

Sharing the Truth in Love: How to Relate to People of Other Faiths fulfills the promise of the title. With excellence, Ajith Fernando is preeminently qualified to write this book. Raised in a Christian family in a multi-religious community, the author left his native Sri Lanka to further hone his scholarly skills in the West. As a result, the book is wholly trustworthy. . . . Fernando enables the reader to understand and relate more wisely and lovingly with those of other faiths, and he reinforces the Christian's conviction, living in a skeptical world, that the Christian gospel is unique. But he does more. He spurs us on to effective witness among those of other faiths. I know of no other book that does these things as effectively.

—Robertson McQuilkin

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SHARING

**THE TRUTH
IN LOVE**

HOW TO RELATE TO
PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

Ajith Fernando

*Sharing the Truth in Love:
How to relate to people of other faiths*
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PREFACE

When Dr. Robert de Vries of Discovery House Publishers invited me to update my book, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions*, I did not realize that the scene in the church and in society had changed so much in the 15 years since I wrote it. I discovered that a completely new book was needed. Although a few sections from my earlier work have been retained, this is essentially a new effort. It is in some ways a companion to my other book, *The Supremacy of Christ*. These two books, along with my book *Crucial Questions about Hell*, will combine to provide a comprehensive theological base for Christian witnessing.

When I was in my late teens I heard a preacher who argued that not only those who receive Christ have salvation. Before the sermon was over, I walked out of the church in disgust. My mother, who is a convert from Buddhism and is much bolder than I, gave the preacher a piece of her mind after the service.

Around that time I was at another service on what was called Evangelism Sunday. The preacher claimed that Christ has saved the whole world. Evangelism is nothing more than telling these people that they are saved and now can live like saved people. I realized that we must give an intelligent response to these views that are growing in our churches. But being of a shy disposition and therefore unable to engage in effective debate, I believed that the way to unleash this burden was by writing. This book is an expression of that realization.

I am grateful that the Lord has given me opportunities to interact with those of other faiths from my childhood. Within three houses of the

home where I grew up in Colombo, Sri Lanka, we had a Buddhist temple, a Buddhist family, a Hindu family, a Sunni Muslim family, a Shiite Muslim family, and a single person with New Age beliefs.

We were friendly with all these people. As a child I would go to the Buddhist temple and chat with the monks there. In my late teens and early twenties I met almost every Saturday night with a group of seven people, all except two of whom were Muslim. Another was an atheist and a fan of Bertrand Russell. We spent hours talking about various issues, including religion and philosophy.

I studied at a university that had only recently been converted from a Buddhist seminary to a university. The vice-chancellor there was a Buddhist monk. I stayed in a Buddhist home while I was there. And our ministry in Youth for Christ (YFC) has been predominantly with those of other faiths. Few joys on earth exceed the thrill of strategizing for such ministry and then going into the fields God has prepared for us to harvest.

I have been a youth worker for almost 25 years. The primary audience of my regular teaching ministry is teen-agers and the young volunteers and staff who work with them in the ministry of YFC in Sri Lanka. I have tried to teach the Bible and Christian doctrine to them. I have done this teaching alongside our evangelistic ministry among unreached youth. I have been active in the “theologizing” process that YFC has engaged in as we decide on what truths to communicate in our evangelistic programs and how best to communicate them. I have talked with many Christians and non-Christians about the issues addressed in this book.

What I learn through my ministry with YFC, and also at our church, I try to share with a wider audience through my itinerant ministry and writings. When I minister outside YFC, Christian laypeople and workers who have no time to consult technical works, have, I think (perhaps I should say, “I hope”), found my basic explanations of theological and exegetical matters helpful. This book is an extension of that ministry. I share with you the results of our attempts to theologize about relating to people of other faiths from the multi-faith context in which we have been called to serve.

This is not intended to be a groundbreaking work of scholarship, though I hope you will find fresh insights here. I have depended on the work of many scholars. Generalists such as I rely on the specialist scholars of the church, and I laud their efforts with deep gratitude to God.

I usually spend two weeks a year teaching in a seminary in Sri Lanka or abroad. One of the reasons I do so is that I gain the privilege of interacting with scholars. I have written for laypersons and busy Christian workers who do not have the time to read the more specialized books of the scholars.

Extensive endnotes are included to help the reader who wants to delve further into the issues discussed here. When choosing what material to include, I asked, "What should my readers know about this topic?" and "What are the questions they are asking?"

My ministry would be empty and ineffective without the colleagues God has given me. It is my joy to dedicate this book to some of them with whom I have partnered closely. Kumar Abraham and Noel Berman are former YFC staff and continue to be close friends. Mayukha Perera, Rajadurai Rajeevan, and Nadarajah Satchithanandakumar are my present colleagues. Working with each one of these brothers has been a great blessing and joy to me.

(John) Indrasiri Wijebahu is from the Sinhala congregation of the Nugegoda Methodist Church. I will never forget the day I went to preach there, taking John and his wife, Dalreen, as singers. Only the church custodian was there, and we were told that no one had come to worship for about three months. They were new believers at the time and had not yet joined a church. Not only did they join this church, but they also persuaded my wife and me to transfer our membership there. It was John's hard work (aided perhaps by the reluctant involvement of my wife and me) that enabled us to restart this congregation and see it grow and flourish. This is all the more remarkable considering that John is paralyzed from his waist down. Most of the members of this congregation are from other faiths. It is a great joy for us as a family to serve there under our own gifted pastor.

My hope is that this book will help its readers to understand and relate more wisely and lovingly with those of other faiths. But more importantly I hope it will convince them of the uniqueness of the Christian gospel and spur them to effective witness among those of other faiths.

To

Kumar Abraham
Noel Berman
Mayukha Perera
Nadarajah Satchithanandakumar
Rajadurai Rajeevan
(John) Indrasiri Wijebahu

celebrating the joy of
partnership in evangelism

THE CURRENT SCENARIO

A missionary about to return home after twenty-eight years in Sri Lanka was interviewed by that country's leading English-language Sunday paper. He explained how he had changed after coming to a multi-religious country.

"I was rather intolerant of other religions at the time and thought that mine was the only true one," he said. "But all that changed during a visit to Anuradhapura" (a Buddhist holy place).

The missionary said he experienced such a sense of peace that he felt he was truly in the presence of God. The difference in faiths did not matter. From that experience this missionary said he learned "the lesson that all religions, lived up to their highest ideals, have the common threads of love and compassion in them. So," he said, "from that moment my ministry became not creed but need."¹

This missionary reflects an attitude that is rapidly gaining popularity in the church today. Many Christians are living in an environment that is not conducive to maintaining the old belief in the uniqueness of Christ, and many are giving it up. A Sri Lankan church leader said that when he sees Buddhist devotees worshipping at the Bodhi tree, which is the tree sacred to Buddhists, he sees the Holy Spirit at work there.

Grappling with the Uniqueness of Christ

Yet we have many texts in the Bible that proclaim that Christ is the only way to salvation. Here are just a few.

- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).
- “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).
- “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).
- “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).
- “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).

Sustaining these beliefs today is a challenge, especially when we meet such nice people who belong to other faiths. Some are at a loss to know what to do when they work close to a non-Christian. A Christian musician who came to minister in Sri Lanka stayed in the home of a missionary who was away on furlough. At the time, the home was occupied only by a Buddhist worker. The believer was uneasy about the prospect of living under the same roof with this person. He was unfamiliar with the idea of relating so closely with a person of another faith.

Some years ago our ministry started a work in unreached villages. Ultimately this became a separate church-planting movement. Soon our staff workers and the believers in one of the villages were coming under attack. On one occasion, the staff workers were badly beaten.

We knew that the monks in the Buddhist temple nearby were behind this persecution. When I visited the village the believers persuaded me to visit the temple and explain to the monks what we were doing. The monks reluctantly agreed to meet with me.

Prior to my visit, I asked the former Buddhists in our ministry to tutor me about how I should address the monks. From their suggestions, I chose words which I felt did not compromise my convictions. When I went to the temple, I removed my shoes at the gate, as is the custom

when one enters a Buddhist temple. I sat on the floor while the monk, who was younger than I, sat on a chair. This too is an accepted custom that expresses the respect the layperson should have for the monk.

I was simply following the customs of the people. This was part of the etiquette of the village, which I needed to respect. But some Christians felt that I had compromised my faith by acting in this way.

In today's society Christians must have guiding principles about how they should interact with non-Christians. We must also have convictions about how to respond to other beliefs. Christians in both the East and the West are faced with a special challenge as the environment is not conducive to maintaining the traditional belief in the uniqueness of Christ.

Religious Pluralism

The dominant philosophy regarding religious truth in the world today is *pluralism*. This has always been the approach to truth in Eastern religions like Hinduism and many forms of Buddhism.² Recently pluralism has become the dominant philosophy in the West as well.

Biblical Christians have correctly accepted pluralism over the centuries when it applies to other areas. For example, in the political sphere it is healthy to have different parties in competition with each other. In the sphere of Christian worship it is necessary to have different forms of worship according to the culture of the people worshiping. It is preferable to have different forms of sports and recreation to offer to students in a given school. We left-handers are grateful that we were not forced to write with our right hand as left-handed children were forced to do in an earlier generation.

Religious pluralism, however, can be held only by rejecting the Christian claim to possess absolute truth. This claim implies that the gospel has the ultimate truth that all people everywhere need to accept. We believe that God has revealed truth to humanity in the Scriptures and supremely in Jesus. This truth is without error and is the only way for the salvation of all peoples all over the world.

We accept that there is truth in other religions,³ but not absolute truth in the sense that we just described. Religious pluralism says that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Therefore the different religions are "equals in the universe of faiths," as John Hick, the foremost pluralist in the church, said.

A Copernican Revolution?

Hick called for a Copernican revolution in our theology of religions. Copernicus realized that the sun, not the earth, is at the center of the solar system and that the other heavenly bodies including the earth revolve around it. In the same way, Hick says, "We have to realize that the universe of faiths centers upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all religions reflect in their own different ways."⁴ In his later writings Hick modified his position to include the Theravada Buddhists who do not include God in their system of beliefs. Instead of God, therefore, he placed what he called "the Real" in the center of his universe of faiths. He even included dedicated secularists, such as Marxists, as reflecting the Real.⁵

A key to understanding pluralism is to understand its view of truth. Biblical Christians have always believed much truth can be discovered by observation and experience without God's direct revelation. This is called general revelation, and it is discussed in chapter 5. But Christians also believe that God has revealed His truth to us ultimately and definitively through direct inspiration of the Scriptures and through Jesus Christ. Pluralists deny this. They say that if God speaks at all, He does it through the different religions. Each religion contains facets of truth that come from the particular experience that followers of these religions have. So the holy books of Hinduism contain truths about God that are discovered through the unique experiences that the Hindus have had. The Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Taoist Scriptures contain truths discovered through the unique experiences of the people of those faiths.

Essentially then, in pluralism truth is discovered by people, or, as Hick would say, truth is human responses to the Real. In Christianity truth is something disclosed by God. Of course, Christians also discover truth, but this is truth that has its origin in God's disclosure and depends on the illuminating grace of God.

So the focus of truth is taken away from objective realities like God or the Bible. The Christian says, "I believe the Bible," and the Muslim says, "I believe the Qur'an." "I" is the subject and "Bible" and "Qur'an" are the objects. In the objective approach to truth, which is the approach

in orthodox forms of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the focus is on the object and not the subject—that is, primarily on what the Bible or the Qur’an says and not on what I believe.

Pluralism adopts a more subjective approach to truth. The focus is placed on the subject, the individual, not on the object (the Bible or the Qur’an). So, “You have your truth and I have mine. If your truth is good for you, that’s great! My truth is good for me.” There is no truth that should be universally accepted by all because there is no such thing as absolute truth. In Athens, Paul said, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Such a statement would have no place in the pluralist scheme.

In pluralism, then, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Rather, all people are engaged in a common quest for more truth. So we learn from each other. Conversion is unnecessary, though it may take place if I come to feel that a certain religion is better for me than my previous religion. That is fine for me, but I must not insist that everyone needs to be converted to my new religion.

I once spoke in a seminar in Sri Lanka on the topic of Christian mission, and I tried to show that we must be involved in evangelism with conversion as a goal. The speaker who followed me presented another view: “If a Buddhist comes to me and says he wants to become a Christian, I discourage him from doing so,” he said. “I tell him, ‘You have a great religion for which I have the highest respect. Go and study your religion and try to be a good Buddhist.’”

Some people are even saying that the new mission of the church is to help create a harmonious society where everyone appreciates the other’s religion and where we learn from each other.⁶ They are calling this the new ecumenism. Indian churchman Stanley Samartha speaks of “new Christological insights” which “go far beyond the narrow confines of Christians to a deeper and larger ecumenism that embraces the whole of humanity.”⁷ The teaching of Jesus that He came to bring not peace but a sword is interpreted to refer not to the uniqueness of Christ but to Christ’s opposition to things like materialism, greed, and exploitation. The various religions must unite, we are told, to combat these dangerous trends in society.

Modernism and Postmodernism

The philosophy of religious pluralism has harmonized well with another phenomenon that has swept the Western world: *postmodernism*. Many of the features of postmodernism were already part of life in the so-called Third World. But in recent times these features have become part of life in the West in a big way. Postmodernism from the West has harmonized well with the thinking of trendsetters in the Third World, and the postmodern influence is very evident in the media in places like Sri Lanka. In fact some are saying that many Third World nations are going to skip the modern era and go straight from a pre-modern era to a postmodern era.

To understand postmodernism we must first understand the distinctive features of what was known as the *modern era*. This is because postmodernism is a reaction to some of the excesses of the modern era. There is no unanimity about the dating of these eras, but generally the modern era is dated from around the late eighteenth century to the mid to late twentieth century.

The distinctive feature of the modern era was its emphasis on the rational. It was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century European movement that emphasized the reliability of reason. The extreme expressions of this movement held that truth could be reached only through reason, observation, and experiment. Science was the supreme field of study during this era.

Some of the characteristic products of the modern era will help us to understand it. Darwin's evolutionary theory looked at nature as a completely self-contained system. Its emphasis on logically explained progression was extended beyond science to other fields too. Applied to the field of religion, people held that religions evolved from primitive forms such as polytheism to the more advanced forms such as monotheism.⁸ Because practicality was the most important criterion in making moral decisions, the pragmatic idea grew: "If it works it must be good."

In such an environment stealing became wrong not because the Ten Commandments said so but because it interfered with the economic functioning of society. Euthanasia and abortion on demand became popular in the closing years of the modern era, as practical considerations were allowed to overcome moral objections to these practices.

Marxism is considered one of the fullest expressions of this era. It gave materialistic and economic causes for all human problems. Some date the beginning of the postmodern era from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.⁹ And the heavily rational expressions of evangelical Christianity, which do not value emotions and experience, are also considered typical expressions of the features of modernism.

Postmodernism is a reaction to some of the excesses of the modern era.¹⁰ Scientific developments in the twentieth century contributed to the loss of trust in objective facts. Einstein's theory of relativity caused a revolution in science, which the development of quantum physics continued. Both these trends turned people's faith away from trust in the primacy of objective truth—that is, truth which can be arrived at through the "absolute" laws of science.¹¹ Similarly, developments in the field of philosophy began to emphasize what is in our minds rather than on the objective facts "out there."¹²

Postmoderns complained that, with so much emphasis on science and objective facts outside of us, people were dehumanized. No longer did they have the opportunity to express their feelings and instincts. So the postmodern generation has been called "an instinctually stimulated generation" where "people prefer to feel than to think."¹³ The Nike motto, "Just Do It," or the Sprite advertisement, "Obey Your Thirst," are good expressions of this approach to life.

Laurence Wood has helpfully described the three eras by suggesting three representative bumper stickers. The premodern bumper sticker would say, "Let the church think for you." The modern would say, "Dare to think for yourself." And the postmodern would read, "Don't think! Just let it happen."¹⁴

Postmodern ideas seem to have penetrated every facet of Western society. Recently I met the former director of a key postgraduate institute for management studies in Singapore, who told me that the most cutting-edge management studies are heavily influenced by postmodern thought.

So postmoderns were revolting against the idea that people were being tyrannized by objective realities, like rules and beliefs, and objectives and goals, without a proper place being given to their feelings and instincts. In this environment we can see how postmoderns would embrace the subjective approach to truth, with its focus on me, "the

subject.” This is the approach of pluralism too. So pluralism has found a fertile breeding ground in postmodern culture.

The importance of feelings and instincts—“the inner life and experience”—has also resulted in a new interest in spirituality. About 25 years ago secular humanism, which devalued the place of the religious, was very popular in the West. Now it has been replaced by a more spiritual approach to life. Unfortunately, most present expressions of this spirituality are New Age and occultic. In chapter 11, we will show that Christian spirituality alone can fulfill the deep yearnings of the heart that are finding expression in postmodern spirituality.

Some forms of postmodernism are hailing the death of the individual subject in favor of the communally-based self. We are seeing a new interest in community and in what Doug Groothuis describes as “cultural constructs of meaning.”¹⁵

The explosion of the charismatic movement is one expression of the postmodern thirst for a spiritual experience to replace dry, ultra-rationalistic religion.¹⁶

The yearnings that lie at the heart of postmodernism can be fulfilled adequately only by Christ. The world may not want this at the moment, as the Christian way includes things they may detest, such as submission to the teachings of Scripture and to the will of God. But without throwing up our hands in despair, we must ask how we can best communicate the gospel to postmoderns. And we will do so with the conviction that Jesus is the only One who can fill the void in the heart of the human being.

Various Christian thinkers and churches have attempted to respond to postmodernism with contextualized¹⁷ theology¹⁸ and ministry.¹⁹

“Fundamentalism” and the Persecution of Christians

If pluralism represents one end of the scale on the issue of tolerance of other faiths, what is now being called “fundamentalism” represents the other. But both approaches are united in their hostility to evangelism that seeks to convert people to Christianity.

The word *fundamentalism* seems to have become popular after a book entitled *The Fundamentals* was published in 1909.²⁰ This book was actually an affirmation of the fundamentals of the historic Christian faith in response to the modernism and theological liberalism that were

sweeping the churches. Christians committed to these fundamentals became known as fundamentalists. More recently this word has been used in a more restricted sense to refer to evangelicals in the USA who have rightist political leanings.

But this word is now also being used to identify extremist Buddhists, Hindus, Orthodox Jews, and Muslims who are asserting the rights of their religion in such a way as to deny an equal place in society for those of other faiths. These fundamentalists wish to prohibit the conversion of their own people to another religion.

If we look at the root of the word *fundamentalism*, the use we are discussing here is incorrect. The word suggests that these people are trying to return to the fundamentals of their religions, but what many of these people espouse may not be in keeping with the fundamentals of the religions themselves!²¹ In Sri Lanka, some people who would be called Buddhist fundamentalists are using violence in their efforts to stamp out Christian evangelistic efforts, even though tolerance is a fundamental tenet of Buddhism. A more accurate way to describe what are called Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists are Hindutva advocates and Islamists respectively.²²

Words often take their meaning from their roots. However, words also may take meanings ascribed to them through popular use. This is what has happened to the word *fundamentalism*. It has come to mean something that contradicts its root meaning. I will use it in this popular sense here.

This type of fundamentalism often equates a religion with a national identity. For this reason, some people say that if you are a true Indian you should be a Hindu. Ethnicity may be included in this form of nationalism. So in Sri Lanka some people say that only Buddhists from the Sinhala race are true Sri Lankans. Christians therefore would be considered second-class citizens. That is not such a big problem. What *is* a serious problem is that Christian evangelism is considered a foreign threat to the nation's security and integrity.

Our evangelistic efforts are often associated with Western expansionist designs. It is alleged that because the West cannot control the Third World through the old imperialism, it has resorted to economic and religious imperialism. By pushing the Western style of market economy and by converting people of other faiths to Christianity the West is said

to be continuing its design of controlling our nations. Efforts are being made in many countries to outlaw conversion. In many Muslim countries it is illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity, though Christians can convert to Islam.

I believe that when Western countries give devotees of Eastern religions the freedom to practice and propagate their faiths, they make a strong statement to the rest of the world. Those of us who live in non-Western countries are grateful that this is the case in most Western countries. Every time a Muslim mosque or a Hindu temple comes up in a neighborhood in the West, Christians living nearby express their dismay with statements like, "What is happening to our country?" But we here are grateful that Western Christians give others this freedom.

Though these religions make use of this freedom in the West, many of them do not give a corresponding freedom to Christians in their countries. The tolerant Western example could well help us in the Third World as we seek to practice and propagate our faith today.

We are grateful for the concern shown by Westerners when we are under attack, and we hope this concern will act as a warning and a deterrent to those who are attacking Christians. The president of a Muslim country in our region, under pressure from Islamists, banned a new version of the Bible just before it was released. Shortly after that he visited the USA. Some senators asked him about the recent banning of the Bible. Then a prominent religious leader informed him that he was the first national leader in history to ban a Bible. He promptly lifted the ban upon his return home!

You will recall the village where I visited the temple after the Christians there had been attacked. After several years of worshiping in temporary structures, these Christians were preparing to build a permanent church building. A Buddhist monk found out about it and set up a Buddhist temple next to the church. A few days later the church's temporary building was burned down.

The leader of this ministry, Adrian de Visser, made some important observations. He said that we must not stop our work because of this attack. We may need to be careful about programs that are too provocative to the Buddhists. But this is not a time to leave the area. After some years of violent opposition, the Buddhist leaders will be forced to recognize that

this church is a permanent entity in the area, and the persecution will die down. This is a sequence of events seen often in church history.

Second, it may be necessary to ask some of our foreign friends to write to relevant authorities in Sri Lanka about human rights violations against Christians. We saw this in action when the village pastor of the work just mentioned was severely assaulted (and saved from possible death by his Buddhist neighbors). At the time, the police took little notice. But this time, after the burning, the police were much more supportive of this same worker and even severely warned the monk of legal action. Foreign pressure helps these authorities do what they are supposed to do—protect innocent, law-abiding citizens!

Buddhist and Hindu extremists become agitated when they realize that a church building is being constructed. For this reason some strategists suggest that churches should refrain from putting up large buildings. Instead they suggest that the Christians meet in houses, possibly in different locations on different Sundays. This may be the best option in many cases. It worked well with the house churches of China that thrived despite the brutal Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong.

Yet converts to Christianity from religions like Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism desire to have a place of worship to call their own. This reflects the importance of the mosque or temple in their former religions.

“Liberal Fundamentalism”

While non-Christians have the freedom to practice and propagate their faiths in the West, sometimes the Christians are actually denied this freedom in the West. This is also a form of fundamentalism, according to the “popular use” definition. We may call it “liberal fundamentalism.”

It is a rapidly growing trend in the West today. The fact that many are reacting so excessively against “traditional values” may be an indication of an uneasy conscience in the West after the mass rejection of its spiritual heritage. Perhaps we in the non-Western world could help out by speaking up for our brothers and sisters in the West when “liberal fundamentalist” authorities discriminate against them.

The situation recalls Paul’s statement: “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). True Christianity has never been popular in any society for very long. The

gospel is too radical a message to maintain popular acclaim. Perhaps after an unusual revival people will be impressed for a duration. But after the initial glow passes, society will find it difficult to tolerate some of the implications of the gospel, especially its uncompromising attitude to unbelief, immorality, and injustice. And it will turn against the true followers of Christ.

Whether we live in the East or the West, the North or the South, if we are truly faithful to the call of God we will be persecuted. Again, without lifting up our hands in helpless resignation, let us like the early church use our wisdom and respond to the prompting of the Spirit to continue faithfully with a wise and bold witness for Christ in the world.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism is a significant development that has recently gained prominence in the church. Pluralist theologian John Hick says inclusivism “represents the nearest approach to a consensus among Christian thinkers today.”²³ We respond to inclusivism in the last chapter of this book.

Inclusivism’s ascension came first in the Roman Catholic Church, gaining momentum after the Vatican II Council of the 1960s. Unlike the pluralists, the inclusivists believe that Christ is absolutely unique. But they say that the salvation He gives may be mediated without the hearing of the gospel. In other words, those outside the Christian religion can also be included in Christ’s saving work.

Some of the more radical forms of this view are still found among Roman Catholic theologians. The Catholic Church has had a “sacramental view” of salvation. They believe that salvation is mediated through the sacraments, like baptism and the Eucharist, which they regard as means of saving grace. Catholic inclusivists extend their understanding of sacraments to the rites of non-Christian religions and say that non-Christians could receive salvation through the rites of their own religions, though it is Christ who saves them.²⁴ These “saved” people of other faiths are sometimes called “anonymous Christians” because, even though they don’t call themselves Christians, they are recipients of Christ’s salvation.²⁵

Perhaps the most famous presentation of this view is in the book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, by Catholic priest Raymond Panikkar. He

says, “In the wake of St. Paul we believe we may speak not only of the unknown God of the Greeks, but also of the hidden Christ of Hinduism—hidden and unknown and yet present and at work because he is not far from any of us.”²⁶ Panikkar wrote:

The good and bona fide Hindu as well as the good and *bona fide* Christian are saved by Christ—not by Hinduism and Christianity per se, but through their sacraments, and, ultimately, through the *mysterion* active within the two religions. This amounts to saying that Hinduism also has a place in the universal saving providence of God and cannot therefore be considered as negative in relation to Christianity.²⁷

The controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng refers to the non-Christian religions as the “ordinary” way to salvation, whereas Christianity is a “very special and extraordinary” way.²⁸ Because of this belief in the special place that the Christian gospel has, I expect that people like Küng would encourage some sort of proclamation of the gospel to non-Christians.

We could say that these Roman Catholics represent one extreme of the inclusivist position. On the other extreme are evangelical inclusivists, like Sir Norman Anderson. In their attempt to answer the difficult question of the fate of those who have not heard the gospel they have come up with another form of inclusivism. These inclusivists say that those who respond in repentance and faith to what they know of the supreme God can be saved even though they may not have heard the gospel of Christ.²⁹ They do not say that Christ saves people through other religions as the Catholic inclusivists claim. Instead they focus on the type of response similar to that described in the Bible as saving faith. Others, especially Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, are less restrictive in their exposition of inclusivism than Norman Anderson.³⁰

The traditional view that one must hear and respond to the gospel of Christ in order to be saved is called *exclusivism* or *particularism* or *restrictivism*.³¹ Some evangelical scholars would have previously been described as inclusivists but now prefer to call themselves exclusivists. They leave the door open to salvation only to those who exercise saving faith as described in the Bible, even though those doing so may not

know Jesus. This is presented as a possibility rather than a dogmatic certainty. Their emphasis is placed on the saving work of Christ and its efficacy as the exclusive way by which people may be saved.³² Others prefer to remain agnostic on the issue.³³ Clark Pinnock criticizes this approach, calling it “a cop-out to avoid answering a fair and urgent question in a responsible way.”³⁴

Affirming Uniqueness in This Environment

The trends described above have combined to cause significant problems for Christians who affirm the uniqueness of Christ, especially in nations where they are a minority. During the writing of this book I was constantly made aware that the people in my nation will intensely dislike what I am writing. They have angry memories of the colonial period when Westerners considered themselves superior to us.³⁵ Most of our religions have a pluralistic approach to truth. Sri Lankans know that we affirm that salvation is only through Christ. This makes them angry, especially when they associate us with the colonial rulers who came from supposedly Christian countries.

Each week over the past few months letters and articles critical of Christians and Christianity have been published in the newspapers in Sri Lanka. Some of them are written in an angry tone. Almost always at the heart of the anger is their revulsion to the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ.

For us this opposition has been difficult to endure. We love our people and seek to be their humble servants, refusing to leave our mission regardless of what happens. We cannot be bitter about their anger against us. Instead we must approach them with respect, love, and graciousness. We desire the best for them, but the best thing we can do for them is to tell them about the God who can grant them eternal salvation. They view us as arrogant traitors for doing that. We need grace and wisdom to respond appropriately. We also need courage and perseverance to remain faithful to the task.

What we are experiencing in Sri Lanka, every Christian will experience to some extent. The whole world is growing in its hostility to the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ. So I trust that what I say will be of help to all who read it.

Paul's Example

Paul's ministry is extremely helpful in learning how to relate to people of other faiths. His ministry in Athens, recorded in Acts 17:16–34, is particularly instructive. It is a fairly detailed description of ministry with people whose religious background was completely different than Paul's. We will glean many principles from this passage to be applied to our contemporary situations. There are those who believe that Paul was a failure in Athens. But there is no hint in the text to suggest that Luke did not intend his readers to use this passage as a model of effective evangelism.³⁶

Chapter 1 endnotes

¹ Alfreda de Silva, "Change of Heart after Anuradhapura Visit," *The Sunday Observer*, March 18, 1984.

² In practice, Buddhists and Hindus hold to certain religious tenets that they consider true (such as the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism).

³ See chapter 5.

⁴ John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mind," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, editors (Glasgow: Collins: Fount Paperbacks, 1980). See also John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973). For evangelical responses to Hick, see Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994); and Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; and Leicester: Apollos, 1991).

⁵ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁶ This was the thrust of a speech given a few years ago at the conference of evangelism of one of the larger denominations in Sri Lanka.

⁷ Stanley J. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, editors (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 79. See also Raymond Panikkar, "Toward an Ecumenical Ecumenism," in *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, Norman E. Thomas, editor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 273–275; and Paul F. Knitter, *No*

Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 153–54.

⁸ See “The Origins of Religion” in chapter 7.

⁹ For this description of modernism I have relied heavily on Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

¹⁰ Postmodernism is described in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, David S. Dockery, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995); Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996); J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); and Veith, *Postmodern Times*.

¹¹ Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

¹² See Veith, *Postmodern Times*, chapter 2: “From the Modern to the Postmodern.”

¹³ Laurence W. Wood, “Telling the Old, Old Story in the Postmodern Age,” *The Asbury Herald*, Autumn 1996, 3.

¹⁴ Wood, “Telling the Old, Old Story,” 4.

¹⁵ In a personal letter to me.

¹⁶ This idea was presented to me by Canadian church leader Dr. Brian Stiller.

¹⁷ I have discussed contextualized ministry in chapter 4.

¹⁸ Millard J. Erickson critiques evangelical theologians who respond to the postmodern challenge in *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998). Under negative responses to postmodernism he lists David Wells, Thomas Oden, and Francis Schaeffer. Under positive responses he lists Stanley Grenz, J. Richard Middleton, Brian J. Walsh, and B. Keith Putt. D. A. Carson presents a balanced approach in *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House; and Leicester: Apollos, InterVarsity Press, 1996). In Britain, Dave Tomlins believes that evangelicalism is too closely tied to modernism. See his book, *The Post-Evangelical* (Triangle, 1995). David Hilborn responds to this proposal in *Picking up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London: Hodder and

Stoughton, 1997). Douglas Groothuis' book, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), is also worthwhile.

¹⁹ See Hilborn, *Picking up the Pieces*; Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Ockholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Charles Strohmer, *The Gospel and the New Spirituality: Communicating the Truth in a World of Spiritual Seekers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996); Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999).

²⁰ See Bruce L. Shelley, "Fundamentalism," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J. D. Douglas, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 396–97.

²¹ See Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict: Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999). A penetrating analysis of Islamic and Hindu extremism.

²² These are the terms used in Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict*.

²³ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 88. Quoted in Clark H. Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips, editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 101.

²⁴ See Nihal Abeysingha, *A Theological Evaluation of Non-Christian Rites* (Bangalore Theological Publications in India, 1979). See also Patrick Kililombe, "The Salvific Value of African Religions," in *Mission Trends, no. 5: Faith Meets Faith*, Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, editors (New York: Paulist Press; and Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 50–68; and Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Toward an Ecumenical Christophany*, revised and enlarged edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 84–85.

²⁵ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, 75–77.

²⁶ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 168 (italics his).

²⁷ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 85–86. Roman Catholic theologian

Gavin D'Costa says his view "affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God," in *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 80.

²⁸ Hans Küng, in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, Joseph Neuner, editor (London: Burns and Oats, 1967), 52–53.

²⁹ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and the World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), chapter 5.

³⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, "The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells, editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988); Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); and John Sanders, *No Other Name?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

³¹ See Dick Dowsett, *God, That's Not Fair!* (Sevenoaks: OMF Books and Bromley, Kent: STL, 1982); Hywel R. Jones, *Only One Way* (Bromley, Kent: Day One Publications, 1996); Erwin Lutzer, *Christ Among Other Gods: A Defense of Christ in an Age of Tolerance* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994); Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994); Ramesh P. Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Moody Press, 1994); and J. Oswald Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?* (also published as *What of the Unevangelized?* Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

³² Chris Wright, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Christ* (East Sussex: Monarch, 1997), 51.

³³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 88, 196; Calvin Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997); John Stott in David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 327–329.

³⁴ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 152.

³⁵ See chapter 3 for a response to the charge of intolerance and arrogance made against those who affirm the uniqueness of Christ.

³⁶ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 477–78.