to America, so did the different religious traditions and cultures.⁶⁹ However, the religious traditions that came with the post-1965 immigrants did not always come from the plethora of Christian traditions that are found throughout the world; instead they were much different from what most American’s were familiar with or understood. With growing immigration also came an expanded vocabulary needed to convey the differences between the typical Caucasian or Black American mindset and that of a newly immigrated Asian, Arab, or Hispanic.⁷⁰ This created a much-needed dialogue regarding issues of immigration and the languages and cultures of these new immigrants. Over time American institutions were confronted with these issues and had to address this new challenge with much more regularity and diligence. For example, after the attacks in 2001, Eck writes, “Americans probably saw and heard more Muslim Americans on television, radio, and in the print media than in the entire thirty-five years since the new wave of immigration.”⁷¹

By the late 1990’s, the impact of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 could be visibly seen with bustling ethnic communities, the building of religious facilities, and a wider

⁶⁷ Eck, foreword to *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America’s Sacred Ground*, by Barbara A. McGraw and Jo Renee Formicola (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), x.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶⁹ Chris Beneke gives credit to the work of Eck’s tracking of modern religious pluralism, however, he believes “it underestimates the religious pluralism that emerged in the eighteenth-century America and the capacity of Americans to maintain it ever since.” Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

⁷⁰ Eck. *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

knowledge of religious differences within the various sectors of society.⁷² Many would come to realize that America was not a melting pot, as Israel Zangwill suggested in his play in 1908, but instead had become a multicultural nation.⁷³ Eck accurately concludes that while “the term multiculturalism has crept into our vocabulary . . . We Americans have not yet really thought about it in terms of religion.”⁷⁴

Eck suggests that this was clearly demonstrated by the significant increase in the call for interfaith involvement by many religious communities after the tragic attacks to the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.⁷⁵ This visible and significant rise in interfaith dialogue and services sparked a debate among the religious and non-religious communities regarding the theological implications of such interfaith exercises. Many Americans were publicly challenged by the ideology of religious pluralism for the first time, while others seized the opportunity to further the efforts of religious pluralism. For example, in the book *A New Religious America*, Eck suggests a post-9/11 pluralist victory:

And there were some very conservative Christian leaders like Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson who gave public expression to their Islamophobia and made intemperate remarks, fueling monolithic stereotypes about Islam. In every case,

⁷² Ibid., 1. Eck states that indeed the Immigration Act of 1965 was the catalyst for a new religious America. For decades immigrants moved into American communities, virtually unnoticed but in the 1990’s their physical presence was considerably more noticeable with the building of mosques, gurdwaras, and other religious structures.

⁷³ Ibid., 55-56. Eck expands on this concept, arguing that the term “melting pot” is inclusivist in nature; meaning that, “People are welcome to come – and be like “us.” In other words, people must “blend in” into American culture, leaving behind any national and cultural distinctives. Moreover, Eck states that the melting pot has numerous “invisible exclusions” and, ultimately, was “a wholly European melting pot.” For example, Asians, Blacks, and Native Americans were not a part of the melting pot ideology. In a 2011 interview for The Harvard Crimson, Eck likens the multiculturalism of America not to a melting pot or a mosaic, but to jazz music <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/12/1/diana-eck-interview/> (accessed March 02, 2014).

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Preface.

however, they were criticized, immediately and decisively, by fellow Christians. The days when Christian church leaders could ignorantly assail Islam with impunity were over.⁷⁶

THE PLURALISM PROJECT

Eck's Contribution at the World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches is an interchurch movement birthed out of the ecumenical movement that began its formation between 1910 and 1920. Between 1937-1938, representatives from over 100 churches voted to found the WCC, but it was not officially inaugurated until 1948.⁷⁷ Currently, the WCC membership consists of over 345 churches from 110 countries and territories, representing over 500 million Christians.⁷⁸ Since its beginnings the WCC has focused primarily on social justice issues and interfaith initiatives. In the 1960's, liberation theology pervaded the WCC, and, during the 1970's, the WCC produced many documents on the topic of religious pluralism. Starting in 1971, the WCC began its work on how Christians should dialogue with people of other faiths, and, in 1979, published its *Guidelines in Dialogues*, clearly articulating the WCC's pluralistic theology.⁷⁹

In 1990, Eck, along with other representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC) summoned a meeting to answer the question, "How do Christians understand, theologically, the great diversity of human religious traditions?" demonstrating the collectively liberal, religiously

⁷⁶ Eck. *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, xix. Eck inaccurately concludes "The days when Christian church leaders could ignorantly assail Islam with impunity were over." Unfortunately, people of all faiths continue to make ignorant claims.

⁷⁷ "History," World Council of Churches, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/wcc-history> (accessed Aug. 7, 2014).

⁷⁸ "About Us," World Council of Churches, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us> (accessed Aug. 7, 2014).

⁷⁹ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/baar-statement-theological-perspectives-on-plurality> (accessed June 13, 2014).

pluralistic thinking of the council.⁸⁰ The gathering consisted of liberal scholars such as Paul Knitter, Pietro Rossano, Dean Robert Neville, and others, who, in contemplating the question of the “theology of religions,” drafted the following:

It is our Christian faith in God, which challenges us to take seriously the whole realm of religious plurality. We see this not so much as an obstacle to be overcome, but rather as an opportunity for deepening our encounter with God and with our neighbors... We find ourselves recognizing a need to move beyond a theology which confines salvation to the explicit personal commitment to Jesus Christ.⁸¹

Furthermore, Eck concludes that the council unanimously and with complete truthfulness decided to “affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of other living faiths.”⁸² Built on the efforts of the 1893 Parliament of World Religions and Vatican Council II, the 1990 World Council of Churches continued to reinforce the doctrine of religious pluralism.

Birth of the Pluralism Project

Also, in 1990, Eck accompanied by twenty-five Harvard Divinity School students, began visiting the diverse religious communities found in the Boston area. Then, in 1991, as a result of their efforts and findings, they started what is now known as the Pluralism Project.⁸³ The Pluralism Project, which has been funded by organizations such as the Ford and Rockefeller

⁸⁰ Eck, *Encountering God*, xix.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xx. See also the 2006 World Council of Churches document “Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding” <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/religious-plurality-and-christian-self-understanding> (accessed June 13, 2014).

⁸³ The result is a resource known as *World Religions in Boston: A Guide to Communities and Resources* Eck, Diana L. World Religions in Boston. Cambridge, Mass: Pluralism Project, 1995.

Foundations, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment, Inc.,⁸⁴ seeks to explore and document the changing religious landscape that has occurred in America over the past 50 years. It has established numerous interfaith councils and networks throughout the U.S. to aid in addressing the implications of a multicultural and multi-religious society. The mission statement of the Pluralism Project is “to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources.”⁸⁵

The efforts of the Pluralism Project, along with two books published by Diana Eck,⁸⁶ make a case for religious pluralism as the only correct response to the religious differences found in America and through out the world. It caters to a postmodern mindset, appealing to a person’s experiences and feelings. Eck also concludes that if one does not partake in religious pluralism, then one will not ultimately experience fulfillment in life.

While the Pluralism Project has been beneficial in some aspects, such as encouraging people to engage with other cultures and religious communities, it is also being used as a vessel to dismantle orthodox Christianity, using the commonality of society to justify its actions. It uses the religious experiences of people of varying faiths to build a framework that rejects the exclusivistic claims of Jesus Christ in addition to the doctrines found within orthodox Christianity. The Pluralism Project is much more celebratory of Eastern religions, specifically, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Middle Eastern religions such as Islam, compared to the

⁸⁴ For a list of major funders of the Pluralism Project see, http://pluralism.org/about/major_funders (accessed Oct. 12, 2013).

⁸⁵ Pluralism Project Website, <http://www.pluralism.org/about/mission> (accessed Oct. 12, 2013).

⁸⁶ Eck. *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. See also Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), 190.

Christian faith. In many cases, Eck's writings and lectures come across as a polemic against the wrongs Christianity has participated in over its history. She consistently highlights hate crimes occurring to people of non-Christian religions yet neglects hate crimes against Christians.⁸⁷ Moreover, in Eck's book *Encountering God*, she clearly articulates her non-orthodox views and exposes her true pluralistic beliefs. Unfortunately, the Pluralism Project celebrates and promotes religious diversity in a way that alienates many Christians.⁸⁸ More specifically, as stated before, the Pluralism Project and Eck's theology is counter to Christian orthodoxy.

The Pluralism Project is a call to relativism, syncretism, and eclecticism. It is highly celebratory of eastern religions while being much more critical of Christianity, specifically orthodox and evangelical Christianity. It opens a religious dialogue with other religions not to evangelize in the name of Jesus Christ; rather it strives to celebrate and find equality in each religion. The doctrine of the Pluralism Project is that no one religion should be superior to another religion. Furthermore, the Pluralism Project gives an aura of academic respectability to religious pluralism. It does not consist of a theologian or two pontificating about the possibilities of religious pluralism; it is an entire academic movement giving the Pluralism Project a level of academic respectability, which makes it respectable at many other levels.

However, the theory of religious pluralism is an exclusive claim flawed in its logic.

Eck's assertion is grandiloquent and, in its simplest form, is no different than the exclusive claim

⁸⁷ See Eck, *A New Religious America*.

⁸⁸ Even though such groups as Buddhist, Muslims, Hindus have a voice in America it must be noted that Eck writes as though they are a large people group in the U.S. According to a 2008 Pew Research survey 0.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 0.6 percent is Muslim, and 0.4 is Hindu. See the Pew Research U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic, 2008. Summary page 5. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (accessed Nov. 08, 2013). According to a 2012 Gallup Poll, the Muslim population is still at 0.6 percent <http://www.gallup.com/poll/159548/identify-christian.aspx> (accessed Nov. 08, 2013).

that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to receive salvation. Eck and other pluralists often stress the importance and commonality that Americans share in their freedom of religion and civic responsibilities. Eck says it is the “covenants of citizenship” that unite Americans and place “us on common ground.”⁸⁹ Her deeply rooted ideology of pluralism ultimately leads to individuals and the cultural distinctives they enjoy being stripped away by a muted, non-differentiated world paradigm. For example, Eck asks, “Are we now at the beginning of an era that will see the bridging of civilizations, indeed a creative dialogue of civilizations? Or will the decades ahead be marked by rigid and rivalrous adherence to religious, cultural, and national identities?”⁹⁰ She suggests that we scrutinize and refine our understanding of interdependence on one another in light of our religious differences, which will help us acknowledge our “deeply related” dependence on one another for survival.⁹¹ In most cases, Eck describes the differences between religions as combative rivals, especially when it comes to Christianity, by stating, for instance, “Must our differences be so divisive, or can they be steered toward creative relationships, rather than competitive rivalries?”⁹² Yet what she does not acknowledge is that there will always be religious differences. Our differences have helped forge new ways to work together and depend on one another in this highly globalized world.

The theological question Eck and other pluralists ask is how religious people such as Christians, Jews or Muslims, will think about their own faith in relation to the faith of their

⁸⁹ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 24.

⁹⁰ Eck, *Encountering God*, x.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, xii.

neighbors. Eck writes, “It is true, that our increasing engagement with one another in civil society may well provide the context for new and transformative theological thinking.”⁹³ She regularly mentions that many people use the words pluralism and diversity interchangeably; however, pluralism is not plurality, but the “engagement that creates a common society” from all the plurality found within America’s diversity.⁹⁴

According to Eck, there are five foundational points that answer the question, “What is pluralism?”⁹⁵ In this section two of the five points will be examined.⁹⁶

Particular View of Tolerance

Tolerance is defined as the ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with.⁹⁷ The foundational understanding of tolerance is that one is in disagreement with another person, their ideas, opinions, or behaviors. In other words, one has to disagree with another person in order to tolerate the person, ideas, etc. Tolerance is said to be foundational to pluralism, yet according to the Pluralism Project website, tolerance is not enough:

⁹³ Ibid., xi.

⁹⁴ Eck, *New Religious America*, 70. See also The Pluralism Project. “From Diversity to Pluralism,” <http://www.pluralism.org/encounter/challenges> (accessed Aug. 10, 2014).

⁹⁵ Eck, *Encountering God*, 190-199 gives a detailed account of Eck’s five points. See also the Pluralism Project website, “From Diversity to Pluralism,” Ibid.

⁹⁶ According to Eck, five answers to the question “What is pluralism?” are as follows: “First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality.” “Second, pluralism is not simply tolerance, but also the seeking of understanding.” “Third, pluralism is not simply relativism but assumes real commitment.” “Fourth, pluralism is not syncretism, but is based on respect for differences.” “Fifth, pluralism is based on interreligious dialogue.” Ibid., 191-199.

⁹⁷ http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/tolerance (accessed Aug. 10, 2014).

Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.⁹⁸

After scrutinizing the verbiage found in some of Eck's books, interviews, and lectures, it can be argued that she is guilty of rejecting her own definitions of pluralism and tolerance.

According to Eck, pluralism must go beyond tolerance. She accurately asserts that people of different religious backgrounds should be actively learning about and trying to understand the differences that people hold amongst religious traditions, however, that is not where pluralists such as Eck stop. She persuasively argues that if people take the time to understand each other's religious differences, it will lead them out of the ignorance and hatred for one another. Hopefully, as people begin to understand each other's differences, they will also begin to see the commonality found amongst their differences. The goal is that the understanding of the other person's religious beliefs will eventually lead a person to abandon his or her own absolutes and embrace a pluralist theology. Eck says pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one's own tradition of faith to reach the "lowest common denominator,"⁹⁹ but this is not the case. She makes the assumption that people cannot be both tolerant and understanding. In addition, she argues it is tolerance that leads to stereotypes, an ignorance of each other, half-truth's, fear, and "division and violence."¹⁰⁰ Eck attempts to

⁹⁸ The Pluralism Project. "What is Pluralism," http://pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism (accessed Aug. 10, 2014).

⁹⁹ The Pluralism Project. <http://www.pluralism.org/encounter/challenges> (accessed Aug. 11, 2014).

¹⁰⁰ The Pluralism Project. "What is Pluralism?" http://pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism (accessed Aug. 11, 2014).

redefine the meaning of tolerance so people will learn to see it as a word with negative connotations.¹⁰¹

In the end, the belief that religious pluralism is tolerant is a myth. Eck violates her own idea of tolerance by not tolerating the views of those who hold to any exclusivistic view, especially in regard to salvation. On the contrary, her tolerance is for those who hold similar pluralistic beliefs.

Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is essential to the promulgation of religious pluralism. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), a professor of comparative religion and a “leading apologist for dialogue,”¹⁰² concluded in the 1960’s that interreligious dialogue was beginning to replace “polemics, debate, and monologue preaching of traditional missionary policy.”¹⁰³ Over fifty years later it is evident Smith was eerily accurate in his prediction on the use of interreligious dialogue. Eric J. Sharpe (1933-2000), founding Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia defines the goal of interreligious dialogue as “expressing a shared quest for intellectual clarity and understanding; a shared humanity; a shared involvement in a particular secular situation; or a shared relationship to ultimate reality, or God”¹⁰⁴ and as the “intuitive

¹⁰¹ Eck offers the following statements regarding tolerance: “Tolerance might sustain a temporary and shaky truce, but it will never bring forth a new creation.” “[Tolerance] (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.” “Tolerance alone does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another” “Tolerance is too minimal an expectation.” “Tolerance is, of course, a step forward from active hostility.” “Indeed, it [tolerance] may be a passive form of hostility.” “Tolerance is a deceptive virtue.” Eck, *Encountering God*, 192-193.

¹⁰² Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 286-287.

¹⁰³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1963), 177.

¹⁰⁴ Eric, J. Sharpe, “The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue.” in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between World Religions*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 81.

recognition of a shared experience of the transcendent reality.”¹⁰⁵ Sharp says that proponents of interfaith dialogue assume that “causes of past intolerance have to do with the doctrinal and other constructions that men have built around their central religious commitment, and seek for areas of common concern in which those constructions are transcended, penetrated, or avoided.”¹⁰⁶

Four Types of Interreligious Dialogue According to Sharpe

Sharpe classifies dialogue into four categories to help differentiate the mechanics between each kind. He identifies the four types of dialogue as Discursive, Human, Secular, and Interior.¹⁰⁷ Each will be given a brief introduction, however, Interior dialogue will be explored in more detail since it is commonly used by pluralists and potentially is the most damaging to biblical Christianity.

Discursive dialogue focuses on clarifying the differences between the participants of the dialogue. The experience should be driven by an “intellectual curiosity and intellectual conviction,” thus allowing each person to honestly learn about the other person’s religious practices and beliefs.¹⁰⁸ Netland accurately concludes that there are “but few” who are involved in interreligious dialogue and “are content to remain strictly within discursive dialogue.”¹⁰⁹ Next is human dialogue, which goes beyond learning about a person’s belief or religious practices and

¹⁰⁵ Sharpe, “The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue.” in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between World Religions*, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁷ For more details about the four types of dialogue see: Eric, J. Sharpe, “The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue.” in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between World Religions*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 82.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 286.

asks the participants to embrace an “I-thou” relationship. In other words, the participants should truly seek to intimately know each other.¹¹⁰ Somewhat removed from the first two types of dialogue, secular dialogue focuses more on social justice issues and how humanity can unite to fight injustices found throughout the world. Secular dialogue attempts to leave behind religious differences for the sake of humanity and embraces economic, political, and social issues.

Lastly, interior dialogue is quite different than the other three types of dialogue. First, the premise of interior dialogue is that God reveals himself in all religions, which is counter to the writings of the Bible and historical Christianity. Second, interior dialogue is presented in a way that implies it will deepen one’s faith or produces a deeper understanding of God (or just the divine). Third, proponents of interior dialogue believe it can be “revelatory” and allows people to discover “more “truth” and to grasp fuller dimensions of the divine.”¹¹¹ Fourth, it does not allow one to persuade non-Christians to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior since this act is seen as “theologically and morally unacceptable.”¹¹² This particular form of dialogue is not only controversial among Christians but can also be dangerous to those who hold to a biblical, historical, orthodox Christianity. Interior Dialogue, according to Sharpe, has “its locus in the mystical, contemplative tradition, and its advocates are normally those trained in that tradition.”¹¹³ Most pluralists maintain that interior dialogue is the preferred, or in many cases,

¹¹⁰ Sharpe, 83. Sharpe expounds further on human dialogue when he quotes C. Murray Rogers. Rogers states that when involved in dialogue, there is an “essential precondition, a willingness and a readiness to listen to the other *as other*. We may not listen in order to prepare our next words of approach, proclamation or attack, but with the awareness that Christ speaks to us from the other.” Rogers continues, the Christian must “understand the non-Christian brother as he understand himself.”

¹¹¹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 289-290.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 290.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

the only way to engage in dialogue with a person of another religion. This approach requires a person to abandon any presuppositions or exclusivistic beliefs. More importantly, interior dialogue assumes that God has revealed himself in all religious traditions and the “essence of religion is to be found in the mystical experience of oneness with the divine.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is the absolute way and truth¹¹⁵ should not partake in dialogue that demands such a presupposition.

Eck's View of Interreligious Dialogue

In stating, “pluralism is based on interreligious dialogue” Eck is saying pluralism, as a practice, is not possible without an atmosphere in which interreligious dialogue takes place.¹¹⁶ However, she is advocating a certain type of interreligious dialogue. Usually people who already believe in pluralism participate in it while those who do not already believe in “interior dialogue” are usually excluded.¹¹⁷ Ultimately, her definition of dialogue does not tolerate those who maintain any kind of exclusivistic belief other than pluralism.

Eck has been innovative and instrumental in the establishment and support of interreligious dialogue and interfaith councils in America. Yet this contemplative, interior dialogue is prevalent in her writings. Even though dialogue can be, and is, an invaluable resource for people of different religions; however, it is not needed to truly deepen one's understanding of their own faith as she and other pluralists assert. Religious pluralists insist that

¹¹⁴ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 88.

¹¹⁵ John 14:6,7.

¹¹⁶ Eck, *Encountering God*, 197. Also see http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism (accessed July 25, 2014).

¹¹⁷ Sharpe, 87.

in order for a Christian to truly understand one's faith, increase self-understanding, and have a deeper understanding of one's faith, there must be participation in interreligious dialogue.

Furthermore, Eck concludes, "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."¹¹⁸ In contrast, the Bible contains plenty of evidence of a well-developed, mature faith that comes through a life of devotion to God: prayer, scripture reading, and a life lived within a community of believers (2 Pet. 1:3-8, Eph. 4:1-16, 2 Pet. 3:18, Heb. 5:11-14, 1 Tim 4:7, James 1:4, 2 Tim. 3:16-17). In the following statement Eck explains that one is not to participate in 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...But a clear understanding of differences is as precious as the affirmation of similarities.¹¹⁹

Despite the persuasive language she uses, her statement that interreligious dialogue is a non-agendum based method to simply create relationships or even friendships is not accurate. This can be clearly seen when she states, "interreligious dialogue must transform the way in which we do theology, becoming a source and basis for theological work."¹²⁰ It is in this statement that she exposes the dichotomy of interreligious dialogue and shows the true intentions for its use. From her words alone it can be discerned that interreligious dialogue is a tool that pluralists should use to further their theological work, not just to discover differences and create relationships with those who are religiously different.

¹¹⁸ Eck, *Encountering God*, 196.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, xx.

Exclusiveness of Interreligious Dialogue

Eck again, in response to how people viewed and treated Muslims and Sikhs after the September 11, 2001 attacks, points to the numerous interfaith movements formed:

Such initiatives, of course, will often meet resistance, especially as we move toward a Christian reformation in our relations with people of other faiths. Bozeman's Christian clergy association was divided as it wrestled with the questions of whether to join with representatives of local Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, Buddhist and Unitarian communities. The interfaith coalition that emerged left behind an opposition group of Christian clergy.¹²¹

Her explanation is quite informative and continues to expose the true pluralistic mindset, which, ultimately, is absolute and exclusivistic in nature revealing how interreligious dialogue is not as neutral or accepting as she claims. Most who advocate and rigorously promote interreligious dialogue maintain that if one insists on the superiority of their own religion they are part of the problem and will usually be excluded from participating in interreligious dialogue. Yet according to Eck, "If we are to speak of God today, we must include in our reflections what we have learned in dialogue with people of other faiths;" meaning people should be prepared to let their theology change in light of what other religions believe.¹²² As well intended, as Eck's claim might be it can be argued she makes this claim to the exclusion of those who are not like-minded and hold to any absolute claims.

According to Eck, the intent of interreligious dialogue is to be able to "understand ourselves and our faith more clearly; dialogue is not a debate between two positions, but a truth-seeking encounter."¹²³ This is a great point, but how can this happen if one of the positions is

¹²¹ Eck, *Encountering God*, xiii-xiv.

¹²² *Ibid.*, xx.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 198.

excluded before the dialogue can start? For example, why did the Bozeman interfaith group reject some of the people? More specifically, how did the *interfaith* coalition exclude an opposing “group of Christian clergy?” Apparently, it was because the Christian clergy held opposing views but do not all faith groups ultimately hold opposing views? Evidently, from this example, certain beliefs are not accepted within interfaith efforts.¹²⁴

It is also worth noting that, in the interfaith coalition quote above, Eck does not question the decision of the interfaith coalition, yet according to her own words “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.”¹²⁵ The decision of the interfaith coalition further contradicts Eck’s philosophy of 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.¹²⁶

Despite Eck’s efforts to make interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism appear inviting and accepting of other people’s religious views, she clearly demonstrates that it is a set of beliefs that ultimately excludes others based on what they believe. For example, she writes, “Each interfaith initiative has to decide, sooner or later, who should be at the table and on what basis. And each

¹²⁴ Eck answers, “What is Pluralism?” with four points. She points out that pluralism is more than diversity, and that it must be an “energetic engagement with diversity” but the situation with the Bozeman group does not appear to be an “energetic engagement” with the diversity that was found within the group.

¹²⁵ Eck, *Encountering God*, 198.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

has to think carefully about who is excluded and why.”¹²⁷ This statement is the antithesis of what interreligious dialogue claims to be about. Moreover, she reassures the reader that “a pluralist culture will not flatten out differences, but has respect for differences and the encounter of differences.”¹²⁸ First, Eck stated that the premise of interreligious dialogue is the understanding that not all will agree. Moreover, she contends the goals of interreligious dialogue are to create relationships, mutual understanding, and to broaden a person’s comprehension of religious differences so one may have a deeper understanding of one’s own faith. So why would a person have to give justification or be accepted by an interfaith initiative to participate? In other words, why would anyone be excluded?

Many today believe interreligious dialogue should take the place of evangelism and missions, becoming the preferred method for how Christians should relate to people of non-Christian religions. Generally, as depicted by pluralists, people who partake in interreligious dialogue are regarded as open-minded and tolerant, whereas, those who reject interreligious dialogue (specifically interior dialogue usually) are seen as narrow minded, intolerant, and ignorant.

Interreligious dialogue can be a beneficial method for people of differing faiths to actively and honestly learn about the differences found within their belief systems. A Christian should be willing to participate in discursive dialogue; however, one cannot start with or accept the proposition that the participants are all speaking of the same God in different ways. One benefit of interreligious dialogue is a better understanding of the other person’s position.

¹²⁷ Eck, *New Religious America*, 372

¹²⁸ Eck, *Encountering God*, 197.

Participants will find areas of agreement as well as disagreement, but participants will also likely be able to discover misconceptions that they held in regard to beliefs and practices of the other party. Discursive dialogue also helps a person better define, or clearly articulate, his or her own beliefs. Nevertheless, the use of dialogue can and does lead to syncretism and eclectism.¹²⁹ Ultimately, Eck wants the dialogue participants to agree that pluralism is the correct answer to religious differences. Unfortunately, it appears there are many Christians who agree with her and have abandoned the biblical responsibility of proclaiming the gospel when engaging in interreligious dialogue.¹³⁰ Yet Newbigin rightly states that a Christian should participate in dialogue to be an “obedient witness to Jesus Christ.”¹³¹

Biblical Interreligious Dialogue

One example the Bible gives of what could be interpreted as a type of interreligious dialogue is found in Acts 17. While in Athens, the apostle Paul actively engages with the Athenians in the synagogue as well as the marketplace (Acts 17:17). His audience consisted of Jews (vs. 17), God-fearing Greeks (vs. 17), Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (vs. 18), and whoever happened to be in the marketplace (vs. 17), which most likely included a multitude of foreigners (vs. 21). After his arrival in Athens, Paul noticed, “the city was full of idols,” which

¹²⁹ Anderson makes the point that syncretism can easily become part of the theological framework of different religions because many people empathically understand the “pressing need for men and women of different races, cultures and backgrounds to learn to understand each other and work together for the common good” and this in turn “provides the major incentive for a syncretistic approach to religious differences, or even for dreams of the eventual emergence of one universal world-religion.” Syncretism allows for a very optimistic response to all of the differences found within the many religions and helps promote the ideology of religious pluralism thereby claiming that all religions come from an ultimate reality or universal religion. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 16-17.

¹³⁰ 1 Peter 3:15-17, Acts 17.

¹³¹ Newbigin, "The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30, no. 3 (1977): 26.

made him “greatly distressed” (vs. 16). However his distress leads him not to disengage with the culture, but to action, “So he reasoned” (vs. 16). After “carefully” looking at the multitude of idols and “objects of worship,” he graciously told the Athenians, “I see that in every way you are religious” (vs. 22, 23). Upon finding an altar with an inscription “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD,” Paul uses the opportunity to build a bridge to share the gospel by stating, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (vs. 23). Paul took the time to discern the religious status of the Athenians, which allowed him to contextualize the message of the gospel in the most fitting way for his audience (Acts 17:22-31). Even though Paul quotes pagan poetry and paraphrases concepts from Stoic and Greek philosophers, he does so using a Christian paradigm.¹³²

In Paul’s interreligious dialogue at the Areopagus, he affirms the idea that truth can be found in other religious writings, but it is Jesus Christ that reigns supreme. Like modern discursive dialogue, Paul found commonality in the varying religious practices, however, he used it as a baseline to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul clearly makes the exclusive claim that God “commands all people everywhere to repent” (vs. 30) and believe the “good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (vs.18).

When describing the benefits of adhering to religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, in contrast to any other theological framework, such as the opposing stereotypical views of exclusivism and inclusivism, Eck is a careful wordsmith in her response:

The exclusivist insists upon the exclusive and sole truth of one’s own religious tradition, excluding all others. The inclusivist sees one’s own religious tradition as including the others, interpreting the other’s faith in one’s own terms. The pluralist accepts the fact

¹³² For example, in Acts 17:28a, Paul quotes the Cretan poet and philosopher Epimenides, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” In 17:28b, Paul also quotes the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus, “We are his offspring.”

that many voices will speak in the exploration of religious truth, each in its own terms, trusting the encounter of real dialogue to reach a deeper understanding of one another's faith and of our own."¹³³

However, the Bible teaches,

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 John 4:2-3).

In order for relativism to work itself out through religious pluralism, a pluralist must maintain that the incarnation of Christ is one of multiple incarnations, or, of a metaphorical nature. If not, then such claims, as "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) would be in direct contradiction to the relativistic approach of pluralism. It appears from this statement that Jesus did not view himself as a way, out of many, but indeed as the only way, one in which he has a unique, salvific role for mankind.

The Bible teaches that there is one true God (Deut. 4:35, 38; Isaiah 45:5-6; Mark 12:32-34). In 1 Timothy 2:5, the apostle Paul writes, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men..." This statement not only affirms the claims of the Old Testament but also makes it clear that it is through Jesus Christ that one can have access to the one true God. According to the gospel of John, Jesus said, "whoever believes him [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life... whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18). Both 1 Timothy 2:5 and John 14:6 give sufficient evidence that people of other religions will not attain salvation unless they accept the salvific role of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9-10,13). Additionally, in the gospel of Luke,

¹³³ Eck, *Encountering God*, xxi

Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection and “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). After Jesus did this he told them, “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (vs. 47).¹³⁴

Rejection of Exclusivistic Claims

Religious pluralism has devastating theological effects that must be considered. In the mindset of the pluralist, one should not reject another’s beliefs as false, unless of course it is an exclusivistic Christian view, but should evaluate the other’s beliefs and how this can benefit or supplement one’s own beliefs. A pluralist maintains, for example, that when meeting a devout Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh and seeing the evidential fruit of a life living openly towards the divine Reality, one “cannot realistically regard the Christian experience of the divine as authentic and their non-Christian experiences as inauthentic.”¹³⁵ There are many who have rejected any type of religious exclusivism for the mutual acceptance of all, despite differences in truth claims, partially due to a growing, multicultural, multi-religious world. Pluralists argue that just because one religious system, such as Christianity, leads to salvation, this does not necessarily mean other religious systems fail to do so. Newbigin understood the pluralist mindset well. He rightly states the pluralist position, “Religious pluralism...is the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that is to speak of religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ There were other religions being practiced when Jesus made this claim.

¹³⁵ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 91.

¹³⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 14.

Eck Rejects the Uniqueness of Christ

Eck negates the distinctiveness of Jesus by equating the word “uniqueness” with “exclusivity,” not as the synonym of uniqueness, but as a term that accepts some and excludes others. For instance, she claims:

“I am sometimes uncertain of the language of uniqueness, for it often seems to be a declaration of exclusivity rather than an invitation to faith, discovery, and dialogue. When the “uniqueness” of Jesus Christ is used to exclude the stranger of another faith, it ceases to be Christian language.”¹³⁷

Eck goes further by asking: “Does the “Good News” of the Gospel really depend upon its being the only Good New there is, the only real history, the only criterion for truth? Can’t the Gospel stand simply and humbly on its own merits, without the fortress of “only-ness” about it?”¹³⁸ The uniqueness of Jesus Christ should not exclude anyone from any faith, for the Bible makes it clear, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). However, Eck does not acknowledge that the writings of the New Testament clearly proclaim that people will ultimately be excluded if they do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. The question must be asked, does the exclusion of someone from another faith, because of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, cease “to be Christian language” as Eck claims?¹³⁹ While teaching Nicodemus, Jesus said, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18). Similarly, as Peter is giving his defense before the Sanhedrin he proclaims “Salvation is found in no one else [Jesus Christ of Nazareth (vs. 10)], for

¹³⁷ Eck, *Encountering God*, 87.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 87.

there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is clear from these passages that the biblical language or, in Eck’s words, “Christian language” is indeed exclusive of a “stranger of another faith” if that person does not confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Rom. 10:9).¹⁴⁰ Therefore, her assertion is not based on the language of the Bible, but on her own opinion and relativistic, pluralistic approach to Christianity.

Eck makes a further argument against the uniqueness of Christ by asking if the “story of Jesus is the *only* story of God’s saving presence here on earth?”¹⁴¹ If it is, she wonders, why is there a plethora of evidence found within the histories of a multitude of religions.¹⁴² She goes even further by asking if the term “uniqueness” is referring to the “only true story or the only saving story,” logically leading her to the conclusion that if either statement is true then all other religious stories must be “incomplete or mistaken?”¹⁴³ Eck insists that she could still believe this “uniqueness of Jesus Christ” perspective if she had never met people of other faiths:

Uniqueness, to me, does not mean that the “Jesus story” is the only story of God’s dealings with humanity, nor the only true and complete story. The language of *only* is the language of faith, not of statistics. Faith in Christ rests on two remarkable affirmations: Jesus Christ reveals to us the face of God, which is love. And Jesus Christ reveals to us the meaning of the human, which is love. This double revelation is enough. I do not need to know that it is the only true story on earth to affirm that it is worth giving my heart to... And the humanity which Jesus reveals is not narrow, arrogant, or dogmatic, but boldly open to claiming the stranger as neighbor. Both sides of this double revelation – the Godward and the human - must push Christians beyond the narrow obsession with uniqueness as singularity.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Eck, *Encountering God*, 87.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

Even though Eck is relativistic in her approach to religions, ultimately she voices inconsistency in her syncretistic, pluralistic thought, “As a Christian, I confess that Jesus enables me to see something of God that I do not know in any other way: God truly grounded in the soil of human life and death.”¹⁴⁵

In addition to how Christians refer to the uniqueness of Christ, Eck detests how some Christians speak of the exclusiveness of Christ and maintains that exclusivity is “utterly contrary” to how Jesus is portrayed in the synoptic Gospels.¹⁴⁶ In spite of her claim, Eck does not give ample justification. Yet there are many instances in the synoptic Gospels where Jesus’ word choice is deliberately exclusive. For instance, while talking to the crowds in Matthew 7, Jesus says, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt. 7:13,14). Shortly afterwards Jesus says,

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and preform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Matt. 7:21-23).

Or when Jesus sent the twelve disciples out, giving them the following orders:

Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. . . If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town” (Matt. 10:5-15).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Eck, *Encountering God*, 90.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁴⁷ Other examples include: “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also knowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to

Eck remarks that if Jesus is “a lens through which we glimpse the nature of God,” one cannot say the God that is revealed is one “whose mercy and compassion are focused on one people.”¹⁴⁸ She points out that Jesus, “kept company with everyone in the world” during that time and extended his “loving mercy” to what could be called “people of other faiths” such as, “the Roman centurion, the Syrophenician woman, the Greek Cornelius, the good Samaritan.”¹⁴⁹ In this case Eck gives a false analogy. She also states that Jesus did not see any difference between Christianity, Judaism, “or the other “isms”” used to classify people of differing faiths; instead Jesus saw faith.¹⁵⁰ There were instances when Jesus rewarded people for their faith, a faith in Him and his Father in Heaven. However, Jesus did see a difference between different people groups according to Matthew 10:5-15. He specifically instructs the twelve disciples not to “go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans.”

She concludes her point by saying there is no doubt Jesus would have “kept company with Patwardhan and Krishnamurti, with Gandhi and Tagore.”¹⁵¹ When she shares this perspective with “church people” someone usually asks about John 14:6 “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” Many people, Eck mentions,

turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household” (Matt. 10:32-36), See also: Matt. 11:27, Matt. 12:46-50; Mk. 3:33-35, Matt. 13:10-17, Matt. 15:7-9, Mk. 16:16.

¹⁴⁸ Eck, *Encountering God*, 93.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

believe this verse means, “no other religion can be a true way to God.”¹⁵² Upon hearing this response from “church people,” she wants to quote verses like John 10:16, “I have many sheep that are not of this fold” or Acts 10:34 which states “I truly understand that God does not show partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Eck rightfully argues that when people use a proof texting approach to the Bible it “does violence to the text and to the context of the early church out of which it came.”¹⁵³ Responding to “I am the Way” as an answer, Eck asks people to consider the question that elicited such a response. In this verse, the disciple Thomas asked the question during an evening meal. Jesus shared with the disciples about his impending betrayal by Judas and predicted Peter’s denial. After such hard sayings, Jesus begins to comfort his disciples:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. *You know the way to the place where I am going* (Jn. 14:1-4).

Thomas then asks the question Eck is referring to, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (Jn. 14:5). Eck asks if Thomas asked any of the following questions, “Did he [Thomas] ask, Lord, are Hindus to have a room in God’s heavenly household? Did he ask, Lord, will Buddhists make it across the sea of sorrow on the raft of the Dharma? Lord, when the Prophet Muhammad comes six hundred years from now, will he hear God’s word?”¹⁵⁴ Thomas did not ask any of those questions, but he did ask, “how can we know

¹⁵² Eck, *Encountering God*, 94.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Eck, *Encountering God*, 94.

the way?”(Jn. 14:6). Therefore, she concludes Jesus’ answer to Thomas was not one of “condemnation” or a “polemical one” but was a “pastoral answer...an expression of comfort.”¹⁵⁵

Eck Rejects the Incarnation of Christ

It can be seen in the work of Eck, and others that adhere to a doctrine of religious pluralism, that the Bible is one of many sacred scriptures. For example, the Quran of the Muslims, the Bhagavad Gita of the Hindus, and the Granth Sahib of the Sikhs are all on equal footing with the Bible. It can also be said that pluralist discredit many other orthodox doctrines including the incarnation of Jesus. For example, Eck makes the following statement:

As a Christian, I attest to the yearning for new theological thinking that moves beyond the patrolling of our Christian borders...I have received countless letters from Christians who have suffered under the theological abuse of fundamentalism and have left the church behind...It is clear that many people are ready to look afresh at those few biblical verses that, for too long, have led Christians to a simple, unreflective belief that people of other faiths are outside the saving grace of God: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me” (John 14:6) and “There is salvation on no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we may be saved” (Acts 4:12). Do such verses really give us self-evident, adequate guidance for thinking about the faith of our neighbors? I don’t think so, and for ten years now I have heard from Christians who are grateful to read these passages in a new light and to look again at Jesus’ insistent love for both neighbors and strangers in the gospels. Christian faith is not premised on diminishing or dismissing the faith of our neighbors. We, too, yearn to claim the “dignity of difference.”¹⁵⁶

The Bible teaches that God has revealed himself to mankind through multiple means. For example: All humans are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Jesus Christ is the logos (Jn. 1:3). God has revealed himself as Creator to all humans (Rom. 1:18-32, Ps. 19:1). God has made himself known through the conscience of men (Rom. 2:14-15, Ps. 19:1-4). However, God

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Eck, *Encountering God*, xii-xiii.

has uniquely revealed himself through his son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that a person may receive salvation (Rom. 10:9-10, Acts 4:12, Jn. 14:6, Jn. 1:12).

Eck is heavily influenced by Eastern philosophies and religions and has departed from biblical and historical Christianity.¹⁵⁷ When Eck went to India, her views and beliefs began to radically change. As she came to know and interact with the people of India, especially in their religious settings, she realized she could no longer hold to many of her previous Christian beliefs. On one occasion, while in Banaras, Eck met an Indian man by the name of “Uncle.” Intrigued that she was a Christian, Uncle asked her to explain to him about her ““chosen god,” Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁸ According to Eck, using Hindi vocabulary, she explained different concepts such as “the Word made flesh,” Jesus Christ being fully man and God and, ultimately, that Jesus Christ was Parmaeshvara, or “supreme God.”¹⁵⁹ In addition, she used the word avatara, which is the closest translation to the English word incarnation; literally it means an appearance of a deity to earth. “As if verifying an outlandish rumor,” Uncle asked her if Christians really believed that Jesus Christ was indeed “the only avatara?”¹⁶⁰ Eck describes her thoughts and how she was not comfortable with the “language about the decisiveness, uniqueness, and finality of Christ,” yet she affirmed to Uncle that the majority of Christians do believe that Jesus was “unique, the only one.”¹⁶¹ Uncle fired back asking her, “how is it possible...to believe that God showed himself

¹⁵⁷ See Eck’s book *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Another example is Paul Knitter’s book titled *Without I Buddha I could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

¹⁵⁸ Eck, *Encountering God*, 81.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶¹ Eck, *Encountering God*, 82.

only once, to one people, in one part of the world, so long ago?”¹⁶² In this conversation Eck articulates her struggle with the concept of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in light of her understanding of the Hindu concept of *avatara*. She infers from the look on Uncle’s face that to believe such a thing (that Jesus Christ is the first and only God incarnate) would mean that God is “stingy,” and the people who believe such a concept must be a “small-minded, self-centered people.”¹⁶³ Eck maintains God has indeed manifested himself in the flesh as Jesus; however, because of her conversation with Uncle she concludes God cannot:

Be made captive to the Jesus story... To insist that there is no other possible way of apprehending the fullness of God than through Jesus did not do justice to the faith of a man like Uncle. And it did not do justice to the wideness and mercy of the one I call God or the one I speak of as Christ”¹⁶⁴

Eck uses this account to articulate the cognitive dissonance she experienced and to demonstrate how it was absurd for her to believe Jesus Christ was the only incarnation of God. Here, she is trying to persuade her audience to think about how the inclusivist or more specifically the exclusivist position is unfair, narrow-minded, and is not considerate of those who are of a different religion. In the end, Eck proclaims that she does “not think that a life centered on Christ needs to eliminate, ought to eliminate, or even *can* eliminate the experience of the *avatara*, the divine descent, that has been attested to by Hindus in the many ways that Uncle has seen.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁶⁵ Eck, *Encountering God*, 92.

Is Jesus God

Many pluralists believe since Jesus never explicitly stated, “I am God” he was not absolutely God, but a great prophet or one incarnation of many, as Eck suggests.¹⁶⁶ She states, “For me as a Christian, Jesus is not simply a great teacher, nor is Jesus simply and flatly God.”¹⁶⁷ Though Jesus did not plainly state, “I am God” it can be concluded from a combination of statements he made about himself that he did in fact believe he was God. Moreover, many who came into contact with Jesus believed He was indeed God (Matt. 2:11; 14:33; 28:9, 17). It can be successfully argued that Jesus thought of himself as more than just another Jewish teacher or prophet. According to Jesus’ audience of Jews, they understood him to claim that he was God, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (John 10:22-39). In the eighth chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus boldly states, “before Abraham was born, I am!” This is a clear indication that Jesus was equating himself with God, something the Jews would have realized immediately upon hearing those words.¹⁶⁸ In John 20:28, the disciple Thomas says to Jesus “My Lord and my God!” Jesus then replies, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (vs. 29). It is evident from this passage that Jesus did not object to the claim that he is God. It must be noted at this point that even though the gospel of John gives clear evidence of the divine nature of Jesus and his inferred claims to be God, many pluralists disregard this book of the Bible. More liberal scholars maintain that since the gospel of John

¹⁶⁶ Eck, *Encountering God*, 81-93.

¹⁶⁷ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 84.

¹⁶⁸ John 8:58. Here Jesus is using the I am concept that is found in Exodus 3: 14 “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

came approximately 30 to 40 years after the writing of the gospel of Mark, John's gospel received many interjections to definitively establish that Jesus was God.

Yet in the gospel of Mark, when Jesus is in Capernaum, he not only healed a paralytic man, but also told the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (2:5). The next verse continues, "Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"¹⁶⁹ This was a blasphemous statement to the teachers of the law because the Jews taught that the Messiah did not have the power or authority to forgive sins; only God could. Consequently, Jesus was implicitly stating that he was God.

Eck Embraces Idolatry

Another instance of Eck's departure from biblical Christianity is when she gives an account of a visit to a Hindu temple: "When I stand in a Hindu sanctuary during the arati, when the oil lamps are raised toward the deity, I feel drawn into an attitude of worship. It is not the worship of idols, but the honoring of God through focused attention to the consecrated image in which God is graciously present."¹⁷⁰ This is a blatant example of how Eck, a proclaimed Christian and Methodist minister, attempts to rationalize her pluralistic theology and has departed from biblical and historical Christianity. The Bible addresses idol worship on multiple occasions and is clear that idol worship is against the commands of God. According to the second and third commandments found in Exodus, Christians are to have "no other gods" and

¹⁶⁹ The two accounts of Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralytic man are found in Mark 2:5-11 and Luke 5:20-24. The response of the teachers of the law originated from Leviticus 24:16, which states a person must be put to death for blasphemy.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 85.

one should “not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...” (Exodus 20:3-4).¹⁷¹ Likewise, according to the book of Deuteronomy, Moses addresses the worship of “man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell,” indicating that idols are no more than a creation of man.¹⁷² Similarly, in the teachings found in Deuteronomy, the Old Testament prophets describe “idolatrous practices” as “spiritual harlotry, an abomination, detestable, foolishness, and utterly disgusting.”¹⁷³ Therefore, according to the Bible, there are no other gods except the God of the Bible, and there should not be any type of physical image of God. Based on Eck’s writings, it can easily be argued that she is “remarkably eager to be transformed by Buddhism or Hinduism” whereas, according to Harold Netland, Hindus and Buddhists usually “do not appear to be nearly as interested in being influenced by Christian faith!”¹⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

To accept Eck’s understanding and position of religious pluralism ultimately leads to the rejection of one’s own religious claims of absolute truth. Religious pluralism by its very nature is the antithesis of an absolute belief. The doctrine of religious pluralism gives people the idea that there are a multitude of religions that lead to God when the Bible states that there are only two options: acceptance of Jesus Christ, which leads to eternal life, or denial of Christ, which

¹⁷¹ See also Lev. 26:1; 1 Chr. 16:26; Isa. 44:6-20 gives an in-depth description; Isa. 46:6-10; Jer. 10:1-25; Ps. 115:4-8; Hab. 2:18-20; Rom. 1:25; Matt. 4:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:20-21; Rev. 9:20-21

¹⁷² Deut. 4:28. See also Deut. 4:16, 23, 25.

¹⁷³ Baker ed., Block, *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*, 64.

¹⁷⁴ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 284.

leads to eternal punishment and separation from God. Ultimately, if one is to accept pluralism then all core doctrines of a biblical, historical Christian faith have to be discarded. Eck is absolutely right when she says, “Pluralism is not a given but must be created.”¹⁷⁵ Again, it must be created. Even though pluralism may be appealing due to its desire to accept all people into a salvific experience, it ultimately destroys Christian theism.

The issue is not whether a plurality of religions in the world exists specifically in America, for this has been the case for most of humanity’s documented history. Orthodox Christianity is now challenged with the fact that religious pluralism has turned into an ideology that has been accepted, taught, and encouraged on most levels of society. Due to the acceptance of relativism, which promotes an inhospitable view of absolute truth claims, and the diligent work of liberal scholars, professors, and clergy within the past 150 years, it can be said, “The truth-claims of the religions are taken to be merely different expressions of human subjectivity, devoid of ‘objective’ truth.”¹⁷⁶ This paradigm shift, along with the widely accepted liberal approach, which maintains that doctrines such as the incarnation should be viewed as metaphorical, has had devastating effects on orthodox Christianity.

On the surface, The Pluralism Project and the writings of Diana Eck appear to be a non-biased attempt to educate people on the growing religious diversity found in the United States; however, it is quite clear that the effects of The Pluralism Project and the efforts of Eck are subversive to Christian orthodoxy. In addition, as a professing Christian and Methodist minister, Eck constantly makes claims that are at odds with the Christian heritage she claims to follow.

¹⁷⁵ Eck, *New Religious America*, 70.

¹⁷⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Christian Faith and the World Religions,” in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds, John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 97.

The Pluralism Project is a practical vehicle used by religious pluralists to aggressively and systematically advance the ideology of religious pluralism in elementary and high schools, colleges, government, religious and civic institutions.

Even with these challenges before the Church, the gospel continues to be spread throughout the world and lives continue to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. The church, especially in America, must remember that pluralism has infected every stream of society to some degree, which can make sharing the gospel appear intolerant and narrow-minded. Yet Jesus' own words may seem intolerant and narrow-minded when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) and "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:14). Disciples of Jesus Christ must be diligent, standing firm on the absoluteness of the word of God and remember that Christians' "struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). Christians who adhere to the incarnation of Jesus and his exclusivistic claims must confront the theology and ideology of religious pluralism at every level of society, even in the Church. Christ followers must challenge the doctrines of religious pluralism with "gentleness and respect," always remembering the admonition to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3).

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