The Catholic Church’s Theological Approach to other Religions: From Conversion to Conversation

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Abstract: This essay attempts to map the nuanced journey of the Catholic Church’s theological approach to other religions since its birth in Judaism to the present day. Priest demonstrates the slow historical progression from exclusivism to inclusivism, which finally emerged in the 20th century, and concludes with the Church stepping hesitantly, but inevitably, upon the threshold of pluralism. Priest argues that the history is a story of transformation, from only to also, from conversion to conversation.

Key Words: Catholic Church – interreligious relations; Catholic Church – mission; exclusivism; inclusivism; pluralism; salvation outside the church

Accounting for the history of major Christian theological approaches to other religious traditions over the past two-thousand years, three major positions, Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism, corresponding to five Christian epochs (as Panikkar schematises them) emerge as useful categories. Traditional ways of telling this story according to the traditional Catholic Church Magisterial position tend to present it as linear and somewhat simplistic, however, it is not entirely linear and is far from simplistic. There are always exceptions, tensions and nuance. The history of the major Christian theological approach to other religions is inextricably entangled with social, cultural and political history. It quickly becomes evident that one cannot understand the shifts in one without understanding the shifts in the other. The historical account begins with Christianity’s birth in Judaism, its subsequent claiming of the divine birthright and blessing for itself, and millennia of theological defence of it being the ‘only’ religion and mode of civilisation. It ends on a threshold of ‘also’, where civilisation is marked by plurality, God and God’s blessing cannot be understood as less than universal, and the edges of Christian theological approaches to other religious traditions are blurred.

Extra Ecclesiarm Nulla Salus

For nearly two thousand years of Christian history this axiom was the constant and unanimous teaching of Tradition, which stated that the Mystical Body of Christ is the Catholic Church and that outside of it there is no salvation. From the patristic period to the middle of the twentieth-century, the official Catholic Magisterial position on the approach to other religions was underscored by an ecclesiocentric, exclusivist theology. In these terms, ‘Church’, a physical, institutional reality, was understood as the centre of the Christian mystery (as distinct from Christocentrism), and belonging to it was defined strictly according to baptism. ‘Salvation’, accessed only through this Church, was understood primarily as concerning the soul’s entrance, after death, into heaven - eternal
life with God. Without salvation it was understood that one would suffer eternal damnation in hell.

The history of the major Christian theological approaches to other religious traditions begins in the Patristic period. Raimon Panikkar’s schema of the Christian Epochs\(^1\) sees two epochs taking place within this period, of Witness and of Conversion. In the first years after Jesus, those who witnessed to the truth of his resurrection and to the divine mystery at work in his life, did not count themselves outside of the Jewish tradition (to which they largely belonged). However, the nascent Christian church, while beginning as a branch of Judaism, progressively came to define itself against Judaism “in its increasing desire for legitimation and with its growing integration with the Roman Empire and the West.”\(^2\) By the very early fourth-century, Rome became a Christian state under Constantine (312 CE) and it was established that “to be a Christian is to be converted [my emphasis] to Christianity.”\(^3\)

In a theological history inextricably interwoven with time, place and socio-cultural circumstance, it is important to contextualise the beginning of the early Christian church in order to better understand the birth of its theological approach to other religious traditions. Teasdale notes that the Catholic Church, in terms of its knowledge of and proximity to other religions, was for some seventeen centuries situated within “cultures of isolation”.\(^4\) “The early experience of the Christian community was primarily confined to the Jews, and this relationship was not very positive.”\(^5\)

John Hick’s research reveals something of the nature of the evolution of the Jewish Jesus Renewal Movement into exclusivist Christian theological community in his excavation of a term such as ‘Son of God’ which came to be understood as applying literally and uniquely to Jesus, but had been used variously in the ancient world and understood metaphorically in the Jewish tradition. According to Hicks, “As Christianity expanded beyond its Jewish roots into the Graeco-Roman world the metaphorical son of God was gradually transformed in Christian thinking into the metaphysical God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity.”\(^6\) Furthermore, the New Testament texts, in many respects apologetics, seemingly unequivocally ascribed Jesus’ uniqueness in the plan of salvation as the Son of God and sole mediator of saving Grace. Verses such as “No one comes to the Father except through me” (NRSV John 14:6); “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (NRSV Acts 4:12); “before Abraham was, I am” (NRSV John 8:58); “baptism,...now saves you,...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (NRSV 1 Peter 3:18-21); and “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NSRV Mt 28:19), became seminal in a theological understanding of the Christian Church as the unique mediator of salvation in the post-70 CE period. In this time, “Teachers...such as Barnabas (ca. 97), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Tertullian (ca. 160-225), and Origen (ca. 185-254) argued, often vehemently, that the Jews misinterpreted the Scriptures. Only Christians rightly read the prophecies; only Christians

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2 M. Görg, *In Abraham’s Bosom: Christianity without the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 50
3 Panikkar, *Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, ch. 4.
5 Ibid.
6 J. Hick, ‘Is Christianity the only true religion, or one among others?’ (lecture, *Theological Society*, Norwich, England, 2001); [www.johnhick.org.uk/article2](http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article2).
worshipped in true ways. The Jews, blind to God’s ways and lacking in faith, were mired in the law.”

Christianity, and in turn its exclusivist theological approach to other religious traditions, were both first born out of a supersessionistic fulfilment consciousness regarding Judaism which “left little theological room for the continued existence of Jews.” As Mary Boys laments with regard to Jewish-Christian history and by inference more broadly, “Our [Christian] history would have been radically different if we could have seen that God’s relationship with one tradition does not diminish the sacredness of the other’s.”

It was as early as the third-century that Origen, the Greek father of the Church, gave Christianity its persisting theological formula, “Let no one fool himself; outside of this house, i.e. outside of the Church, no one is saved; for if someone goes outside, he becomes responsible for his own death.”

Cyprian, a North African Episcopal contemporary of Origen, fiercely echoed and further popularised the sentiment: Extra ecclesiam nulla salus. In the fourth-century Augustine infamously voiced the conviction in his “Reply to Faustus the Manichaen” (Bk 12.9), that “the Church admits and avows the Jewish people to be cursed”, relegated to eternal damnation and punishment, because they would not accept Christ. This was a particularisation of his broader understanding that all who were separated from the unity of Christ by being “separated from this Catholic Church – however much he believes he is living laudably – will not have life but the anger of God rests upon him.”

As the fledgling Christian Church increasingly formulated, clarified and articulated its theology, as in the examples above, it became increasingly clear about its own identity, especially in relation to the ‘other’. Diana Eck highlights the relationship between exclusivism and identity building.

Oneness and onlyness are the language of identity...This identity is in part what social theorists call an “oppositional identity”, built up over against who we are not. Exclusivism is more than simply a conviction about the transformative power of the particular vision one has; it is a conviction about its finality and its absolute priority over competing views. Exclusivism may therefore be the ideological foundation for isolationism. The exclusivist response to diversity, whether, theological, social, or political, is to mark ever more clearly the boundaries and borders separating “us” from “them.”

Looking at the events of the extensive Christian epochs of Crusade and Mission (c. 4th – 20th centuries), it is clear that the prevailing Christian exclusivist theological approach towards other religions did precisely what Eck describes, informing an ideological foundation – theological, social and political – for the building of an isolationist empire. As the ‘one and only’ means of salvation, and by inference, of civilisation (in the sense of enlightenment), expansionism, imperialism and colonisation in the name of Christ were utilised as a means of homogenising faith, culture and politics across Europe – and beyond.

From the fourth-century when Church and State came together under Constantine, Christianity became increasingly equivalent with Christendom, not just a religion but a

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7 M.C. Boys, Has God Only One Blessing? (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 49.
8 Ibid, 7.
9 Ibid, 5.
11 Augustine, Letter 141. 5, in Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 3:795, as quoted in Teasedale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 84.
civilisation. In Panikkar’s categories, the Christian epoch of Crusade unfolds. Taking an eleventh-century example, the features of the epoch of Crusades and the socio-politicised theology of exclusivism of that time become clear. Late in the eleventh-century, the Byzantine emperor, who, under attack from the Muslim Turks, had surrendered nearly all of Asia Minor, appealed to Pope Urban II for help. At the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban addressed a large crowd, commanding them to go to the assistance of the Greeks and to win back Palestine from Muslim rule.

They have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and devastated the empire. If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impurity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them. On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ’s heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends…. Christ commands it.

All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested. O what a disgrace if such a despised and base race, which worships demons, should conquer a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ! With what reproaches will the Lord overwhelm us if you do not aid those who, with us, profess the Christian religion!

The Spanish Inquisition of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries further echoes the major Christian theological approach to other religions illuminated in the above speech by Pope Urban. The Inquisition was the result of the reconquest of Spain from the Muslims and the policy of converting Spanish Jews and Muslims to Christianity. While the Inquisitions were certainly politically motivated, they were nevertheless underpinned by an exclusivist theology which cannot be put aside. Facing expulsion, torture or death, many Jews and Muslims had nominally converted to Christianity but privately continued the practice of their own faith. The Inquisition began as a means of investigating and punishing these false converts and became an important tool in enforcing the limpieza de sangre (“cleanliness of blood”) against descendants of converted Jews or Muslims.

It is clear that providing an historical account of the major theological approaches to other religions becomes a lens through which to understand much of Western history in the Common Era. The pre-modern exclusivist Christian theological approach saw the ‘other’ not so much in terms of a ‘religious other’, but as a racial other. From this perspective the world was divided clearly into ‘us’ and ‘them’, Christians and pagans, pure and impure, saved and damned. Christian theological exclusivism was a tool of ethnocentrism and a product of a limited worldview. As Paul Griffiths explains,

Western Christians had little occasion to think or write about those things that we now usually call religions. Islam did not come into existence until the seventh century, and until the Renaissance was most often thought of by Christians as a Christian heresy rather than a non-Christian religion; the religions of India, China, Japan, Africa and America were effectively unknown until the sixteenth-century….The result was that Christianity was rarely, if ever, thought of by Christians as one religion among many: Christians did not

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14 The acts of the Clermont council have not been preserved, but five accounts of the speech of Urban, which were written by men who were present and heard him, are recorded. The account of Fulcher of Chartres is quoted here.

before the modern period, have the idea that there is a type called religion of which there are many...instances.\textsuperscript{15}

The continued expansion of the Christian empire through colonisation and missionary activity in the name of Christ and utopian cultural ideals characterises the post-Reformation period. It is the Epoch of Mission according to Panikkar, ushered in by the discovery of the Americas in the late fifteenth-century and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth. It is an interesting epoch for therein there began to be new and explosive shifts in the understanding of the Christian religion and of religions and the world, which eventually engendered major shifts in the Christian theological approach to other religions. The idea of multiple religions largely entered the Christian theological consciousness through the fracturing of Christianity, and with the increase of European knowledge about non-European civilisations. The internal shift within Christianity was first propelled by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century. The homogenous European Christianity of Catholicism was broken and with it came the necessity to create political and socio-cultural structures which could peaceably contain a variety of Christian groups which proposed incompatible understandings of Christianity and were often hostile towards each other. At the same time, through exploration, mission and expansion beyond the West, "It began to seem natural to European historians, philosophers and theologians to think of these forms of life as the religions of India and China, and also to think of Christianity as the religion of Europe."\textsuperscript{16} The tension between the desire for religious tolerance of others and the missionary task "to implant the Church and kill the ignorance and evil of all false religions (including the Catholic or Protestant 'other')"\textsuperscript{17} would become the hallmark of both the modern and post-modern major Christian theological approach to other religions.

The voice of the official Catholic Magisterium finally sounded with a new intonation in the nineteenth-century under Pope Pius IX and the First Vatican Council. While maintaining that salvation's doorway was uniquely opened through the Church, Pius IX rejected that those "invincibly ignorant of Christ and his Church" would consequently be "condemned to eternal punishments."\textsuperscript{18} The natural law of God was understood to be written on every human heart, and saving grace would not be denied by God to those who, while ignorant of the Church, strove towards the living of a moral life. This position, while progressive, still implied the traditional Christian/pagan dichotomous worldview but left salvific room for the "pious heathen."\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, in the face of increasingly pressing changes in the European landscape, the first Vatican Council, in Dermot Lane's words, "By way of reaction against Modernism...deliberately isolated itself from historical, social, scientific and cultural developments. Barriers were erected between life and theology."\textsuperscript{20} It was a final attempt to defend the theological 'culture of isolation’ on all fronts. It would not be until the twentieth-century, with its unassailable social, cultural and political paradigm shifts, that the Catholic Church would officially and explicitly state their recognition of truth and virtue in other religions, and begin to engage in a paradigm shift of their own.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Panikkar, Dwelling Place for Wisdom, ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{18} As quoted in Teasedale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{19} Ulrich Zwingli, an important early Protestant Reformation theologian from Zurich, proposed this pre-Inclusivist notion of the "pious heathen."
In the mapping of the history of exclusivism as Christianity's major theological approach to other religions it is tempting to paint a linear picture. However, as Marcus Braybrooke and others serve to remind us, it is not nearly as unswerving or as un-nuanced as it appears in the official teaching and preaching.

The Christian tradition is not monochrome. The second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr hoped to meet Plato in heaven... In the Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa, who was a mathematician and an influential philosopher as well as a cardinal, suggested that behind all religious differences, there was one universal religion... In the seventeenth century, Robert de Nobli, an Italian Jesuit... who settled in Madurai in South India, started to wear the orange robe of a sunnyasi. When he taught the Christian faith in South India, he said, "The law which I preach is the law of the true God, which from ancient times was by his command proclaimed in these countries by sunnyasis and saints."

David Kerr, in tracing Muslim-Christian relations, describes an event of the seventh-century where the Prophet Muhammed orders his earliest convert community to flee Mecca and seek refuge in the court of the just and truthful Christian Negus of Abyssinia. They do find refuge there and Kerr reflects, "This early evidence of Muslims and Christians sharing common social and spiritual space reminds us that the history of Christian-Muslim relations began not as two separate circles confronting each other."

Later, around the fifteenth-century, there was a more extensive sharing of common social and spiritual space, "in Spanish cities like Cordova, Seville and Toledo, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peaceful co-existence and many distinguished scholars and philosophers played a crucial role for exchanging cultures."

In the thirteenth-century while Pope Boniface was reasserting the idea that there was no salvation or forgiveness outside of the ‘ark’ of the Church, Thomas Aquinas was asserting something new relating to his understanding of a universal divine providence that could deliver humanity. He identifies "what he calls implicit faith as sufficient for salvation, and he extends this understanding to non-Christians." The Catholic Magisterial position would not echo Aquinas’ nuanced position for another six centuries.

The echoes of those earlier progressive, more inclusivist thinkers loudly resonate in the final of Panikkar’s five Christian Epochs, Dialogue. This epoch saw the greatest theological change in its approach to other religions in the 2000 years of Christian history. The twentieth-century itself was a catalyst for change. The traditional understandings underpinning Christian theology could no longer be sustained in the face of new and multiple socio-cultural realities. There was an official shift from exclusivism to inclusivism, and a theological recentring from ecclesiocentrism to Christocentrism. It is an epoch still presently being lived in which the horizon of pluralism looms ever closer and beckons ever more luminously.

The twentieth-century, with its modernism, its major crises and catastrophes, its rapid developments, and its shifts in political powers, led to new awareneses, and a rise in the consciousness of ambiguity rather than certainty:

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24 Teasedale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 85.
Two world wars, post-colonial independence movements and the advance of science, technology and secularisation began to undermine past assumptions. In the wake of such atrocities as the holocaust, Europeans began to question their right to claim any form of superiority over other cultures. Indigenous peoples and followers of other traditions began to assert their rights to exist on equal terms. As well, European churches were losing adherents such that the division between “Christian” and “non-Christian” peoples seemed arbitrary at best.25

Reviewing these same realities and shifts, Hans Küng commentates the new theological imperative at work. Unlike the barricaded position against history the first Vatcian Council had taken, it became “impossible to fabricate idealistic theological constructions of history any more. Theology [had]...to be practiced in the face of these concrete plural histories of human sufferings.”26

The fact that astronomies change while the stars abide is a true analogy of every realm of human life and thought, religion not least of all. No existent theology can be a final formulation of spiritual truth (Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Living of These Days, 1956). Unable to reassert again the traditional exclusivist theological approach to other religions in the face of all that had come to be in the new world, the Second Vatican Council envisioned and recognised the inclusivist possibility of salvation outside the Church, embracing all of humanity. While the stars would abide, the astrology finally changed.

“Extra ecclesiam nulla salus” was replaced by an understanding that rather than the unique Church of Christ being the Catholic Church, “the unique Church of Christ....subsists in the Catholic Church” (Lumen Gentium, 8). Quoting Gavin D’Costa, Teasdale’s discussion of Inclusivism presents its definition as a position which “affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions, while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God.”27 The inclusivist framework acknowledges “other religions as carriers of genuine revelation,”28 and “gives recognition to truth and moral values in the non-Christian traditions.”29 All of history is understood as being embraced by God’s eternal plan of salvation made known in Christ. The Holy Spirit’s activity is understood to be operative ‘outside’ of the visible body of the Church and mysteriously present in the heart of every person. Recalling the conciliar documents, Paragraphs 16 and 17 of Dialogue and Proclamation30 highlight the setting of new bearings upon the Christian theological compass with regard to the approach to other religions:

16. Nostra Aetate speaks of the presence in these traditions of “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all (NA 2). Ad Gentes recognises the presence of “seeds of the word”, and points to “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations” (AG11). ... Lumen Gentium refers to the good which is “found sown” not only in “minds and hearts”, but also “in the rites and customs of peoples” (LG 17).

17. This recognition impels the Church to enter into “dialogue and collaboration” (NA 2; cf. GS 92-93): “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values” (NA 2).

27 G. D’Costa, as quoted in Teasdale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 88.
28 Teasdale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 103.
29 Ibid.
Additionally, now nearly two thousand years on from Christianity's birth from Judaism and subsequent rejection of the Jews in forging Christianity's exclusivist claim to God's blessing, the Second Vatican Council moved explicitly away from the traditional theology of old covenant/new covenant theory, to asserting that there is only one covenant, for God “does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues” (*Nostra Aetate* 4). The immediate implication was the recognition that Jews continue to be an elect Israel and Judaism a living religion, rather than lost souls. In the major Christian theological approach to other religions, the language of “only” was transformed into the language of “also.”

Jacques Dupuis examines how a new exegetical approach to the Christian scriptures and the replacement of ecclesiocentrism with Christocentrism helped enable a theological approach which could hold the ‘also’ rather than insisting on ‘only’ in the twentieth-century. The New Testament texts, formerly understood as strictly affirming the uniqueness of Christ as the only ‘way’ of salvation, through correct interpretation, “according to criteria of exegesis and history in the historic context of the apostolic church, as well as in the contemporary context,” are able to sustain that affirmation of faith while not contradicting religious pluralism or leading to an exclusivist theology of salvation. And as Dupuis explains regarding Christocentrism, Christ, “not the church, stands at the centre of the Christian mystery...The Church as a derived mystery and utterly relative to the mystery of Christ, cannot be the yardstick by which the salvation of others is decided.”

The new inclusivist approach to the other religions, while a radical repositioning, still posited Christianity “at the top of a hierarchy of truth-teaching religions; it includes their truths, if they teach any, in its truths.” The idea of ‘anonymous participation’ in the singular path of salvation through Christ, first proposed by Karl Rahner, further characterises inclusivism. Distinct from Zwingler’s notion of the pious heathen who can perhaps attain salvation through the natural desire for a moral life inherent in a God-given human nature, Rhaner’s theory rests upon the notion of the “supernatural existential”...on the idea of his theological anthropology...of humankind in the concrete historical condition in which it is created by God and destined for union with God.”

The tension between dialogue, which hinges on the notion of the common search for truth across the religions, and proclamation, that salvation is still mystically axised in Christ, dually advocated by the Second Vatican Council and throughout the papacy of John Paul II, has been stretched and tested in the later years of the twentieth-century and on into the new millennium. Many contemporary Christian theologians, such as John Hick, can no longer manage to engage an authentic theological approach to other religions within this tension, understanding it rather as a contradiction, and have broken into the call for another paradigm – that of pluralism. Pluralism is the view that all major religions are equally valid and lead to God and salvation. Thus, no one major world religion is inherently better or superior to any other. Most religions, pluralists claim, stress love for God and love for fellow human beings and point out that no one religious tradition has a greater propensity for its faithful living a moral life. This is not the official theological approach of the Catholic Church. However, providing an historical account of major

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31 The idea of ‘only’ to ‘also’ in this context is developed by John Mbiti in ‘The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion’ in J. Wall (ed.), *Theologians in Transition* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 54-55.


33 Ibid, 77.


35 Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 53
Christian theological approaches to other religious traditions cannot be left at inclusivism. Inclusivism increasingly stands as a shifting middle ground between exclusivism and its more genuine opposite, pluralism. Pluralism is readily being used terminologically to describe the nature of the contemporary world - the global village - and a new means of theological navigation of that terrain justly and peaceably is being suggested. Fosdick’s analogy, quoted earlier, of stars abiding while astronomies change, was fitting to describe the movement from exclusivism to inclusivism. Most recently, within the theology of pluralism a paradigm change is being proposed, which while affirming the incapacity of a final formulation of spiritual truth, and calling for a change in ‘astronomy’, challenges the idea that even the stars abide, fixedly or without changing.

Revealingly, Hans Küng reflects on the transition marked by the Second Vatican Council that “No one – least of all the Concilium theologians – was striving for a uniform, standardised, theology of the kind embodied, for example, by neo-scholastic theology before the Second Vatican Council...Our goal is a plural theology, open to learn and ready to discuss; one which – rooted in the Christian tradition – can provide an answer to the challenges of our time.”

The challenges of the contemporary epoch, pushing always at the seams of Christianity’s major theological approach to other religions, are marked by new questions about the nature of God and revelation, the nature of salvation, the nature of the human person, and the demands of living in a society that is ambiguous and multiplicitous.

Küng voices a widely held pluralist view that “against the background of the paradigmatic transformation of society in general... the histories of theology, church and world must be analysed in conjunction with one another.” The kinds of social landscape change being referred to are focused upon by Gilkey, who details that, since 1945, “domination is no longer a possibility or a possible goal, ...world power must be shared, not only with other groups with their own interests but with groups holding quite other cultural and value systems...the continuation of our [Western] power – and that of our forms of cultural order – is precarious at best.” As shown in the mapping of its earlier history, this cultural ordering and triumphal imperialism of the West, which persisted for so long, was informed and sustained by an exclusivist Christian theology and simply no longer holds in understanding the world, or the religions. The new landscape is marked by choice and competition, a “market of world views – this faith or this ‘life style’ against that.” In light of this Berger proposes choice, the “crucial consequence of pluralism”, as its “heretical imperative.” The Church’s inclusivist approach to the other religions cannot see all of these choices as equal. Theological pluralism insists that each choice is valid. John Hick explores this equality using the example of a philosophical apologetic used by Christianity to validate their religious experience and subsequent claims about God.

In Christian terms, its conclusion is that one who experiences in his or her life, in greater or lesser degree, as being in the presence of God, as made known to us by Jesus, is rationally entitled to believe in the reality of that God, and to proceed to live accordingly. But if such an argument holds for the Christian experience of the divine, it

37 Ibid, 443.
40 Ibid.
must also hold for the Jewish, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist experiences. One must follow the Golden Rule and grant to religious experience within the other great traditions the same presumption of cognitive veridicality that one quite properly claims for one’s own.\footnote{41} The question arises today of how Christians can deny for others what they assert for themselves. A type of moral repugnance has developed around notions of proposing that a God who is loving and merciful with a passionate universal desire for all to be saved, could be compatible with a God who has a special relationship with some, and not others, who undertook “the action of creating a world in which it is possible that some are damned,”\footnote{42} or that one’s eternal destiny should be principally determined by “causes beyond their control (parents, teachers, local culture).”\footnote{43} As Eck challenges, “If we conclude that ‘our God’ is not listening [to the prayers of those from other faiths], then how are we to speak of ourselves as people of faith among other peoples of faith?”\footnote{44} Indeed, how are we to speak? The history of the major Christian theological approaches to other religions presently stands on a new threshold, exploring symbols of mutuality. “Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of attention to the power of the symbol of the trinity,”\footnote{45} notes Mary Boys. “We have not understood the triune God as a symbol of mutuality, or radical authority, and of community in diversity.”\footnote{46} This threshold has moved significantly from its wending way through two millennia, and five epochs of exclusivism and inclusivism, of Christian imperialism, isolationism, homogenisation, and hegemony. Through dialogue with other religions, understanding rather than certainty is being pursued and there is movement afoot into a new epoch, “from an age of conversion to an age of conversation.”\footnote{47} Theology and history, in the past standing one over the other, now stand as correlative. Praxis has become the test of Christian theological theory. The history of the Christian theological approach to other religious traditions, informed by its past and its present, moves inexorably towards a time when “the Church may be prompted to formulate and teach what it has not previously formulated and taught by coming to know of truths discovered and taught by those outside its boundaries.”\footnote{48}

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\footnote{42}{Berger, ‘From Secularity to World Religions,’ 167}
\footnote{43}{Ibid, 151}
\footnote{44}{Eck, ‘Is Our God Listening?’, 21.}
\footnote{45}{Boys, Has God Only One Blessing?, 173.}
\footnote{46}{Ibid, 172.}
\footnote{47}{Rufus Black, Melbourne theologian and ethicist, as quoted in ‘God of All Things,’ The Age (Melbourne, 9 April 2006), Extra Supplement, 14.}
\footnote{48}{P.J. Griffiths, Problems of Religious Diversity (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 63}