

What is God Going to Do With All Those People?  
A Look at Christian Soteriology



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To the reader:

I wrote and presented the following paper for a class I completed at Union Theological Seminary in the autumn of 2000. I took the class mainly because I, after completing seminary three years prior, found myself lacking one more theology course that I needed to take in order to meet the church's ordination requirements. In other words, I was not looking for an opportunity to write a two-dozen page paper; I was also writing my ordination papers while taking this class, and I was working full-time as a pastor in Newport News.

I am glad I took the class and wrote the paper. I learned a great deal from the process. I have been interested in these issues for some time, and I find that even today, matters of soteriology are at the forefront of the minds of the people I serve.

Rereading this paper more than a decade after I wrote it, I see in it the work of a much younger man. If I ever have an opportunity to rewrite it, I would add more categories of soteriology than I did, better acknowledging the particularity of Christ and the New Testament's assertion that salvation comes only through Christ, while maintaining that I am open to the hope that Christ's saving grace is greater than anything we could ask or imagine.

So what follows is the paper as it was submitted. When my professor returned it to me, his comment on the paper was "So basically, what you are saying that we should engage people of different faiths in conversation." Even today, it sounds like a good place to start.

Also, he gave me an A.

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“Are you thirsty?” said the Lion?

“I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill.

“Then drink,” said the Lion.

“May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

“Will you promise not to—do anything to me if I do come?” said Jill.

“I make no promise,” said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

“Do you eat girls?” she said.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.

“Oh dear! said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.<sup>1</sup>

C.S. Lewis’ encounter between Jill and the Lion illustrates for us the traditional Christian soteriology: salvation comes only through a person’s acceptance of Christ as Savior. Those who accept Christ gain eternal salvation after death and those who reject Christ are doomed to eternal torment in the fires of Hell. The road each person travels in life leads to an inevitable fork, and at that fork a person has a very important choice to make with significant consequences if one chooses incorrectly.

Of course, the question this raises is the title of this paper: “What is God going to do with all those people?” What about the billions of persons who have not chosen Christ? As technology and commerce and globalization make it easier and easier for us to know persons of different religious backgrounds, we learn that these “other” people are our neighbors and our friends. They teach our children and they love and nurture their own. They risk their lives in defense of our nation. They are honest and sincere in their

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, in *The Quotable Lewis*, Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, ed., Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton Illinois, 1989, p. 57.

disciplined pursuit of God, sometimes in ways that would shame most Christians in the West today.

In this paper, I will attempt to show why this salvific aspect of Christian doctrine is vital for the person writing theology, why we must begin with this question. I fear that this question is one that we answer too quickly or not at all. Either many, many people are damned or no one is or we just don't think about it at all and hope for the best. I will explore some of the existing options for understanding Christian soteriology and propose some possibilities for interfaith dialogue while showing why this question has a rightful place in Christian prolegomena.

Those who believe that consideration of interfaith dialogue is a betrayal of a biblical mandate often fail to recognize that the relationships between God's "chosen" people and "outsiders" was an issue not only since the time of the Bible but during that time as well. In Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus, the King of Persia, is referred to as God's *anointed*, the only Old Testament passage where the word "messiah" refers to a non-Israelite.<sup>2</sup> In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus praises a Samaritan, Samaritans who were deemed in 2Kings 17:24-34 as religious apostates, and Jesus uses the Samaritan's good deeds to teach his Jewish audience a lesson of compassion and mercy.

It is interesting to note that the Roman empire, the world power during the early history of the Christian faith, was quite comfortable with religious syncretism; the indiscriminate mixing of elements from various religions. In essence, members of different sects from different parts of the empire were welcome to worship their own gods, as long as

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical references in this paper are taken from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

they were willing to believe that, although they had different names, they were ultimately the same as the Roman gods. This allowed to Romans to maintain peace. However, in this world both Jews and Christians appeared to be unbending fanatics, with their insistence upon a strict monotheism.<sup>3</sup> For example, when Herod placed a Roman eagle at the entrance of the Temple, the Jews revolted and the revolt was suppressed by force. During the childhood of Jesus, there was a revolt against Archelaus, the son of Herod that resulted in the destruction of a city near Nazareth and the crucifixion of two thousand Jews. Such rebellions continued until and beyond the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.<sup>4</sup>

Christians were just as devout in their insistence upon the particularity of the Christian faith. Anyone who has considered the history of the ancient church is familiar with the stories of martyrdom at the hands of Rome. When Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia in 111 (during the rule of Emperor Trajan), he began to call Christians before him and question them as to the substance of their illegal faith.<sup>5</sup>

Many brought before him claimed to have abandoned the faith or denied ever being Christian. Pliny required them to pray to the Roman gods, burn incense before an image of the emperor, and curse Christ. Once an accused person had done this, they were free to go. Those who persisted in the faith were executed, more for their obstinacy in the face of Roman rule than for their faith, and persecutions such as these would continue off and on with varying severity until early in the fourth century.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco, 1984, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

The early church could not accept a theological self-understanding where faith in Christ was of equal validity to the religions of the world around them. Claiming faith in Christ was necessary at all costs, and it was better to die Christian than to live pagan. The Christian commitment was to Christ alone and this commitment was sealed with the blood of centuries of persecution. Whether we like it or not, we are the inheritors of that faith and the task of writing and reading and critiquing theology cannot be done without first considering what it means for us today to claim faith in Christ in and in relation to a largely non-Christian world.

Three options have developed in response to this issue and I will deal with each of them here. I call them the Traditional Christian option, the Christian Universalist option, and the Pluralist option.

#### THE TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN OPTION

The traditional option is where this paper began, with Jill learning from the lion that there is no other stream from which to drink. Those who ascribe to the traditional option believe that God, in God's grace, mercy, and love, has intervened in human history incarnate in God's son, Jesus Christ and only through faith in him can one hope for salvation from the eternal torment of Hell. Whether a person believes in the Arminian notion of salvation through free choice and perseverance in the faith or the predestinarian notion of irresistible grace and election to salvation, there are persons who will be saved and live in eternal communion with God and those who will live in eternal punishment.

Those who hold to this option have ample scripture upon which to base their beliefs. To name a few:

“Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:13-14).

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:42-44).

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! (Luke 12:4-5).

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath. (John 3:36)

Traditionalists will argue that one cannot read verses about the love and mercy of Christ and pretend that these verses dealing with wrath and judgement do not exist, or if nothing else, to gloss over them too quickly. If Christ died to save us, he certainly died to save us from *something*. There is, therefore a crisis in the lives of all people that begs each us to make a personal decision for Christ. We, as sinful humans who have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) cannot stand alone before a perfect and righteous God, thus it is only through acceptance of the divine grace offered by Christ that one can be saved, for who ever denies Christ can expect to be denied *by* Christ (Matthew 10:33).

Taken literally, these verses (and verses like them) make a compelling case for the absolute dedication to Christ alone. It helps to explain the courage of the martyrs and the fervor of Christians today who consider themselves to be conservatives or fundamentalists. For these Christians, any voice in the religious community that speaks of truth to be found in faith communities that do not focus on Christ are considered voices of deception, voices that would lure people away from the truth of biblical salvation in the name of Jesus Christ.

Within such a theology, the rest of the world is easily identified as a mission field. The rest of the world, even those who are devout and sincere practitioners of other faiths, persons who describe genuine experiences with the divine are considered residents of the world into which Jesus commissions and sends his disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). In 1877, Evangelist Dwight L. Moody described it this way:

I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, "Moody, save all you can." God will come in judgement and burn up this world, but the children of God don't belong to this world. They are in it, but not of it, like a ship in the water. This world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer; if you have any friends on this wreck unsaved you had better lose no time in getting them off.<sup>7</sup>

To the adherents of this theology, God is above all righteous and just: the righteous are saved and the wicked are punished. Everyone has an opportunity to get in the lifeboat of Christ and be saved. The problem, as John Hick has identified, is that not everyone has equally easy access to the life-boat while others were never informed that the ship was even sinking at all: He states that "the problem can be posed very concretely in this way. If I had been born in India, I would probably be a Hindu; if in Egypt, probably a Muslim; if in Sri Lanka, probably a Buddhist; but I was born in England and am, predictably, a Christian."<sup>8</sup> If Hick is correct that this is a fair assumption, then a person's eternal home is one that is controlled largely (although not entirely) by forces beyond that person's control.

I, for example, was born into an American Christian family. I attended worship services, confirmation class, Sunday school, etc. I could have just as easily been born in a remote African jungle and perhaps not even heard of Jesus Christ, or if I had I might have

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<sup>7</sup> Dwight L. Moody, "The Return of Our Lord" in *The American Evangelicals: 1800-1900*, William G. McLaughlin, ed., Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion, Fourth Edition*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990, pp. 109-110.

heard a message that was so wrapped in the culture of the West (a culture foreign to me) that I could have never appropriated that gospel message into my life. Furthermore, accepting Christ may have stripped me of my home, my name, my community, and my family in ways the Christian missionaries who evangelized me never had to experience.

Even those who live in largely Christian areas will find that there is often disparity among the ability persons have to choose Christ for reasons beyond their control. There are persons molested as children in their churches by their pastors, there are persons who are only a generation removed from losing loved ones in the Holocaust, there are persons who have had their faith challenged through tragedy in ways that those who would quickly write them off as “damned” or “unsaved” have never experienced.

Despite its problems, the traditionalist option is understandable. Part of the same gospel message that promises eternal life is a command to spread the gospel. It is also noteworthy that since the traditionalists believe so deeply in direct interpersonal sharing of the gospel, they are also the ones who encounter the most direct interpersonal rejection of the gospel, a risk that a great many Christians avoid by never risking it at all.<sup>9</sup>

To this, some Christian theologians have suggested the possibility that in Jesus Christ, God has created a means by which all persons may be saved, a way that is not limited to the “accidents of history.”<sup>10</sup> This theology of salvation can best be described as Christian universalism.

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<sup>9</sup> David Lowes Watson, *God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST OPTION

There are a number of different ways to come at this particular theology. St. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons (c.140-c.202) developed a doctrine of Christian universalism while attempting to explain the problem of evil. Irenaeus believed that a goodness which develops in humans by our free choices in the midst of temptation and suffering is intrinsically more valuable than a goodness that God simply created in us readymade. In other words God could have made us permanently perfect and placed us in a perpetual paradise. However that kind of world, although the most enjoyable place to live would not be the best place to become children of God.<sup>11</sup> As Paul understood it, “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:4-5).

As Hick points out, in order for Irenaeus’ theodicy to make sense, there must be a life after death that will make all of this suffering worthwhile.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Irenaean theodicy necessitates *all* humans “attain the highest heavenly state.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the person who murdered a lifelong friend of mine forced me to seriously reexamine some critical aspects of my faith, and in a sense, helped to make my faith stronger. Since this

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<sup>11</sup> Hick, pp. 44-45.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 47. Hick also points out problems with the Irenaean theodicy, one of which is that human suffering often causes a person to abandon faith rather than misery always strengthening faith. Furthermore, he points out that it is debatable whether or not the *necessity* of human suffering necessitates the *degree* of human suffering we have seen in events such as the Holocaust.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

person is a necessary character in the divine drama of salvation, he too would have to be saved in spite of himself.

Origen of Alexandria (c.185-c.254), on the other hand argues for a Christian universalism based in an eschatology that includes all people being made subject to Christ:

The end of the world, then, and the final consummation, will take place when every one shall be subjected to punishment for his sins; a time which God alone knows, when He will bestow on each one what he deserves. We think, indeed, that the goodness of God, through his Christ, may recall all His creatures to one end, even His enemies being conquered and subdued. For thus says Holy Scripture, 'The Lord said to My Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool' [Psalm 110:1)...What, then, is this 'putting under' by which all things must be made subject to Christ? I am of the opinion that it is this very subjugation by which we also wish to be subject to Him, by which the apostles also were subject, and all the saints who have been followers of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Origen does not doubt the judgement of God or the punishment for sins. However he understands them in the context of a high Christology, where Christ's power to save includes the salvation of those deemed his enemies. The unrighteous are in fact punished, although their "punishment" is nothing other than the eternal love of Christ.

Yet another way of looking at the Christian Universalist option is to consider the twentieth-century theologian David Lowes Watson. In his 1990 text, *God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation*, he outlines a Christian theology of universal salvation where the Christ event is seen as the "explosion" of God's grace into the world.<sup>15</sup> He takes quite seriously Paul's words in Romans 5:18-19, where the apostle says

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

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<sup>14</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, in *Readings in the History of Christian Theology: Volume 1; From It's Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation; First Edition*, William C. Placher, ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 40-41.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, p. 11.

and concludes, “If Adam’s sin could affect countless human beings, including those who have not shared in Adam’s particular transgression (5:14), surely God can go one better, and justify countless human beings through the righteousness of Christ.”

To Watson, the church has made the mistake of equating the receiving of divine grace with a “privileged status that it was never meant to enjoy.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, he draws a distinction between salvation and discipleship. Quoting the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, he maintains that Protestants have made the mistake of failing to be concerned with “who God is” and instead being concerned with “what God is for man [sic].”<sup>17</sup> The result is an anthropocentrism that is “more concerned with human response to God than with what God has to say about the human condition.”<sup>18</sup>

Watson argues that

The theological constructs of Paul, based on centuries of Jewish history, must now be extended by two millennia of church history. To the semantics of Jew and Greek must now be added those of Christian and non-Christian. And if Paul was concerned to place Jew and Gentile under the same accountability to the gospel, yet eschatologically without the advantage of the law, so it must be our concern to place Christian and non-Christian under the same accountability to God’s saving righteousness and justice, yet eschatologically without the advantage of the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Discipleship, therefore, is not a “privileged status” but people, like the Israelites, who are set apart not so that they might consider themselves elite or superior to the world but instead set apart for a servant role, for a special task for God. For Christians that task is the proclamation of the good news of God’s salvific work in the world in Jesus Christ, a proclamation of both word and Christlike deed.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

Criticisms of Watson's universalism are plenty.<sup>20</sup> It appears that he performs some exegetical acrobatics in order for his theology to make sense. He reads the same scriptures that deal with damnation and the importance of personal salvation as the traditionalists. However, he only addresses them within the larger context of God's universal grace that is not limited to personal response. Watson does not deny that one must be saved and that this salvation only occurs through the event of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God in Jesus Christ. However, he asserts (much like Origen) that God's grace and salvation will win out in the end.

Watson has also been criticized for reducing the importance of discipleship by distinguishing it from salvation. The obvious question asked by many whom are familiar with his work regards why one would want to undertake the risk and the cost of discipleship at all. Furthermore, it begs the question as to why Christians would bother the evangelism of the world, since the world's salvation seems (in the end) to be totally independent of human response. Watson's reply to this is based in the incarnation: not only does the believer experience the joy and peace of reconciliation with God, a spiritual homecoming, but also

The reason and the purpose of evangelism, and for being a Christian disciple, is to help Jesus with this unfinished task. As long as there is pain or suffering in the world; as long as there is injustice or oppression; as long as any of Christ's little ones hurt, or starve, or are neglected, Jesus suffers with them (Matthew 25:42-45). What more pressing motivation could there be for a Christian to evangelize than to bring Christ's suffering to an end, as quickly and as thoroughly as possible?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I took a class with Dr. Watson at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. in 1995 where he outlined his theology and I heard these objections firsthand.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, pp. 93-94.

A third criticism of Watson's universalism deals with this worldwide suffering of which Christ is inexorably a part. The argument is that this universalism, despite its high Christology and its insistence upon the primacy of God's grace, does not give enough credence to God's justice in the face of human sin. During a lecture by Watson on this topic, a student sitting next to me shouted at him, "What about Hitler? Are you saying even he is saved?" Watson maintains that the grace of God is so powerful and the Christ event is so significant that all human sin, even the sin that resulted in the systematic murder of millions, is no match for God's grace. However, to many, this answer is difficult, if not impossible to swallow.

#### THE PLURALIST OPTION

In 1735, a young Anglican priest named John Wesley was sailing to North America with dreams of preaching to the native Americans in Georgia. After reaching Savannah, Wesley asked a Moravian Christian named Gottlieb Spangenberg for advice as he began his new ministry in the New World. In his diary, he recorded that conversation:

He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know he has saved you?"<sup>22</sup>

This excerpt of conversation between Wesley and Spangenberg gently describes one of the central tenants of the Christian faith, the belief that Jesus Christ is not simply a truth revealed by God that is somehow relevant for some and not for others. Instead, Christ is

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<sup>22</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco, 1985, pp. 209-210.

seen among most Christians as God's supreme self-revelation, God's necessary and vital intervention for the salvation of the world.<sup>23</sup>

The pluralist is able to look at things quite differently. John Hick suggests that instead of understanding religions as mutually exclusive systems that we should "see the religious life of humanity as a dynamic continuum within which certain major disturbances have from time to time set up new fields of force...These major disturbances are the great creative religious moments of human history from which the distinguishable religious traditions have stemmed."<sup>24</sup> He goes on to assert that is inappropriate for one to "speak of a religion as being true or false" for this would be the same as suggesting that "a civilization as [being] true or false. For the religions, in the sense of distinguishable religio-cultural streams within human history, are expressions of the diversities of human types and temperaments and thought forms."<sup>25</sup>

The pluralist is one who, again in the words of Hick, sees that

It is possible to consider the hypothesis that the great religions are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate divine reality but that their differing experiences of that reality interacting over the centuries with the differing thought forms of differing cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration – so that Hinduism, for example, is a very different phenomenon from Christianity, and very different ways of experiencing and conceiving the divine occur within them.<sup>26</sup>

For Hick, the future is one where comprehending different religions as different ways of "conceiving the divine will become normative, to a point where different religions will become more akin to different denominations within religious traditions today."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I suppose this depends upon how one defines "Christian," but that is a topic for another time.

<sup>24</sup> Hick, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

The mere thought of this can be quite unsettling, both for the Christian working under the traditional and the Universalist soteriologies. Basic Christian doctrines such as the incarnation, atonement, the Lordship of Christ, sin, and salvation all must be reexamined under the Pluralist understanding of theology. Was Jesus correct in asserting “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)? If another person does not need the forgiveness of sins offered in Christ, why do *I* need it? Whether or not a person subscribes to Hick’s assertion that it is not appropriate to speak of a religion as being true or false, it appears to a great many Christians that there are certain claims that certain religious groups make about truth and about God that conflict and thus cannot both be true.<sup>28</sup>

#### POSSIBLE LESSONS

I am a pastor. I have served local congregations for nearly six years. I understand the opinion that discussions about pluralism can be quite unsettling to persons who are very intelligent, sincere, and devout in their faith. I also understand how discussions regarding religious pluralism can easily be regarded as a “selling out” of Christian identity in a move towards a postmodern relativity of truth. Theologically, I see myself somewhere between the traditional Christian option and the Christian Universalist option. I believe in the power of the gospel to transcend the powers of race and culture and tradition and history that so often keep persons from acceptance of the invitation of Jesus Christ. However, I also believe that God is more patient, more loving, more gracious, more forgiving, and ultimately more self-revelatory than I could ever hope to understand.

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<sup>28</sup> Hick also says, “the skeptical thrust of these questions goes very deep; for it is a short step from the thought that the different religions cannot all be true, although they each claim to be, to the thought that in all probability none of them are.” *Ibid.*, p. 110.

I have to admit that the pluralist option is sometimes rather unsettling to me. I read the stories of the martyrs and I am overwhelmed at what they willingly gave in their conviction that to call Christianity merely another voice in a diverse society was to make a mistake with eternal consequences. Maxie Dunnam tells this story:

At a world conference on evangelism, speaker after speaker had waxed eloquent about religious pluralism, the need and the demand for interreligious dialogue, the negative impact of Christians witnessing to people of other religions, the danger of imperialism in churches with a passion for evangelism, the equality of world religion. We heard that Jesus is our Savior, but not necessarily the Savior of humankind and that the paths to salvation in other religions are as legitimate as the way of salvation in the Christian religion. A bishop from Pakistan shocked the assembly by making an intervention. He stood and with conviction and passion simply said, "If what you are saying is true, then I must go home and tell the Christians in our land that they don't have to die for the faith any more."<sup>29</sup>

What I would like to suggest is a benefit that pluralist dialogue can have for those who consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ and members of Christian communities of faith. To begin, I would like to draw on the work of Diana L. Eck who works for the Pluralism Project at Harvard University.<sup>30</sup> Eck asserts a proactive element to pluralism, saying

Pluralism is not the sheer fact of this plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality. Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple...Such diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to *participate* in pluralism.<sup>31</sup>

By this participation, she means to say that religious people must be willing to go beyond mere tolerance and engage one another in real dialogue. Tolerance, to Eck, can be an

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<sup>29</sup> Maxie D. Dunnam, "Ideas Have Consequences," in *Circuit Rider*, January-February, 1998, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> The Pluralism Project can be found online at [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org).

<sup>31</sup> Diana L., Eck, "Challenge of Pluralism," in *Nieman Reports* "God in the Newsroom" Issue, Vol. XLVII, No. 2, Summer, 1993, p. 7.

obstacle to engagement for it “does not require us to attempt to understand one another or to know anything about one another.”<sup>32</sup>

Hick notes that “until comparatively recently each of the different religions of the world had developed in substantial ignorance of the others.”<sup>33</sup> The result of this, as Eck says, is that there is still a great deal of ignorance and stereotyping that goes on between different religious groups. In America, we have a great religious identity yet a very low level of “religious literacy.” Furthermore, the institutions that train religious leaders seldom, if ever require courses about other faiths.<sup>34</sup> These practices can only serve to isolate religious groups from one another and perpetuate ignorance and stereotyping of different groups.

As I write this, I am sitting in my study at the church I serve in Newport News, Virginia. I can hear hymns being sung by the Korean United Methodist Church of the Peninsula, a congregation that shares our building, as they worship in the second night of their revival services. They are singing tunes I recognize in a language I do not. I wonder about the story of Christianity in Korea and the impact Christianity has had on that land. I wonder what interfaith dialogue is like between Korean Christians and Korean non-Christians. Last summer, my congregation helped a Christian family from the largely-Muslim Sudan immigrate to the United States after two years as refugees in Egypt. I wonder what it was like to be a Christian there and I wonder if I am faithful enough to maintain my faith in such an environment.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Hick., p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> Eck, p. 8. Eck also notes the irony that “every high school graduate is required to dissect a frog, but every high school student is not required to know something about Islam – the religion of a fifth of humankind.”

All week, I heard about the violence in the Middle East and prayed for it to end. Last week, the remaining crew of the U.S.S. Cole returned to Norfolk.

This paper probably raises more questions than it answers. However, the experience of researching and writing it has convinced me that what the world needs is for religious people around the world to have enough faith in their faith to not feel as though the need to fear those who live and believe differently than they do. I do not believe the future of humankind should exist in a relativistic society where one faith is just as good or as true or as valid as any other. Eck believes that the religious confessions made by adherents of different faiths need not be “left at the door” during dialogue between different faiths, for this dialogue must not pretend these commitments do not exist but instead persons of different faiths must encounter one another *as we are* if we are to genuinely learn from one another.<sup>35</sup> Pluralist dialogue is frequently criticized on the grounds that it deprives everyone equally of the confessions of their faith and thus results in a vague and blurry theism. Eck asserts this is not the case.

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<sup>35</sup> Eck, p. 8.

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned Cyrus of Persia and Jesus' use of the Samaritans as examples of persons outside of the Jewish mainstream who God could use nonetheless as purveyors of divine truth. There are others: In Amos 9:7 the prophet taught that the same God who brought Israel up from the land of Egypt brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. God used Job and the centurion at the crucifixion (Mark 15:39) to reveal divine truth.<sup>36</sup> If this can take place in our Scripture, why not in our response to Scripture? If we, as Christians, trust that we are in care and guidance of God's Holy Spirit, must we be afraid that our faith might be corrupted by dialogue with persons of other faiths? Furthermore, if we assert that all persons are made in God's image, is it impossible to believe that we might find some of the divine nature in persons who do not think and act as we do?

I believe that pluralist dialogue can be of great benefit to Christians. William Placher points out two examples of ecclesial mandates for interfaith dialogue:

Vatican II, for instance, called Roman Catholics to 'sincere and prudent dialogue' with unbelievers on the grounds that the church 'can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with the entire human family with which it is bound up, as well as its respect and love for that family, than by engaging with it in conversation. The Presbyterian Church's Confession of 1967 noted, 'Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.'<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, David Tracy suggests that:

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<sup>36</sup> I was pointed to these scriptures in William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology; A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1989, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Christians can learn from Buddhists to rediscover the power of Paul's talk of "self-emptying"; Christian ideas of grace can help Pure Land Buddhists clarify their differences with other schools of Buddhism; Buddhists can learn from Christian emphases on social justice to rethink their understanding of what "compassion" means; adherents of many other traditions can learn from a neo-Confucian like Wang Yang-ming strategies for combining political and mystical elements of faith.<sup>38</sup>

I suppose at this point I need to explain how a paper on pluralism became (mainly) a paper on soteriology. I suppose it is because most Christian thought begins here. That is, many Christians regard everything in terms of salvation and then make our decisions about what is true or what it means to be human or what it means to be in relationship with God from there. I believe that the issue of the relationship between the Christian and the non-Christian world belongs in the prolegomena of Christian theology because so much of how we go about the business of living out our theology is informed by what we believe about God's relationship with the rest of the world. Are we conquerors, sent to change the minds of the rest of the world for Christ? Are we proclaimers, sent into the world to tell of an inevitable salvation that is already taking place? Do we believe the Christ event is significant for all people or just those in the Christian colony? It seems that as humans involved in a relationship with the divine, one of our fundamental questions we should ask is, "What does the divine expect of all of us in return?"

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<sup>38</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1987, pp. 94, 102. (Quoted in the Placher text).

In answering this question, I believe that the Roman Catholic position from Vatican II quoted above is correct. One way we can show our love for the world is through our willingness to engage it in conversation. In Mark 10:46-52, Jesus encounters and heals a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. I believe it is true that Christ provided him with more than physical healing. I believe Christ showed the love of God to him through conversation. Instead of healing him from a distance with the arrogance that says, “Don’t worry, I know what you need,” Jesus engages Bartimaeus in conversation. He asks, “What do you want from me?” and he gives Bartimaeus an opportunity to respond on his own terms and to speak for himself.

I believe that adherents of different religions who are willing to know one another as *people*, not as nameless and faceless stereotypes or as enemies to our respective faiths, can truly learn from one another and perhaps one another with more respect and an end to the violence described by the bishop from Pakistan. I believe that dialogue with those who think differently than we do can help us to reexamine what we believe and in doing so, make our faith stronger. Perhaps this is one way for the human family to take a step towards the vision of the prophet Isaiah who yearned for a day when the Lord “shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4).

#### A PRAYER FROM KENYA

*From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,*

*From the laziness that is contented with half-truth,*

*From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, Good Lord, deliver me. Amen.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Carlton R. Young, editor, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, 1990, p. 597.



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