



# Reports

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*Thomas Paul Schirrmacher*

Christian Dialogue is oriented towards  
Truth in Relations: Apologetics, Dialogue,  
and Pluralistic Theology of Religion

**2025/10**

International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



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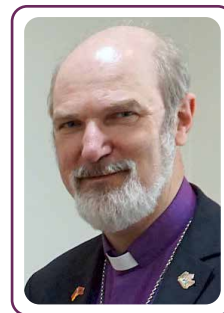
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## **Christian Dialogue is oriented towards Truth in Relations: Apologetics, Dialogue, and Pluralistic Theology of Religion**

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## 1. Introduction

### “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”

This paper is concerned with the question of whether Christian apologetics as it relates to other religions and worldviews is in principle compatible with an interreligious dialogue and whether truth claims make dialogue with other religions and worldviews impossible or impede dialogue. I argue that both sides can, indeed must, go together. That is to say that dialogue with other religions and worldviews is both (1) intellectually honest and (2) in keeping with the essence of the Christian faith, and that it is only so if we face up to the truth claims of central Christian statements of faith and at the same time seek serious conversation on an equal footing.

According to quite a number of representatives of the pluralistic theology of religion (henceforth pThR) or similar concepts, such a situation is not possible since dialogue can take place only if one strongly relativizes one’s own claim to truth. The Catholic theologian Paul Knitter, for example, says that dialogue is impossible if one of the partners enters into it with a claim to truth.<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, a dialogue in which both sides give up their claim to truth practically never takes place, certainly not, for example, when representatives of Islam are involved. Dialogue in which only one side does so takes place quite rarely. In reality, most often an intensive dialogue takes place between followers of religions and worldviews who listen to each other in a friendly and peaceful manner, who want to serve society together, but who consider the essence of their faith to be unquestionable.

The document on the ethics of mission, “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”<sup>2</sup> (CWIMRW), jointly adopted in 2011 by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), also expresses very nicely the state of affairs in terms of dialogue.<sup>3</sup> After all, the document was prepared by the departments responsible for dialogue at the three global Christian bodies. During the five years of its drafting, I also had insight into the positions of the primary individuals responsible for dialogue in the Christian realm. pThR hardly ever came up.

Dialogue remains integrated into the missionary mandate in CWIMRW. The introduction of the document states, “Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential

<sup>1</sup> Knitter. *No Other Name*. 211.

<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*. [https://vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interrelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_20111110\\_testimonianza-cristiana\\_en.html](https://vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20111110_testimonianza-cristiana_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Christian Troll, Thomas Schirrmacher. “Der innerchristliche Ethikkodex für Mission.” *Materialdienst der EZW* 74 (2011) 8: 293–299 (Text pp. 295–299); McDermott, Netland. 273–277; Klaus Schäfer. “‘Das christliche Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt’: Einführende Bemerkungen zu den ‘Empfehlungen für einen Verhaltenskodex.’” *VELKD Informationen Nr. 136* – April – June 2012: 12–21 (Text 7–11); [http://www.velkd.de/downloads/VELKD-Informationen-Nr\\_136\\_download.pdf](http://www.velkd.de/downloads/VELKD-Informationen-Nr_136_download.pdf).

for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.”

At the same time, however, dialogue is indispensable: “Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22–28).” This was also signed by the WEA as the professional body for a total of about 600 million evangelicals.

Christians should “build relationships of respect and trust with people of all religions, in particular at institutional levels between churches and other religious communities, engaging in on-going interreligious dialogue as part of their Christian commitment. In certain contexts, where years of tension and conflict have created deep suspicions and breaches of trust between and among communities, interreligious dialogue can provide new opportunities for resolving conflicts, restoring justice, healing of memories, reconciliation and peace-building.”

As it is already clear at this point that dialogue also has a strong socio-political dimension, the document says the following even more clearly about direct political cooperation with followers of non-Christian religions: “Mutual respect and solidarity: Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common good. Interreligious cooperation is an essential dimension of such commitment.” “Building interreligious relationships: Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.”

Finally, the document opposes the politicization of religions: “Where any religion is instrumentalized for political purposes or where religious persecution takes place, Christians have a task as prophetic witnesses to denounce such actions.” This applies to others as well as to one’s own religion.

According to CWiMRW, a prerequisite for dialogue is the reassurance of one’s own faith. The goal is to “encourage Christians to strengthen their own religious identity and faith while deepening their knowledge and understanding of different religions, and to do so also taking into account the perspectives of the adherents of those religions.”

Nowhere is it assumed here that Christians must fundamentally doubt their own faith and its correctness for the sake of dialogue, or that Christians may not defend their faith on apologetic grounds.

I have been involved in a great many discussions with other religions, locally, at the national level with grand muftis and other national religious representatives, at the global level (for example with world representatives of religions such as the Sikhs or Ahmadiyyas), and at global Muslim conferences of all types. The Office of Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations of the World Evangelical Alliance is part of the Department of Theological Concerns that I directed 2010–2021, and it maintains relationships with all major religions on a global level. I am also involved in major multi-religious dialogue initiatives, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (where all major world religions have produced a joint

paper in support of refugees) and the World Assembly of Religions for Peace. Nowhere does pThR play a role nor has it played a role.

The largest dialogue event between religions in the world is the plenary assembly of Religions for Peace. The organization has national structures in over 70 countries. Vice presidents include the general secretaries of the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches. All the major religions are likewise prominently involved here—Islam, for example, also with the support of Saudi Arabia and Iran—as Indian religions or the Sikhs. This organization gets by without any explanation as to the truth claims of others. It does without common prayers or religious ceremonies or common declarations of belief in the same God. It is a platform for innumerable small and large dialogues and at the same time makes fundamental declarations on religious freedom and against violence, including violence between religions. Representatives of the view that all religions actually reflect the same reality, as pThR sees it, play a very subordinate role. Otherwise, Muslim representatives or official representatives of the Vatican or the WEA would not be so prominently involved.

In 2014 I visited Albania at the invitation of the President of Albania upon the occasion of the Pope's visit. In addition to talks with the Pope, with the Orthodox Church leader, and with other church leaders, there were also talks, together with the Secretary General of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania, with the two leaders of the Muslims, the Grand Mufti of the Sunnis and the head of the Bektashi Sufis (called Shiites in the country). These meetings dealt with common concerns vis-à-vis the government as well as critical issues such as interfaith conversion (in both directions). Among other things, the aim was to create an independent panel alongside the government-appointed Interreligious Council (in which the Evangelical Alliance is represented),<sup>4</sup> in order to discuss topics and controversies of its own choosing and to have the opportunity to present its own views to other religions in an original way.

Somehow, representatives of pThR have managed to give the impression that meeting with representatives of other religions cannot be called a dialogue if one does not represent the pThR position. But why not? Why is dialogue only dialogue if in the process a religion fulfills certain specifications set out by scholars?

For instance, in one case I met the top mufti of an Islamic country. First, for about fifteen minutes he explained Islam to me, gave me a Koran, and invited us to submit to God. Then we invited him to believe in Jesus with the WEA's response letter to "A Common Word." Each, of course, tried to convince the other; anything else would have been contrived. Only then did we switch to politics, for I wanted to and was allowed to give him examples of how Christians are discriminated against in his country. At the same time, we listened to his complaints of "aggressive" behavior on the part of "sects." Finally, we discussed, with examples, our disappointment that religious violence was increa-

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. State Department. *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Albania*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/albania/>



sing as it was. That is dialogue in true Evangelical-Islamic fashion! But why should it not be called dialogue?

If dialogue is a friendly, respectful conversation between adherents of different religions who state and match up their positions, evangelicals are constantly involved in it on both a small and large scale. Evangelical theologian Werner Neuer defines dialogue as follows:

“The term interreligious dialogue would thus be defined as a conversation committed to truth between adherents of different religions, aimed at understanding the conversation partner and taking place in an atmosphere marked by freedom. All purposes going beyond this (for example, the effort to reach consensus or to revise previous realization of truth) are not necessarily connected with the concept and concern of interreligious dialogue.”<sup>5</sup>

### The three classic positions utilized

The classical division into exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, which Alan Race first presented in 1983,<sup>6</sup> is not always a happy one, especially since it was clearly created to let pluralism shine,<sup>7</sup> and particularly since almost every author then defines the three in a somewhat different way. However, for this essay, it should serve as a starting point, even if we will problematize it again and again in the following discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Now, however, there are some queries about this tripartite division.<sup>9</sup> The most fundamental one is whether it does not mark the encounters between Christianity and other religions too smoothly and unambiguously, when historically they were much more complex, changeable, and affected by constantly changing social shifts on a global scale.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, each of the three positions itself makes a certain claim to truth. Schmidt-Leukel has aptly written: “Each of the aforementioned positions naturally makes a claim to exclusivity over the other two competing views as well as over the atheistic interpretation of religions. In this sense, each of the three religio-theological positions would be ‘exclusivist.’”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Neuer. “Interreligiöser Dialog.” 93.

<sup>6</sup> Race. *Christians*.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, for example, clearly in Neuhaus. *Weltfrieden*. 86.

<sup>8</sup> In my opinion most clearly portrayed in Schmidt-Leukel. “Zur Klassifikation religionstheologischer Modelle,” *Cath(M)* 47 (1993): 163–183; cf. Kothmann 116. Cf. also the good presentation with further splitting of the positions in Bernhardt 53–127.

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. *Gott*. 62–87 compiles 8 key criticisms, even as he then seeks to refute them from the perspective of *pThR*.

<sup>10</sup> von Stosch clearly states. *Theologie*. 20–21.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. “Religiöse Vielfalt.” 14–15.

In each of the three positions, there is “a Christian theological judgment of other religions.”<sup>12</sup> “At least according to Schmidt-Leukel, “in this sense, all three positions would, in turn, be ‘inclusivist.’”<sup>13</sup>

My point here is only to show how problematic it is to use these three pigeon-holes and, in particular, to say that no position can state that it is completely free of exclusivist or inclusivist elements.

While into the 1980s the discussion mainly revolved around the question of the exclusivity of revelation, following John Hick the discussion has shifted since 1985 to the question of salvation, notably through Paul Knitter and Chester Gills. Thus, it was no longer a question of revelation per se but of revelation that brings salvation. Since then, inclusivism has meant that salvation is revealed in superior form in Christianity but that one can also obtain knowledge relevant to salvation through other religions. In turn, a distinction is made as to whether there is nothing additionally relevant to salvation for Christians to learn in other religions or whether something additional is indeed the case (“inclusivism open to learning”). Pluralism, on the other hand, is about what is in principle a revelation of salvation of equal importance in certain other religions (rarely in all religions).<sup>14</sup> This is how Schmidt-Leukel defines it:

“In the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, the issue is whether salvific knowledge of God is either exclusive to Christianity (exclusivism), or non-exclusive but found in its singular highest form (inclusivism), or also found in other religions in equal form (pluralism).”<sup>15</sup>

The following example may show how complicated the classification can be. If one defines inclusivism as the position that other religions are also ways to salvation, then the position of Vatican II was that of exclusivism. This is because other religions as alternative ways to salvation were also rejected. If one says, however, that inclusivism “above all allows common basic structures to apply,” i.e., refrains from the question of salvation, then in the wake of Acts 17 the position of many evangelicals is inclusivism. This is due to the fact that in certain religions one allows talk of the Creator, even if an unknown one.<sup>16</sup>

Paul Knitter has written: “The particularists have reminded many of us pluralist theologians of religion that although we call ourselves pluralists, we are also, quite inevitably, inclusivists. The only way to be able to approach the religious other ... is our own religious perspective.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. “Religiöse Vielfalt.” 15.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. “Religiöse Vielfalt.” 15.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Neuer. *Heil.* 50–51.

<sup>15</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. “Religiöse Vielfalt.” 14.

<sup>16</sup> See Gerlitz. “Pluralismus I.” 719, who leaves both next to each other without comment.

<sup>17</sup> Knitter. “Religionstheologie.” 24.

Helga Kuhlmann similarly points out that Reinhold Bernhardt—whom we will deal with below—believes that only inclusivism is possible because he thinks it is an illusion to truly see the world from the perspective of others.<sup>18</sup>

At the end, we will discuss the fact that pThR thinks and acts in a very inclusivist way with regard to non-religious worldviews and atheists and not from a classical Christian point of view. pThR thinks and acts by predetermined standards, by means of which religions can be designated. The standards are less in line with the primordial concern of religions, excluding people who do not believe in higher powers.

Werner Thiede has pointed out inclusivism's oft-appropriating tendency.<sup>19</sup>

All this shows that the three pigeonholes should be handled very carefully and that it is more important to ask concretely what is represented and done in detail than to conduct a sorting out, let alone to conclude from this classification alone with whom it is worth talking and with whom not, or even to dispense emotional evaluations.

## 2. Questions to be sorted out in advance

In the following, we first want to narrow down the question by sorting out all questions that have to do with how to deal with other religions and may not be conflated with the question of truth itself. What applies to evangelicals, regardless of theology of religion, is the following:

- Christians should always speak the truth about others.
- Christians listen, and they want to speak with others, not just about others. They want to give everyone the opportunity to present their view of things, and they want to discuss what the other person actually advocates, not a caricature.
- Christians stand up for religious freedom, which means that statements about truth are never a justification for restricting freedom of belief and others' freedom of conscience.
- Christians desire to convince others in honest conversation. They do not desire to bribe others, compel them, manipulate them, or have faith imposed by the state.
- Christians want to live in peace with all people and to participate in a peaceful and just society. This is not possible without cooperation and dialogue with non-religious people as well as with representatives of other religions.
- Christian witness is not an ethics-free space; it needs a biblically sound ethical basis so that we really do what Christ has instructed us to do.

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<sup>18</sup> Kuhlmann. "Religionsdialogfähig." 117.

<sup>19</sup> Thiede. *Wahrheit*. 65.

However, when looked at the other way around, this also means that reference to the mentioned principles can never be used as an argument against truth-oriented dialogue!

This (and more) will now be explained and justified in detail.

## 1. Speaking the truth about others

In CWiMRW, misrepresentation of others' faith is rejected as unchristian: "Renouncing false witness. Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions."

Transferred to the field of scholarship, this means the following: "The concern to let the material of religious history speak for itself and to work on it according to all the rules of interdisciplinary research compatible with cultural sciences, on the basis of a discursive concept of religion, should be common to all participants. This is less a question of school orientation than one of scholarly seriousness or its loss."<sup>20</sup>

This should be self-evident even for evangelical researchers. In any case, as a scholar of religion and sociologist of religion, I make a serious effort to research other religions first, to get to know them firsthand and to understand them, as the *Lexicon of Religions (Lexikon der Religionen)*<sup>21</sup> hopefully well attests. I have, for instance, had the Sharia explained to me on location by Sharia judges in several countries.

One example is Islamism in relation to Islam. Thorough study of sources leads to the realization that Islamism—apart from precursors such as the Mahdi movement in Sudan and Wahhabism—has emerged from 1920 onward as a new inner-Islamic movement starting in Pakistan and differing fundamentally from the mother religion on a number of issues.<sup>22</sup> This is not only important information for politics, which can also protect the majority of Muslims from false accusations. Rather, it is also important if one wants to be in dialogue with Islamists.

## 2. Religious freedom as a Christian doctrine

Religious freedom applies to all people, not just Christians. For Christians, this is not just a political requirement. Rather, it arises from the Christian faith itself. For God created all people in his image (Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1), not only Christians. God now desires—as the Old Testament already says again and again—to be loved with all one's heart and not out of compulsion. Accordingly, the

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<sup>20</sup> Dehn. "Religionswissenschaft." 97.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, inter alia, *Harenberg Lexikon der Religionen*. Harenberg: Dortmund, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Schirrmacher. *Islamismus*.

innermost orientation of the conscience and heart of man must not and cannot be forced.

God has forbidden Christians from executing any kind of punitive judgment on their critics and from punishing people for their “unbelief.” Already Jonah had to experience that God was more merciful with “godless” Nineveh than Jonah himself, who would have preferred to see judgment upon Nineveh (Jonah 4:1–10). And Jesus clearly rejected the idea of his disciples bringing down fire from heaven on villages rejecting their proclamation (Luke 9:51–56). Thus, Christians are forever barred from punishing others for rejecting Jesus or the gospel (let alone their own convictions).

The state is called to protect religious freedom, not to spread our faith. If you look at the tasks the New Testament assigns to the state, you will see that spreading or promoting a particular religion is not one of them, but spreading and promoting peace and justice for all are. Christians are subject to the state in matters of secular justice; indeed, Paul can virtually describe the non-Christian state as “God’s servants” when it punishes Christians who do evil (Romans 13:1–7). The fact that Christians have often handled this quite differently in so-called Christian countries in history does not change the fact that a Christian does not have to bend his faith out of shape when he stands up for religious freedom. Rather, it follows organically from his faith.

According to biblical understanding, the monopoly on the use of force is held only by the state, which, however, has neither the task to preach the gospel nor to enlarge the Christian church. It is even supposed to keep itself out of questions of conscience and religion (in Romans 13:1–7, one finds that what is at issue has to do with doing evil, not thinking), which is why, in turn, as “God’s servant,” it has to even explicitly punish Christians who do evil (Romans 13:1–7).

The state has to protect Christians only insofar as it has to protect all who do good. It also has to restrict or punish Christians only insofar as, in working for justice and peace, it has to hinder and punish all those who plan or carry out violence, whether and how it is religiously motivated or not. Christians, then, claim no greater right to religious freedom for themselves than they do for others. They also want to live “in peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), not only with their own.

The Evangelical Alliance, the history of which developed out of the anti-slavery struggle, has propagated religious freedom since the mid-19th century. The aversion of many mainstream European churches to Evangelicals goes back to this time, when the demand for religious freedom was perceived as the greatest threat. That ‘state church’ pastors were involved in the Alliance only made matters worse, as they were seen as traitors.

The Evangelical Alliance was thus already committed to religious freedom when it was founded in London in 1846. Several national alliances themselves grew out of the desire for religious freedom. Predominantly free church Christians or Christians from smaller churches joined together to fight for the right to exist. Anglican priests in England and theologically conservative pastors from the

state churches in Germany became involved at an early stage, and the issue of religious freedom was on the agenda at every major conference, for example in New York in 1873. The Alliance stood up for persecuted Christians of other denominations. However, even then, the Alliance stood up for non-Christian religions. In 1855, an international commission of the Alliance visited the Turkish sultan and obtained substantial relief for local Orthodox churches. Another commission approached the Russian tsar about the oppression of Protestants in the Baltic states. The Alliance did not want Baptists advocating only for Baptists, Lutherans only for Lutherans, and Jews only for Jews. Rather, the Alliance sought religious freedom for all.

Allen D. Hertzke, professor of the sociology of religion, describes how over the past 30 years an alliance of Evangelicals, Catholics, Jews, and others in the U.S. and around the world has ensured that religious freedom has become a growing issue in politics and the media.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Religious freedom makes truth claims possible

In 2008, the 12th Assembly of the WEA in Pattaya, Thailand voted unanimously in favor of a “Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church.”<sup>24</sup>

“6. The WEA differentiates between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe.”

Conversely, disagreeing on matters of truth never allows for a right to deprive another of his freedom.

People who proclaim Christianity may regret with bleeding hearts that other people reject the offer of salvation in Christ, but they never have the right to declare them brutes for it, to insult them, to send the state after them, to invoke judgment on them or even to carry it out, or in short, as CWiMRW puts it, to violate the human dignity of others.

### 4. Religions’ political cooperation for peace and justice

Once again, one finds the following in the WEA’s Religious Freedom Resolution: “The WEA therefore aims to work collaboratively with all who share its goals of supporting religious freedom, be it political powers or representatives of other or no religions. The WEA affirms the intention of Christians to live together peacefully with adherents of other or no religions and to work together for the common good and reconciliation.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Allen D. Hertzke, *Freeing God’s Children. The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights*, Lanham (Maryland, USA): Rowman, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> “Resolution on Religious Freedom.” *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 2 (2009) 1: 92–94; <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/168>

<sup>25</sup> World Evangelical Alliance. *Resolution zur Religionsfreiheit und Solidarität mit der verfolgten Kirche der Weltweiten Evangelischen Allianz*. <https://iirf.global/news/wea-resolution>

The WEA promotes such discussions through its Peacebuilding Initiative and through the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

Since the state does not belong to any religion and is not supposed to proclaim the gospel but wants what is good and just for all people, and because human dignity is given by God to all people, since he has created everyone (Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1), Christians cooperate with the followers of all religions and worldviews for the good of society, inasmuch as the followers of those religions and worldviews allow it or reciprocate.

This applies directly to upholding religious freedom. It also applies to all human rights, and it applies fundamentally to peace and justice. Christians are always prepared to form a state together with followers of other religions and worldviews by working together. In Romans 13:1–7, Paul does not presuppose that the authorities are composed only of Christians; on the contrary, he places Christians under the authority of the state, which is committed to justice, regardless of the religion or worldview of its representatives.

Paul exhorts Christians: “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:17b–18), following Jesus, who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9) and “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house’” (Luke 10:5). James, the brother of Jesus, echoes his brother’s words quite correctly when he says, “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). In 1 Timothy 2:1–2, Paul extends this commandment to the world of politics: “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Christians build relationships of trust and love with all people, religious and non-religious, which are prerequisites for peaceful and functioning coexistence. Tensions and conflicts can be resolved between people only when they talk to each other.

## 5. Ethics and mission belong together

Ethics and mission belong together. Christian witness is not an ethics-free space. It needs an ethical foundation so that we really do what Christ has instructed us to do.

In 1 Peter 3:15–17, a certain complementarity is found. On one hand, there is a need for Christian witness, even apologetics (the Greek text uses the word “apologia,” originally a speech in court offering a defense) and on the other hand, there is a need for “gentleness and respect,” that is, respect for the dignity of other individuals: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason (Greek apologia) for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” Human dignity does not allow us to hide our hope. Rather, it allows us to express it clearly, to explain it, and also to defend it, but even answers to such questions, behind which there are evil intentions, can never allow us to trample on the same dignity of our interlocutors. Both

sides complement each other, just as both are indispensable basic building blocks of our faith.

People do not speak directly to God when they speak with us. On one hand, we can certainly be God's ambassadors and bear witness to the hope that is within us. However, on the other hand, we are just people who are saved not by our own virtue but by God's grace alone. We want people to find peace with God, receive His forgiveness, and trust God as the only truth, but they have not sinned against us, they are not to bow down to us, nor are we the ones who are the truth and who are in possession of the truth in everything we say. Christians are not "Doctor Omniscients." Rather, Christians are ordinary people who have special knowledge only insofar as they testify about the revealed truth in Jesus Christ and that truth's history as written in the Bible, and about their personal experiences with that revealed truth.

Whoever assumes that he has found the truth in Jesus and that this is above all the truth about our relationship with God and how we find peace with God through grace, forgiveness, and redemption, and whoever also refers to the written revelation of the Jewish-Christian tradition for this, must, at the same time, take into account everything relating to the weighty restrictions for conversing with those who think differently in terms of content and manner. "Truth and love" (Ephesians 4:15) belong together, especially in dialogue and missionary witness.

Meekness is not only a compelling consequence of the fact that Christians should and want to proclaim the God of love and should and want to love our neighbor. Rather, it is also a consequence of the knowledge that Christians themselves are only pardoned sinners and not God.

Our interlocutor must primarily be reconciled with his Creator, not with us. Therefore, we can humbly step back again and again, admitting our own limitations and inadequacies, and clearly point out that we can claim authority over the other only insofar as we have proclaimed the good news in an unadulterated form and in a form understandable to him. Reverence is a consequence of the fact that we see people through God's eyes, that is, as his creatures, as images of God. This prohibits us from treating anyone as subhuman or spiritually limited if they disagree with us.

A Christian does not have an answer to all questions. Rather, he can only advocate God's message where God has revealed himself to him in the Word and in Christ in the course of history. God's commandment and human commandments in a respective religious tradition and culture are strictly separated by Jesus (e.g., Mark 7:1–15). A Christian must not claim to know and advocate the truth in everything. Rather, as a fallible human being he can only speak of a claim to truth where God has really authorized it, which is to be repeatedly examined (Romans 12:2). Therefore, a Christian can learn a lot from his interlocutor without automatically having to make concessions in the most central questions of faith.

Mission respects the human rights of the other person and does not want to disregard the dignity of people. Rather, mission seeks to respect others' human



rights and promote people's dignity. Christians always see other people as images of God (Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1), even if they have completely different views about things. In Christianity, human rights are not derived from the fact that someone believes in God or is a Christian. Rather, they arise from the fact that everyone is equally a creation by God. God created man in his own image, and he created all as equals, including man and woman. Therefore, all people are to be treated without regard to person (Romans 2:11; James 2:9). There are religions that grant human rights only to their own followers, but Christians also defend the human rights of their enemies, pray for them and love them (Matthew 5:44 = Luke 6:27).

It is reprehensible to bring about conversions through coercion (including state coercion), guile, fraud, or bribery, quite apart from the fact that the result cannot, by definition, be a genuine conversion and turning of man to God from the bottom of his heart in faith and trust.

A conversion is a deeply personal, well-thought-out stirring of one's heart toward God. Thus, when people tell us they want to convert, we must always give them space and time for their decision and not press them, and we should not baptize them hastily but should make sure they really know what they are doing and want to do it out of conviction and faith.

There should also be sincerity and transparency about what the Christian faith is and what is expected of Christians after their conversion. Christianity is not a secret circle. Rather, it is open to the general public and seeks to be transparent to all. Christians have nothing to hide (Matthew 10:26–27) or to conceal beforehand and reveal only afterwards. Jesus said to those who wanted to become his followers, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28; see verses 27–33). Christians must help people estimate the costs and not hastily cram them into Christian churches, only for them to later realize later that they have been deceived.

All of this presupposes conversation and dialogue with all people. Why should followers of other religions be excluded? Christians can convincingly present and defend their truth only in a serious conversation, in which the other person also has his say and in which the truth is wrestled over.

## **6. No fundamentalism in dealing with other religions**

The discussion with other religions should be free of fundamentalism, whereby I do not define fundamentalism as a truth claim per se but as a militant truth claim. In my opinion, one should speak of fundamentalism only when violence and threats are involved or at least a political claim is made. For me, fundamentalism, therefore, does not mean assuming the existence of truth or believing to know it in parts or passing it on to others. Rather, fundamentalism is a militant claim to truth that derives a political claim to power from unquestioned higher revelations, individuals, values, or ideologies, which is directed against religious freedom and the requirement for peace and justifies, demands, or uses non-governmental or non-democratic governmental violence for achieving its

goals.<sup>26</sup> In other words, fundamentalists want to force other people to think and live like they do. Iran is the most obvious example of this.

One of the most significant advances of the modern constitutional state is that it alone has a monopoly on legitimate violence and that this is also withdrawn from the grasp of individual religious and ideological communities. Fundamentalism, with its recourse to ultimate truths, falsely provides reasons for deviating therefrom.

However, fundamentalist violence also includes internal violence against one's own members. This is done so that the individuals remain loyal to the party line, or it is conducted against those who leave, either to punish or ostracize them or to prevent others from leaving.

What the vernacular means by fundamentalism is militant truth-telling, and that is what I find to be the shortest definition. In my opinion, there are only two ways to save the term fundamentalism for serious use. One way is for the concept of fundamentalism to be brought closer to everyday usage and related to truly violent movements. Alternatively, one can seek to use the word broadly for all kinds of movements, in which case the term urgently needs to be de-emotionalized so that it acquires a neutral, non-pejorative meaning. For this to occur, there would have to be a large-scale effort by experts to oppose the mass media. That is currently an illusion. In my opinion, those who warn the public against fundamentalist currents should limit themselves to those groups that are dangerous because they in principle justify violence or because of their expression of a willingness to use violence—or even because of the use of violence—but at least because of the danger they pose by wanting to gain political power in an undemocratic way over those who think differently.

That is why my definition, as I have defended it as a sociologist of religion on the basis of many examples in my book *Fundamentalism*, is as follows: Fundamentalism is a militant truth claim which derives its claim to power from non-disputable, higher revelation, people, values, or ideologies. It is aimed against religious freedom and calls for peace; it justifies, urges, or uses non-state or state-based non-democratic force in order to accomplish its goals. In the process, it often invokes opposition to certain achievements of modernity in favor of historical grandeur and bygone eras, and at the same time it uses these modern achievements mostly in order to extend and produce a modern variation of older religions and worldviews. Fundamentalism is the transformation of a religion or worldview conditioned by modernity.

I argue that a religious and worldview community that advocates, propagates, and respects religious freedom in practice cannot be fundamentalist and should not be called so! And conversely, the rejection of religious freedom should be a clear indicator in the direction of fundamentalism, although not the only one.

However, this is not quite as easy to carry out as in the case of religious freedom, since the concept of human rights is expanding more and more away from

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<sup>26</sup> For reasons see my *Fundamentalism: When Religion becomes dangerous*. WEA Global Issues Series 14. Bonn: VKW, 2013. <https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=10708>

classical human rights to an inflation of demands. If, for example, abortion is defined as a human right, then most religious communities have a hand with bad cards, because they still value the human right of the unborn child as highly as that of the mother, or at least they take it into account.

But let's get back to religious freedom. What more can be demanded of a religious community than that it stand up for religious freedom in the modern, democratic state, and thus for the religious neutrality of the state and for the separation of state and church or religious structure, and that it respect other religions and worldviews in the political environment?

## **7. How questions relating to political demands on the part of religions have come to be superimposed on the classical question of truth**

In my opinion, the one-sided question of whether one concedes certain features of revelation and salvation to another religion has been increasingly superimposed upon,<sup>27</sup> certainly since September 11, 2001, by the more practical and rather political question of which wings of religions one must distance oneself from because they use violence as a means of mission or punishment and trample on human rights. By rejecting violent Christianity as well as Islamism or fundamentalist Hindutva, a Christian dispels the rigid scheme of whether one recognizes “the one true Islam,” etc., or whether two religions believe in the same God. (Peaceful Muslims and Islamists certainly believe in the same God, but in the end what good is it to recognize that?)

Like the Second Vatican Council, CWiMRW, with the agreement of Evangelical Christians, calls on Christians to “acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them.” However, this is not a blanket recognition that there is only good in other religions, and certainly not that this good has salvific quality.

The statement made by the Second Vatican Council as well as in CWiMRW, that Christians acknowledge everything that they find good in followers of other religions, is not to be answered for religions as a whole. Rather, the answers can be very different for separate wings of the same religion. What is the attitude of the different wings of a religion toward violence against dissenters, toward the politicization of religion, toward religious freedom, toward human rights? What kind of society do they produce or want to produce? What role do they play in the dialogue surrounding life, neighbors, and society? What common ground can there be in the fight against poverty or corruption? These are all questions that cannot be answered sweepingly for an entire religion and that are central, regardless of how one assesses handling the question of truth in dialogue.

What about violence and threats from voodoo, Satanism, or Salafism? Why does pThR usually not address such questions and problems? What about

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<sup>27</sup> On the consequences of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack for the dialogue between religions, see Robert Schreier. “Pluralism after 9/11: Living with Difference and Instability.” *Ecumenist* 41 (2004) Spring: 12–16.

Adolf Hitler, who repeatedly invoked a God of struggle<sup>28</sup> (that he himself made up), and how does that relate to the “Real” that John Hick talks about?

In three posts I have criticized the martyr worship of war dead in Tokyo as well as in Edinburgh and Ottawa,<sup>29</sup> and thus equally in a non-Christian as in a Christian cultural context. What does the discussion of salvation contribute to this discussion? Nothing! I am not concerned with the question of whether the soldiers received salvation. Rather, the concern is with the message that they received it because they fell in war, regardless of whether they thereby became gods (as in Tokyo) or have achieved God’s special good pleasure (as in Edinburgh and Ottawa).

## 8. No claim to truth nor common ground automatically means peace

Conversely, historical experience teaches that sharing the same or largely the same truth or largely being in agreement on matters of religion does not by itself prevent religious wars. Many major religious wars have taken place within religions (e.g., Catholics versus Protestants, Shiites versus Sunnis, Buddhist Lama versus Buddhist Lama), with Christianity being no historical exception.

In particular, Gerd Neuhaus has pointed out that commonalities between states, religions, world views, cultures, etc. do not automatically bring about unity and peace at any time; they can also lead to competition and rivalry.<sup>30</sup> Who has proved by historical examples that commonalities automatically bring about world peace? Are there not enough examples to the contrary? Have not Protestant countries waged war against each other? And conversely, are there not enough examples of countries in which religions that are far apart in content peacefully respect each other?

The theologian Miroslav Volf, for example, who is considered by many to belong to the Evangelical camp, is of the opinion that Islam and Christianity have more or less the same creed and can pray together to the same God.<sup>31</sup> To do this, however, he must elevate to the norm a very specific variety of Islam held to by certain dialogue partners and formulate or reduce Christianity in such a way that hardly any classical theologian will find himself in it.<sup>32</sup> Volf simply ignores central differences between Islam and Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

However, the decisive point is the following: He demands that Christians and Muslims share their creed. This has to be the case because otherwise, it is

<sup>28</sup> See Schirrmacher. *Kriegsreligion*.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher. “The Japanese Yasukuni Cult – Soldiers as Martyrs?” <https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=2223>; “Troops killed as martyrs for God? Something startling in Edinburgh.” <https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=1583>; “Similar to Edinburgh and Tokyo: Soldiers worshipped as martyrs in Ottawa.” <https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=3570>

<sup>30</sup> Neuhaus. *Weltfrieden*.

<sup>31</sup> Volf. *Allah*.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the comprehensive critique of Volf in McDermott, Netland. 62–70.

<sup>33</sup> Schirrmacher. *Koran und Bibel*.

maintained, no peace between the two religions is possible. However, that would then mean that peace will never be possible with religions that do not fit into this schema, such as non-monotheistic religions. Conversely, as I said, some of the most extensive religious wars have taken place within the same religion, such that theological proximity by far does not guarantee peace.

Incidentally, Jews and Muslims would then have to get along much better than Christians and Muslims. Peaceful Muslim mystics would have to get along very well with Islamists thanks to their belief in the completely same God. The reality is something else.

In reality, religious freedom means that religious communities renounce violence or are prevented from doing so by the state, regardless of how they relate to each other. If we always wanted to wait for convergence discussions between theologians, we would still be waiting on some fronts today. This works both ways. It is often only under the umbrella of politically guaranteed religious freedom that a genuine dialogue takes place between religions and worldviews and that rapprochement and cooperation occur in the first place.

To put it another way, it makes more sense for people around the world to learn to exchange their truth claims and their justification in peaceful dialogue and not to misuse truth claims to legitimize violence, hatred, or conversion under pressure or to convey to people a concept, which at best is enforceable in the West, that there is actually no truth at all, or that truth can be found everywhere in equal measure, or that one must always be inwardly on the verge of gladly giving up one's own truth.

### 3. On Evangelicals' view

#### Cheap criticism of Evangelicals

Although Evangelicals, with their view of other religions, represent a position that is also widespread among non-evangelical Christians and churches, pThR particularly likes to take shots at Evangelicals. However, these shots are usually only taken at a caricature or a self-constructed cardboard cutout, since the extensive Evangelical literature on this topic has not been received.

Reinhold Bernhardt throws “fundamentalism and Evangelicalism” into one big pot and has written the following about them: “However, since this realm is difficult to grasp academically and the question of absoluteness is mostly answered here only in the form of recurring assertions, but has not gotten through in a reflective manner, I can refrain from this in the further presentation—one finds the explanandum, but not an explanans.”<sup>34</sup>

Does this apply to the world religion departments of many Evangelical universities in Korea or the U.S.? Does this also apply to Evangelical works on the

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<sup>34</sup> Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 70. We will leave aside the question of whether redundant argumentation is purely a specialty of authors! That is, rather, an emotional attack more than a serious dialogue!

theology of religion, which are often more than 400 pages long?<sup>35</sup> This statement falls back upon the author, who has not even opened whole libraries of books because he knows in advance that there is always only the same thing there anyway, but who at the same time also teaches others that dialogue always presupposes the willingness to listen to the other and to let him present himself first. To put it another way: Do the advocates of dialogue with everyone also exercise the option of dialogue with evangelicals? Or are we the only ones excluded from such conversations? Also, since other religious directions are obviously engaged in talks with us, for instance the Vatican, the question arises: Are representatives of such positions the only ones who deny us a serious dialogue by defining in advance that dialogue with us is pointless anyway?

If Bernhardt thereby constructs an all too unambiguous “model of dualistic-exclusive allegiance”<sup>36</sup> and then rejects it, indeed rather shoots it down, this is likely to be, as he describes it, a theoretical pigeonhole in which he will hardly find any Christian theologian in reality, not even an Evangelical one.

Bernhardt cites only two Evangelical documents on missions in 1990.<sup>37</sup> However, he apparently has nowhere dealt with Evangelical literature on world religions or with significant Evangelical theologians who have published on the theology of religion, such as Ken R. Gnanakan, John Stott, Allister McGrath, Harvie M. Conn, or William Lane Craig. That he is not concerned with even seriously surveying Evangelical positions in their breadth is indicated not only by the absence of relevant original literature. Rather, it is also indicated by his prejudiced, arrogant tone, of which a few examples follow below.

One of these hallmarks is for him that exclusivists advocate the following: “Truth can never be actively and freely constructed by man; it is not created but discovered.”<sup>38</sup> With this, of course, he presupposes a certain philosophy as the standard of good and evil, namely that there can never and nowhere be knowledge that is “discovered” because it is already existing. Rather, we always construct truth through “discovery.” Are laws of nature or mathematical axioms thus also created and never discovered? Only a vanishing minority of people might see it this way, and non-Christian dialogue partners practically never see it this way. And so, of course, dialogue becomes impossible, since even if I would appropriate it, my interlocutors from other religions will almost never do so.

Bernhardt has certainly not studied Evangelical authors thoroughly. For otherwise he would have noticed that evangelicals emphasize more strongly than others the subjective side of the personal experience of truth in addition to the knowledge of truth as the discovery of truth—among other things because of the strong emphasis on personal conversion and even more their emphasis on a personal relationship of trust in God. Moreover, the truth claim applies only to

<sup>35</sup> For example in McDermott, Netland. *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions* from Oxford University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 58.

<sup>37</sup> Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 59.

a few central truths but not to every statement, i.e., not to everything that is said in a conversation. Therefore, even for evangelicals, most of their truth is something worked out in life and on the basis of personal experience, without this contradicting the existence of truth in advance and independent of the individual. In addition, it plays a central role for evangelicals that our knowledge, according to Paul, is “in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9), that until the return of Jesus we only recognize a “poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12) and that we have faith only like a “treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7),<sup>39</sup> except for the fact that the conclusion drawn from all this is not that the truth does not exist at all.

I would say that no one can go into a conversation without not tacitly presupposing certain basic premises of his thinking as true and inviolable. Conversely, no one in a conversation takes everything he says to be the embodiment of the ultimate truth and never learns anything from others.

Another example of unfair treatment of evangelical representatives was provided by Gerhard Gäde in 2010, after 20 years of further Evangelical publications since Bernhardt, when he wrote:<sup>40</sup>

“Nowadays exclusivism is probably advocated almost exclusively in fundamentalist and, in part, in Evangelical circles. In the theological debate regarding religion, it hardly plays a serious role anymore.”<sup>41</sup>

This may be true for German groups of experts, where experts of the same orientation keep to themselves, but it really does not apply to international discussions.

I would like to put it in an exaggerated manner like this: It is a matter of dialogue that has to do with real religions, not professors. There is a big difference between a dialogue between hand-picked partners and a dialogue having to do with real religions, be it at the grassroots locally or be it between those who are actual leaders in their religions. Heinzpeter Hempelmann aptly refers to the concept of pThR as follows: “The ideal speaking situation as an unrealistic abstraction.”<sup>42</sup>

The cooperation between the dialogue departments of the Vatican (PCID) and the World Council of Churches (IRD) with the WEA (Religious Liberty Commission) for elaborating “Christian Witness in a multi-religious World,” which after all also contains a clear commitment to dialogue with other religions, happened exclusively through exclusivists and inclusivists, even at the largest meeting of the elaboration process with 350 participants in Bangkok. There is no question that even in the three large worldwide Christian bodies, the Catholic Church, the WCC, and the WEA, the time of pThR is over and inclusivism is even being

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Neuhaus. *Weltfrieden*. 86–89.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the many authors named by Schmidt-Leukel. *Gott*. Pp. 112–114.

<sup>41</sup> Gäde. *Christus*. 45.

<sup>42</sup> Hempelmann. “Dialog.” 130.

formulated more and more narrowly; that is, the comprehensive possibility of salvation through other religions is the view of only very few.

Similar to Bernhardt, Helga Kuhlmann writes: “Exclusivist perspectives ignore religious and worldview plurality”<sup>43</sup> and move them close to fundamentalism, and that is the end of the matter. That she has read even one of the Evangelical reference books on the matter is not apparent. The Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846, has been an international pioneer for religious freedom—long before the established state churches—and still is today. How can this be possible if they have ignored and continue to ignore religious pluralism? Not to mention the numerous encyclopedias of religions from Evangelical quills.

Paul F. Knitter has written: “The formerly predominantly Christian approach to other religions is now being carried forward by fundamentalist and conservative Christians. For them, the message of Christianity is contained in the Bible, and what they take from the Bible is clear.”<sup>44</sup> What then follows is the short version of the Christian doctrine of salvation as held (or at least traditionally held) by all Christian denominations. I can’t see anything specifically Evangelical about it. Of course, he does not cite any Evangelical theologians, but only the Frankfurt Declaration of 1970 (which never received any international binding force or was adopted by any of the global evangelical bodies) and the Lausanne Declaration of 1974, which was after all “toned down” and “accorded some value to other paths.”<sup>45</sup>

One almost has to smirk to think that Karl Barth suddenly found himself in need of explaining how in the world he could share the evangelical position:

“One certainly cannot label Karl Barth an Evangelical and fundamentalist Christian in this sense, but he is one of those theologians who best worked out the theological and scriptural basis for the exclusivism of the Evangelical position. One cannot easily dismiss this attitude, as Barth presents it, as ‘simplistic’ and ‘narrow-minded.’”<sup>46</sup>

This feeds the suspicion that the term “exclusivism” is often understood not as designating a position that is at least worthy of discussion. Rather, it is often understood in the sense of arrogance and, indeed, narrow-mindedness, i.e., a more psychological classification, as if such attitudes did not occur among advocates of other schools of thought.

But back to the initial point. It is interesting that Knitter is clear about the fact that he “labels” (his expression!) Evangelical Christians and presents their position as simplistic and narrow-minded. It is only Karl Barth that he does not want to label in such a way although the positions are identical. Barth formu-

<sup>43</sup> Kuhlmann. “Religionsdialogfähig.” 116.

<sup>44</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 58.

<sup>45</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 58.

<sup>46</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 58. Cf. Barth’s famous chapter on religion KD § 17 = KD 1,2. 304–397. On Barth see Bernhardt 149–173, Steube. *Christentum*. 178–183, Kothmann. *Apologetik*. 118–120, cf. on his fellow dogmatist Otto Weber: Steube. *Christentum*. 183–187.



lated “the theological and scriptural basis” for Evangelical and (supposed) fundamentalist Christians!

Knitter’s objection to these theologians on half a page is really very thin and actually only consists of one question, whether they would do justice to the richness and diversity of the New Testament with it, and one assertion, namely, that they could not initiate an interreligious dialogue with it. These are supposed to be “profound objections”?<sup>47</sup> The fact that pThR for its part excludes the entirety of biblical theology of religion will be discussed below. And that one can have a good dialogue without pThR is shown daily by the dialogue that actually takes place. However, even if one follows Knitter in dismissing Evangelicals in a subordinate clause, at least the other theologians mentioned would have deserved a bit more attention. After all, he writes, without doing otherwise himself, “Liberal Christians pass by this model ... and shrug it off or laugh it off.”<sup>48</sup> Yet that is exactly what he does!

## Evangelical authors

Why is there no mention of such Evangelical theologians who clearly say that dialogue is indispensable, just not at the cost of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior? And indeed, why is there no mention that dialogue is the way of mission par excellence since mission in the New Testament unfolds dialogically?<sup>49</sup>

Do these condemnations really apply to Heinzpeter Hempelmann, Martin Repenhagen, Werner Neuer, and Pius Helfenstein, who all approach the subject matter in a very sophisticated way? And what about the case of those in the international sphere, such as Harold Netland, Alister McGrath, John Stott, and Arthur Glasser, or those close to the Evangelical camp such as Lesslie Newbigin and Stephen Neill?

Bernhardt, for instance, advocates a kind of claim to absoluteness without exclusivity. He does this by advocating discussions with each other in the language of a loving couple.<sup>50</sup> But then how is that not exclusivism? Evangelicals have always advocated the language of love; one of their favorite formulations is that Scripture is a “love letter” from God.

## Criticism of one’s own religion

What is often overlooked in a one-sided critique of evangelicals is this: Like Karl Barth, evangelicals are highly critical not only of other religions but also of their own religion. They criticize nominal Christianity, a double standard of morality, and Christian claims to power, and, like Karl Barth, they often see human religion at work in official Christianity rather than divine activity.

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<sup>47</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 60.

<sup>48</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 61.

<sup>49</sup> Z. B. Neuer. “Interreligiöser Dialog.” 189–192, 201–208.

<sup>50</sup> Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 238–239.

Barth was not ecclesiocentric and saw no claim to truth in the institution of the church. Rather, the church is Christocentric,<sup>51</sup> whereby the church can only testify to the truth in Christ and must always ask itself anew whether it has not wallpapered this truth with a Christian culture. He had that in common with Evangelicals.

### **Who is lost?**

In my opinion, the discussion focuses too much on the question of salvation alone.<sup>52</sup> This is due to the fact that each and every religion understands something different by “salvation.”

If the biblical sense of lostness or salvation is denied—indeed, if hell and judgment are denied—why does it matter so much whether one is considered lost by others? Strangely enough, however, even many atheists in the Western world feel set back when they are denied salvation. Why, actually? One is only withholding from them something they consider non-existent anyway!

### **We are not the judges!**

It is no coincidence that Paul, while repeatedly calling on Christians to examine themselves and see “whether you are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5; cf. Romans 14:22), does not as a general rule call on specific people by name and say that they have no faith. There is a big difference between proclaiming to the general public certain basic principles on the basis of which they are to examine themselves, and saying directly to someone, “You are lost.”

Also, the vast majority of Evangelicals are glad that God Himself is the judge and has reserved for himself any final judgment. Only God himself can look into people’s hearts, and in the end, we do not know his judgment, for “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). We cannot look into the heart of anyone, not even the heart of our spouse, and often not even ourselves! Therefore, any examination can only be carried out by each individual, at best on oneself: “A man ought to examine himself” (1 Corinthians 11:28), not his neighbor.

Also, we Christians are subject to the same judge and righteous judgment as everyone else. We are not each other’s judges, but we are on a par with everyone else under God. People also do not think and act against or for us, but against or for God.

Hans Rothenberger sifted through the vast field of literature, books as well as Evangelical journals, for an Evangelical missiology conference.<sup>53</sup> He came to the conclusion that the most common position of Evangelicals is that people who have never heard the gospel can still be saved by God’s grace through the work of Jesus Christ—note, despite everything, only through salvation in Christ.

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<sup>51</sup> Also according to Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 162–165.

<sup>52</sup> Also according to von Stosch. *Theologie*. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Rothenberger. “Antworten.”

Rothenberger calls this all in all “a position of reverential agnosticism.”<sup>54</sup> This is not a classical view of salvation as seen by other religions, but neither is it a classical exclusivist position, which Rothenberger actually finds only among Evangelical dogmatists. (Note that exclusivism is also more often held in the Catholic and non-Evangelical Protestant spheres and practically only by dogmatists).

Martin Reppenhagen, as an Evangelical, puts it similarly to Rothenberger: “A salutary agnosticism that is aware of the limits of human knowledge and ability to make statements seems appropriate to me.”<sup>55</sup>

Harold A. Netland also demonstrates that the best-known Evangelical proponents of exclusivism reckon with the possibility that God in his grace saves even people who have never heard the gospel.<sup>56</sup> A discussion volume of 21 evangelical professors in the USA includes exclusivists as well as representatives of a view very similar to Karl Rahner (e.g., Harvie M. Conn, Clark Pinnock).<sup>57</sup>

According to this, very many, if not most, Evangelical theologians would be at least cautiously inclusivists, if only in the sense that in Jesus Christ—and still in Christ alone—and through the grace of God, people can be saved from whom we would not have suspected it on the face of it and who have never had the opportunity to hear verbally about the saving grace found in Christ.

## Who is exclusivist?

Klaus von Stoch speaks of the enduring appeal of exclusivism<sup>58</sup> and obviously means inclusivism as well. That is a fashionable way of putting it. For it is not true that this is a special feature that is purely Evangelical. So far, no denomination or global ecumenical association has made pThR or other versions of the equality of the salvific character of religions its official doctrine; it is primarily a matter of academic scholars. The first and second theses of the Barmen Declaration, which is still considered a confessional document in some member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, or EKD), are clearly exclusivist;<sup>59</sup> this is no wonder, given the influence on the document of Karl Barth, who—as we have seen—vehemently held an exclusivist view of the gospel.

It is also often overlooked that certain basic assumptions of the classical Christian faith live on much more stubbornly than many realize. Just one example: Christians—and by that I mean the great mass of the lay people as well as

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<sup>54</sup> Rothenberger. “Antworten.” 101. Vgl. ähnlich den Überblick bei Gnanakan. *Proclaiming*. 83–93.

<sup>55</sup> Reppenhagen. “Aspekte.” 108.

<sup>56</sup> Netland. *Pluralismus*. 213–215.

<sup>57</sup> William V. Crocket, James G. Sigountos (eds.). *Through No Fault of their Own?* Baker Book House: Grand Rapids (Michigan, USA), 1993.

<sup>58</sup> von Stoch. *Theologie*. 62–87.

<sup>59</sup> Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. *Barmer Theologische Erklärung*. <https://www.ekd.de/Barmer-Theologische-Erklärung-11292.htm>

church leaders—reject the deification of human beings. God is the triune God alone, revealed in Jesus Christ. This exclusivity rejects, whether one likes it or not, whether one states it or politely conceals it, the claims of the Dalai Lama, for example. Christians are also convinced that Jesus Christ is the mediator to God. Thus, they reject the claims of Muhammad, Buddha, or other mediators between God and man. This rejection of the deification of human beings is also very clearly found among representatives of all forms of inclusivism and more expansive forms of dialogue.

The official theological teaching authority of the Catholic Church is still partly exclusivist, partly inclusivist, but certainly not open to pThR. The strengthening of the cautiously inclusivist program under Pope John Paul II was strongly rolled back again under Pope Benedict XVI<sup>60</sup> and was even indirectly criticized by Pope Benedict, when he still was Cardinal Ratzinger, as “Dominus Iesus,” in particular, clearly shows.<sup>61</sup> (However, in the case of Pope John Paul II, it is even doubtful whether he ever represented an inclusivism in the sense of salvation through other religions). Perry Schmidt-Leukel points out that “Dominus Iesus” was criticized within the EKD sphere because of its ecumenical statements but hardly because of its anti-pluralistic statements concerning religions. He also points out that the last two major statements of the German Protestant regional churches, “Religions, Religiosity and Christian Faith” from the VELKD in 1991 and “Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions” from the Chamber for Theology of the EKD, are quite close to “Dominus Iesus.”<sup>62</sup> The former is above all in agreement with Karl Rahner and is a clear rejection of Paul Knitter’s pThR. The latter very clearly rejects an “ecumenism of religions” and warns against a leveling of the differences between religions and the Christian faith. For him, the declaration ultimately follows “an exclusivist baseline.”<sup>63</sup>

Pope Francis, for example, like Evangelicals and like the CWIMRW document, combines a great openness in conversation with other religions with a commitment to the primacy of the Gospel:

“In this dialogue, ever friendly and sincere, attention must always be paid to the essential bond between dialogue and proclamation, which leads the Church to maintain and intensify her relationship with non-Christians. A facile syncretism would ultimately be a totalitarian gesture on the part of those who would ignore greater values of which they are not the masters. True openness involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity, while at the same time being ‘open to understanding those of the other party’ and ‘knowing that dialogue can enrich each side.’ What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says ‘yes’ to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others. Evangelization and

<sup>60</sup> Neuer. “Neufundierung.”

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Neuer. “Neufundierung” und Koch. “Wahrheit.”

<sup>62</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. *Gott*. 23, 110–111.

<sup>63</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. *Gott*. 112.

interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another.<sup>64</sup>

Pope Francis stated elsewhere in the same document, “I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI that take us to the very heart of the gospel: ‘Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.’”<sup>65</sup>

Under the heading “Dialogue with All People,” the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*” (1965) of the Second Vatican Council states as its aim “to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel.”<sup>66</sup>

“*Nostra Aetate*” explicitly did not adopt Karl Rahner’s view of a mediation of salvation through other religions. Rather, the Council only sees here, and for instance also in *Lumen Gentium*, possible “preparation for the Gospel” in other religions.<sup>67</sup> It is debatable to which extent this can be called inclusivism at all. The Council speaks positively of followers of other religions. However, nowhere does it say that anyone receives salvation through non-Christian religions.<sup>68</sup> Measured by the common definition, this is classic exclusivism!

Incidentally, Bernhardt himself considers Rahner’s view to be a “combination of exclusive and universal absolute components.”<sup>69</sup>

## The World Council of Churches<sup>70</sup>

The notion that salvation is to be found in many religions has, especially since S. Wesley Ariarajah, M. M. Thomas, and Stanley J. Samartha, served as the basis of large parts of the dialogue program of the World Council of Churches (WCC), even if their view ultimately did not go beyond a very broad inclusivism<sup>71</sup> and pThR has never become the exclusive and official position of the WCC and has “never [found] its way into a higher-ranking document”<sup>72</sup> of the WCC.

<sup>64</sup> Franziskus. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 251

<sup>65</sup> Franziskus. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 8, with a quote from the encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

<sup>66</sup> The Holy See. *Nostra Aetate: Über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen*. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_ge.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_ge.html); vgl. dazu auch Steube. *Christentum*. 37.

<sup>67</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 16. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_ge.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_ge.html).

<sup>68</sup> Thus also Gäde. *Christus*. 52–54.

<sup>69</sup> Bernhardt. *Absoluthheitsanspruch*. 194, see generally 174–198.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. in more detail Thomas Schirrmacher. “A New Horizon for World Christianity: The Convergence between the Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Unity and Mission?” (English and Korean versions). Pp. 59–103 in: Jong Yun Lee (ed.). *A New Horizon of World Christianity: International Symposium*. Seoul: Academia Christiana of Korea, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> This is also true, for example, of M. M. Thomas and Stanley Samartha, who were in fact inclusivists. See. Gnanakan. *Proclaiming* 36–39, 51–55.

<sup>72</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel. “Theologie.” 36.

Rather, a “religion-theological abstinence”<sup>73</sup> prevailed, as Schmidt-Leukel demonstrates from 1979 and 2003 WCC documents on dialogue. The WCC’s dialogue department today is quite small; actually, it is the WCC general secretary who meets primarily with senior representatives of other religions. And the WCC’s dialogue today takes place independently of the pThR. After all, the WCC co-signed the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” which embeds dialogue in mission and emphasizes that any dialogue must be preceded by an assurance of one’s faith.

The pThR is in strong retreat in the World Council of Churches, mainly because the Orthodox churches, which do not share it, have strengthened, and because many churches of the Global South no longer share that view. This was visible to everyone by the fact that in the WCC’s Busan assembly there was no dialogue in the sense of pThR. Rather, dialogue occurred in the area of political cooperation. And that occurred in the plenary sessions. Apart from Jewish representatives, no speakers of other religions appeared or performed religious ceremonies, as was the hallmark of previous assemblies.

Paul F. Knitter lists under “modified exclusivism”<sup>74</sup> Karl Barth, Paul Althaus, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Carl Heinz Ratschow, Carl Braaten, and Paul Devenandan, that is, theologians who have strongly influenced the WCC. He also lists M. M. Thomas, one of the leading dialogue advocates of the WCC in the 20th century.

## Dialogue happens anyway

Dialogue between representatives of truth claims happens anyway—and frequently—whether its critics “allow” it or not.

Mission, however, is a reality of being human, no matter where we look. Truth claims are a reality wherever we look. Think of the internet! People try to convince each other of all sorts of things every day. Most of the time, this is done peacefully. If this does not happen peacefully, downplaying certainty of conviction or claims as if holding similar positions implies peacefulness rarely helps. Rather, it is a matter of principle how people treat each other, in love and peace or not, no matter how close or far apart their “truths” are.

As human beings, we talk to each other all the time, about trivial things as well as about what is most important to us, such as our work, our family, or even our faith or worldview. On one hand, we simply want to communicate and be in conversation. On the other hand, we are constantly trying to convince others of something, while at the same time listening to the arguments of others, who may in turn be able to convince us of something. The majority of our everyday conversations are neither inconsequential nor a struggle for truth. Rather, they lie somewhere in between or are a mixture of both. I think that our conversations in such cases often better reflect what our conversations about religion should

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<sup>73</sup> Schmidt-Leukel. *Gott*. 109.

<sup>74</sup> Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 60–61.

be like rather than some theoretical demand that such conversations should either always be about truth or that any claim to truth should be left out.

Conversations in which every statement we make is subject to the proviso that we ourselves do not know exactly what we want are also not meaningful, nor are conversations in which every statement is infallible.

People who do not stand by their convictions to others are not serious interlocutors. However, there is a world of difference between spreading one's convictions peacefully and respectfully and spreading them violently in a way that does not respect others' dignity.

Christian witness is not an ethics-free space; it needs an ethical foundation grounded in the Bible so that we really do what Christ has instructed us to do.

## 4. Biblical foundations

### Real dialogue without losing truth

Dialogue in the sense of peaceful discussion, honest and patient listening, learning from others, rejecting false testimony about others, self-critical reflection, presenting one's own point of view in a winning, convincing, and humble way instead of manipulation or coercion are all Christian virtues.

Dialogue between committed Christians and followers of other religions and worldviews is possible in the sense that Christians are glad to talk peacefully with others about their faith ("give an answer. ... But do this with gentleness and respect," 1 Peter 3:15), willingly listen to others (James 1:19), learn in many areas from the life experience of others (see the whole book of Proverbs), and are willing to have themselves and their behavior questioned again and again.

However, if dialogue is understood to mean that the innermost truth claims of Jesus Christ (John 14:6), the gospel (Romans 1:16–17; 2:16), and the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Hebrews 4:12–13; John 17:17) are to be temporarily or principally invalidated in conversation with followers of other religions, or that the missional nature of the Christian faith is to be temporarily or principally invalidated in conversation with followers of other religions, and that biblical revelation is to be put on a par with the revelations of other religions, then "dialogue" is, in my opinion, compatible neither with Christian mission nor with the nature of Christianity at all.

The truth claim of the Christian faith is expressed above all in the doctrine of the Last Judgment and eternal life. Hebrews 6:1–2 speaks of "the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" as two of the six most important foundations of faith. The Church of all times has held fast to this, as the Creed shows: "from there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

However, this also means that Christians leave everything to God's justice and the judgment of Jesus Christ here and in the Last Judgment. Christians do not know it in advance. Christians are glad that God himself is the judge and has reserved every final judgment for himself. Only God himself can look into the

hearts of people, and we do not know his judgment in the end, for “man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

So we must clearly point out that a dogmatic statement (e.g. “if someone believes this, then this will happen ...”) does not automatically mean that we really know the state of another’s heart and that our view of others is identical with God’s view. Convinced, dogmatically based positions can very well go hand in hand with the humble attitude that God alone knows how things are with us and how things are with others.

### **The biblical testimony of Jesus Christ as Savior<sup>75</sup>**

“Jesus, the evangelist par excellence and the Gospel in person,”<sup>76</sup> is the missionary par excellence, and the goal of all mission is a “personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus.”<sup>77</sup> Jesus was sent to earth by God the Father as a man to take the punishment of the cross upon himself and to bring about and proclaim salvation. God had already decided prior to the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) not to leave people to their self-chosen fate of sin (John 3:16) but to send himself in Jesus as a missionary into the world (John 3:16).

From the beginning, Christians understood Jesus’ death as a substitutionary sacrifice for sins. The sinless and innocent Jesus was given over to death by God out of love for sinners in order to redeem the guilt of sin. Jesus’ death is the price of redemption, both as a process of deliverance and as a “ransom” (Romans 3:24; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18–19). Man’s hopelessly sinful nature through original sin since Adam means separation from God and eternal death, but Jesus’ sacrificial death leads to liberation, redemption, and eternal life. With images of the slave market, the court system, the military, the service in the temple, and everyday relationships, the New Testament describes believers’ reconciliation with God through the death of Jesus. Redemption is expressed in liberation from sin and changed lives in new freedom. Among many images and expressions, the Scriptures use the word “salvation” as a comprehensive term for salvation from the slavery of sin and death. God as Savior brings salvation through His Son Jesus Christ (Psalm 25:5; Luke 1:47; Acts 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Christianity differs from all other world religions in that it places its founder completely and in every respect at the center and worships him divinely. Jesus is for the church not only the originator or rediscoverer of metaphysical and ethical teachings, like Buddha or Confucius; not only the messenger of a God revealing himself, like Moses or Mohammed; not only an incarnation of the lord of the world proclaiming divine wisdom, like Krishna. Rather, he is all this together, and beyond that, he is God himself. Through his birth, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension, he is the center and turning point of world history,

<sup>75</sup> See Steube in detail 87–110.

<sup>76</sup> Papst Franziskus. *Evangelii Gaudium*. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz. Bonn, 2014. 209, 264.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



and as judge of the world in the Last Judgment, he is the goal of world history. Despite all the differences on particular questions, countless Christian churches and groups are unanimous with respect to one point: God has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ, and on him hangs the fate and redemption of mankind.

### **John 14:6: it is a matter of salvation**

When Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6), he is concerned precisely (1) with an actual, lived relationship with God, namely the “way” (which in the language of the Old Testament and New Testament stands for life progressing in time); (2) with “life” (which in the same language stands for the fullness of a successful life and eternal life in communion with God); and (3) with the truth that the true God is “Father” and can only be rightly understood as the Father of Jesus Christ, who through Jesus also becomes our Father.

Jesus not only knows the truth and does not simply proclaim the truth, but he is first and foremost the truth in person as the God who humbled himself. Thus, 1 John 5:20 says, “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (cf. 5:6). It is in this question of the truth claim of the Christian faith where actually the sharpest divergence from other religions and worldviews occurs.

“The faint echo of what truth means in Hebrew is still quietly felt here: absolute reliability in speech and action, in thought and planning, in being par excellence, a reliability that only God can demonstrate, a faithfulness to which man is destined but which he cannot keep.”<sup>78</sup>

A “truth of faith” is certainly something different from objective correctness, but this does not by implication mean that a truth of faith must be automatically objectively wrong! For instance, one can hold a mathematical equation to be correct or incorrect without being personally affected by it and without having to align one’s life according to it. (However, the attempt to live against mathematical axioms would be impossible and cause great chaos.) A truth of faith must nevertheless be true and reliable; that is, the one to whom we relate through faith must not deceive us, and it is always a matter of the reality of our lives.

The famous opening words of Romans 1:16–17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” mean that the gospel is not about lofty philosophies, tips for a more beautiful life, moral advice or contemplative thoughts. Rather, it is about a concrete question of law, power, and strength. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power!” (1 Corinthians 4:20); “because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

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<sup>78</sup> Ron Kubsch. “Die Sache mit der Wahrheit.” *glauben und denken heute* 2 (2009) 2: 3–4, <https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/glauben-denken-heute-19.html>

Everything other than the proclamation of this deadly serious question of power—in the truest sense of the word—would be a belittlement and trivialization of human problems! Thus only “God’s power” (or “God’s might”; Greek *dynamis*, from which “dynamite” is derived) can produce “salvation” (or “rescue”). Paul’s assessment of the truth content of other religions in Romans 1:18 ff is precisely determined by Romans 1:16–17.

Since salvation in Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:14–15) and Scripture reveals Jesus as the voice and word of God par excellence (John 1:1–3,14; Revelation 19:13),<sup>79</sup> a correct understanding of Scripture can only be Christologically based. That Jesus is the Word of God has often been used by theologians who see themselves as historical-critical as a justification that the Holy Scriptures cannot be the Word of God. However, the same Scriptures that reveal Jesus to us as the Word of God reveal:

1. that Jesus speaks the “words of God” (John 3:34; 17:8; cf. 8:28–29+31–32+46–47);
2. that Jesus himself calls the “Scriptures” the “word of God” (e.g., Mk 7:10–13) and the like, and that he makes sweeping statements about the “Scriptures” authorizing them as the sayings of God (e.g., John 10:34; Mark 12:10; Mark 12:24).

To put it another way, that Jesus is the one word of God (Barmen Declaration 1) does not mean, after all, that God says nothing, but rather that God is a speaking God and that there are words that apply to man and are revelation to him. Those who see Jesus as the word of God but do not let him say anything in terms of content and stand for nothing completely fail to understand why the Holy Scripture precisely uses the concept of the spoken and written word for Jesus as a person.

### **Describing the Creator’s essence: the Trinity**

The further the description of God moves away from his actual essence of love, the less this God can be compared with the Christian God. The less “the greatest commandment” stands in the center—[“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). The second one is this: ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29–31)], the further one moves away from God, as a Christian and as a non-Christian. “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and out of this motive Jesus was sent for salvation and faith (John 3:16). Therefore, the true God is also not a distant, triumphal God. Rather, God humbles himself (Philippians 2:5–11) out of love for mankind.

In my opinion, the indispensability of the doctrine of the Trinity is based primarily on God being love. God was already love before all creation, namely between Father, Son, and Spirit. He did not first have to create a counterpart in order to

<sup>79</sup> On the Trinitarian significance of this statement, also for the Old Testament, cf. Thomas Schirrmacher. *Christus und die Dreieinigkeit im Alten Testament*. RVB: Hamburg, 2001.

actually be able to love. Rather, the fact that love is the program of creation is based on the fact that the world was created by a God who is eternally love, and not only theoretically, but in the practical consummation of eternal love relationships.

#### *Differentiation: Example 1: Judaism*

How complicated and complementary the question can be is shown in what Paul says about the Jews: “‘And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11:27-33). This text can only be understood in a complementary way. It points to friends and enemies of God at the same time, yet with the mercy of God being in all places. Who would want to give a simple answer as to who is saved and who is not?

#### *Differentiation: Example 2: The Areopagus speech (Acts 17)*

Paul’s speech in Athens shows how good and important it is to study other religions and worldviews and their texts, and to adjust to their followers in terms of thought and language.

According to the book of Acts, the apostles began the discussion where they had a difference of opinion, but they accepted common premises of thought. Therefore, when they interacted with Jews, they no longer discussed creation or the inspiration of the Old Testament. Rather, they started directly with the discussion about Jesus Christ. With Gentiles they went back much further and also discussed creation, assuming what was taught and seen in the respective culture about the Creator as in the biblical testimony (e.g., Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34). For this reason, Paul was able to prove the existence of the Creator in his famous Areopagus speech in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) by citing Greek philosophers without explicitly referring back to biblical testimony.

This speech shows that Paul studied the Greek philosophers intensively and planned the speech specifically for his audience. Thus, he did not simply fall back on commonly known dicta but also on derived texts. This is supported by the fact that in Titus 1:12 Paul quotes Epimenides, who is mentioned in Acts 17, in a sentence that is directly related to the quotation of Epimenides in Acts 17:28. Paul critically takes up the philosophers and paraphrases their thoughts, for example when he points out that God does not need the help of humans (Acts 17:25). This idea contradicted Greek religious practice but can be found almost verbatim in Plato, Euripides, and other Greek philosophers.

Paul's speech thus becomes a prime example of missionary preaching par excellence, which also has much to say to the missionary today, not only with respect to content but also with respect to method. In Acts 14:15–17, Paul took a very similar approach to the worshippers of Zeus, even though we do not encounter any quotations from philosophers there—probably because of the less educated audience or simply because of the brief reporting. Many commentators have pointed out that the speech in Acts 17 is merely a practical implementation of the first chapters of Romans (Romans 1:17–32).

*Differentiation: Example 3: Existence of the Creator or trust in the Creator?*

From a Christian perspective, the question of whether other religions believe in the same God easily leads one astray, since for Christians it is more a matter of whether one is in a relationship of trust with that God and whether one has received his grace and forgiveness than whether one believes his existence is possible or describes him correctly. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19) The letter of James dramatically describes the lifelessness of a purely theoretical belief in the fundamentally correct and same God.

I write “more a matter” above because of course one cannot have a personal relationship with God and trust him if one does not believe that he exists. And therefore, the correct description of God indeed has something to do with how and whether one trusts him. The only thing is that both are worthless without actual trust in God.

Polytheism, as well as supplementing or substituting God with other gods, is already rejected in the Old Testament. However, it is not in itself questioned that there is faith in a creator also outside of Israel. All names of other gods are used for the God of Israel (apart from Yahweh as the name of God), above all “El.” At the same time, however, the descriptions of the nature of the true God are set apart from descriptions of the nature of other supreme gods. The true God is absolutely fail-safe, able to do what he says and wants, merciful, of great goodness, etc.

This finds its continuation in the New Testament. With *theos*, the same designation is used for the Christian God as in the social environment, only that the name Jesus is typical as a classical name like Yahweh but just not a total designation of the triune Creator God.

If there is only one Creator, then he is the Creator of all people and there for all, for he “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good” (Matthew 5:45) and has given us all life and, for example, the joy of eating (Acts 17:25). Thus, wherever this Creator is spoken of, only the One can be meant, however misrepresented and falsely worshipped. People do convert away from idols in the New Testament, but if someone had already believed in the Creator beforehand, like the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1–10), that individual finds salvation and peace with God through faith in Jesus. However, it is not portrayed as if he had converted away from the wrong Creator toward the right Creator. (In the Bible, this does not exclude that not only idolaters turn from idols to the living God

[1 Thessalonians 1:9], but there are also people, like the Athenians, who know about the existence of the Creator, yet simultaneously worship idols, and have to turn away from them towards the—now no longer “unknown”—Creator and Redeemer).

At that point, where Paul emphasizes the absolute claim of the true God of the Jewish-Christian revelation most strongly, for example in Romans 1:16-32—and he puts the same approach into practice in Athens in Acts 17:16-34—he assumes that all religions have their origin in the knowledge of the existence of the one true Creator. Indeed, in the case of the polytheistically oriented Greek philosophy (and religion), it has actually long since been recognized that there is a primordial mover behind everything, that this mover is even worshipped, but that this knowledge (gnosis) remains useless, which is why the Greeks themselves refer to this god as the “unknown god” (a-gnostos). The evidence for this has long since been provided by historical research. Thus Paul does not emphasize that the worship of the Greeks is useless because their ancestors refer to the wrong God. Rather, it is because they only make conjectures about the right God or know or represent him completely incorrectly. Paul urges his audience to turn away from their limited powers, spirits, and gods to this one and supreme Creator God who ultimately revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Was the “unknown God” of the Greeks that Paul highlights in Acts 17 the same God as the God of Abraham? Yes and no. Yes, because Paul teaches that this unknown God has now revealed himself, yet no, because the lack of redemption and thus the lack of a relationship with this God prove that the Greeks believed in other gods. Moreover, God was unknown to them because they knew nothing about his actions and his being.

Thus, at the center of the Christian faith is not so much the question of the same God in whose existence one believes as it is the question of salvation and the way of salvation and the relationship of trust towards this God. If one understands “believe in God” as (1) to consider God as existing, one will quickly come to an agreement with many people. If one understands by the phrase (2) to hold certain statements about God as correct, that is to say, a confession of faith, the situation already becomes more strained. However, if we understand it in the biblical sense as (3) trust in the love and grace of God, who grants us salvation in Christ, a convinced and practicing Christian automatically always believes something different from a non-Christian, even from a nominal Christian who falls into category (2).

## **Is there the same God in Islam and Christianity?**

Is the Islamic God the same as the Christian God?<sup>80</sup> Or let us put it more generally: Do the monotheistic religions believe in the same God?

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<sup>80</sup> Since Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians both call God Allah, the oft encountered pairing of God / Allah is meaningless; cf. Thomas Schirrmacher. “Dürfen arabische Christen Gott ‘Allah’ nennen?” *MBS Texte Theologische Akzente* 96. Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2008. <https://thomasschirrmacher.info/?p=565>

The question of whether others who believe in a creator God in any form believe in the same God as Christians is not quite as simple as it first sounds, since one believes in the same God but can have a completely different picture of him. Who would deny that the Jews believe in the same God as the Christians and yet in many respects have a wrong image of God that often blocks their understanding of salvation in Jesus Christ? The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons also believe in the same God as Christians and yet have a completely wrong image of God.

And if various ethnic religions believed in the existence of a creator God, who was mostly not worshiped, missionaries, following Paul's speech in the Areopagus, rightly did not argue that this God did not exist. Rather, they asked them to turn away from their other idols toward this Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### **Islam versus Christianity and the problem of having things in common**

If you start with apparent similarities, you usually already favor one religion over the other, because a similarity usually has a very different status within the respective religions. For example, anyone who begins a dialogue between Christianity and Islam over the unity of God, which both proclaim, has already described the main content of faith for Islam but has set the main content of faith for Christianity, namely salvation in Jesus Christ, into the second row. For this reason, the EKD (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, or Evangelical Church of Germany) document entitled *Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft*<sup>81</sup> (English translation of the title: Clarity and Good Neighborliness), adopted during Bishop Wolfgang Huber's tenure as Council Chairman, rightly emphasized that dialogue with Islam is possible for Christians only if they accept Jesus as the Son of God, who effects salvation, and are able to bring that into the conversation and not wait until a later point.

When the 138 Muslim authors of the famous letter "A Common Word"<sup>82</sup> emphasize, for example, common love for God and for people and refer to quotations from Jesus, they have already given their image of Jesus but tacitly rejected the Christian one. This is not because they said something that Christians could not share. Rather, it is because they ignore the fact that from a Christian point of view, Jesus, as the son of God and as God, spoke of love and embodies it himself and pours it out into believers. The response letter from the World Evangelical Alliance did a nice job of elaborating that.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> *Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft*.

<sup>82</sup> A Common Word. <https://www.acommonword.com>

<sup>83</sup> Friedmann Eißler (ed.). *Muslimische Einladung zum Dialog. EZW-Texte 2020*. EZW: Berlin, 2009. 93–99. (also <https://d-nb.info/993795803>); original: <http://www.acommonword.com/category/site/christian-responses/>

## 5. Arguments against pluralistic theology of religion (pThR)

### Dispensing with truth does not work even within Christianity

Even within Christianity, dialogue that does not take the truth claims of various denominations seriously does not work. Does one have the pope or the Bible as the supreme authority? You can't just gloss over this question by saying that both somehow reflect the same reality. You can't separate the debate from the question of truth by decree! And why? I myself had a friendly and peaceful discussion with the Pope about this. The increasingly intense talks between the Vatican and the WEA, meticulously mapping what both sides have in common theologically and what divides them, have not made collaboration and respect difficult. They have made it possible. That may not make much sense to some Western academics, but at least representatives of three-quarters of world Christianity are talking to each other here, without pushing the question of truth to the margins.

### No explanation for much of the Scriptures is offered by pThR

Representatives of pThR rarely bother to give exegetically useful explanations of how whole groups of texts in the Old and New Testament are to be understood or why they are to be neutralized for the present. As correct as it is when representatives of pThR point out that all of Scripture must be taken into account for the topic and that topics such as conversation, the commandment for peace, God's will to save all people, etc. must be included in the topic, the reverse is also true: one cannot simply say goodbye to the other parts of Scripture.

What about the criticism of syncretism in the Old and New Testaments, which includes a criticism of one's own religion, namely when one deviates from the belief in the one God of the Bible? Many long passages of prophetic literature deal with this! What about the so-called polemical theology of the OT, which takes up the parallels from other religions and cultures only to work out the uniqueness of Yahweh?<sup>84</sup>

What about religious criticism of the Holy Scriptures, such as when Paul sees religions as man-made (Romans 1:19–25)? What about the "creation" of gods according to Romans 1,<sup>85</sup> an idea that Ludwig Feuerbach took up, applying it only to the Christian God, but likewise taken up by Karl Barth? Is every type of such criticism of religion wrong? Or to put it another way, do all religions have to be treated with kid gloves and glossed over in the name of dialogue? And

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<sup>84</sup> Particularly well addressed in Currid. *Gods*; cf. Daniel I. Block. "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology." Pp. 43–78 in: David W. Baker (Ed.). *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*. Kregel: Grand Rapids (Michigan, USA), 2004.

<sup>85</sup> Steube. *Christentum*. 355–356.

should there not be acknowledgment of a certain justification regarding the criticism of religion with respect to actual, existing Christianity?

I remember a dialogue meeting of pThR representatives at which I was to speak about the Evangelical understanding of dialogue. My condition was that top atheist representatives would also be present, which was then accepted. Interestingly, the discussion shifted away from the discussion with me as an Evangelical to the fundamental criticism of the representative of the Humanist Union that the representatives of pThR are not less fundamentalist than the representatives of the religions themselves.

Gerhard Gäde proposes the fact that the New Testament recognizes another religion in the Old Testament as striking proof for pThR, something which in his opinion cannot be contradicted.<sup>86</sup> However, first, this would only be a proof of a distinct inclusivism, because the Old Testament is not recognized in just any interpretation. Rather, it is only recognized in the interpretation of the apostles, and second, his step from Israel to all other religions is simply postulated and not substantiated in detail. That is difficult for me to understand because the statement of the New Testament is precisely that the New Testament builds on the foundations of the Old Testament, and what is taught there does not contradict the New Testament. But how do you want to transfer that to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or voodoo?

The apostles proclaimed the identity of the Father of Jesus Christ with the covenant God of Old Testament Israel. At the same time, they saw idols of their time aligned with idols that challenged this covenant God, which Gäde, of course, does not mention. Why should what is said positively about Israel automatically apply to all religions?

### **A Western concept of truth**

In all pThR, a concept of truth is given that actually makes the concept of truth itself rather suspect. For one can only say that truth is found in many or all religions if one:

1. questions the traditional concept of truth (i.e., one says that nobody has the truth in the end or that many truths are valid in parallel);
2. questions the concept of personal revelation (i.e., revelation is either not personal revelation from God and/or the content transmitted is not considered revelation); and
3. challenges the Christian concept of God as truth, who revealed himself in Jesus as the truth in person.

Incidentally, this is a typical view of Western liberal theology, which in the Global South is usually represented only by theologians who have studied theology at universities in the West that are in accordance with liberal theology. This is

<sup>86</sup> Gäde. *Christus*. 161–163.



hardly communicable to the vast majority of Christian theologians, and laypeople worldwide can hardly understand it.

### **pThR itself practices apologetics just as its counterpart does**

The apologetic dispute remains despite pThR. Advocates of pThR fight apologetically, not for a form of Christianity or for another religion like Islam. Rather, they fight for their own view of things. At this point they do not appear much different from apologists of religions themselves.

I also cannot see that they are really more open to the views of dissenters or have fundamentally rethought things more often in open conversation with others in their lives than exclusivist or inclusivist advocates. Hick and Knitter have maintained their position for decades; dissenters do not seem to have had much influence on them.

There are also astonishingly apodictic passages in the texts of many representatives of pThR that do not tolerate any contradiction.<sup>87</sup> I have experienced this myself during consultations. This is not meant to be a cheap ad-personam argument, because the same exists in my own circles, of course. This is the only thing: dogmatism is equally distributed in all circles and often has to do with personality. A certain view or worldview does not automatically make a person tolerant. Even advocates of tolerance can be intolerant in their dealings with others.

Incidentally, the renunciation of one's own confession or one's own truth claims would itself already be an indispensable dogmatic commitment. This is clearly shown when opponents of all dialogue meet advocates of a dialogue absent of any confession, and both equally sometimes become zealots for their cause.

Werner Thiede has also pointed out how legally compelling this kind of dialogue often becomes. Bernhard Weite and Leonard Swidler have even formulated "commandments" for dialogue, Swidler with "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," and Raimon Panikkar has formulated a "Sermon on the Mount of intra-religious conversation."<sup>88</sup>

### **Comparative Theology for a Non-Exclusivist Alternative**

What is usually overlooked in pThR is the fact that there have long been pluralistic counter-models<sup>89</sup> which do not presuppose that the question of truth must be suspended. We will limit ourselves here representatively to a model that clearly rejects pThR<sup>90</sup> but nevertheless wants to avoid exclusivism and to avoid inclusivism as far as possible. Comparative theology became its own camp in academia only in the 1990s in the Anglo-Saxon realm, starting with Francis X.

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<sup>87</sup> For instance, one could read the end of Gäde's book. *Christus*. 183–193.

<sup>88</sup> Documented in Thiede. *Wahrheit*. 11–12.

<sup>89</sup> Knitter. "pluralistische Religionstheologie." 21 implies that but only lists so-called "Partikularismus." In Knitter. "Religionstheologie" one finds a good listing of reactions to pThR.

<sup>90</sup> See, for instance, the criticism of Hick in von Stosch. *Theologie*. 22–55.

Clooney,<sup>91</sup> Catherine Cornille, and Jams L. Frederick. In Germany it was and is presented mainly by the Catholic theologian Klaus von Stosch.<sup>92</sup>

Comparative theology is about doctrinal and epistemic humility, about a common struggle relating to ultimate questions, about intensive studies and comparisons between religions on detailed questions (“a micrological approach”). However, the idea of a truth claim has not been abolished for several reasons: (1) It is obviously not possible at all. It is indeed possible to translate one’s own point of view into philosophical formulations in an enlightened way, but the fact remains that one cannot utilize another’s presuppositions. (2) It is obviously not possible to lead a dialogue without a claim that in the end does not deny the foundations of the Christian faith. (3) In the end, pThR can no longer say anything positive at all about God.

Comparative theology does not seek to compare whole systems with each other and to discuss their questions of truth. Rather, it seeks to concentrate on individual aspects and topics. It is certainly difficult to clarify the question of truth conclusively within a religion, even within a church. Conservative Christians and Muslims, for example, are more likely to agree on issues such as the virgin birth and homosexuality than conservative and liberal Christians. Conservative and liberal Christians, in turn, are more likely to agree on other issues. Struggling with respect to the truth can be maintained to always remain in the background and not to be resolved, with at the same time no one claims to know the truth about everything.

I do not want to propagate comparative theology here, but I do want to point out that pThR has long had competition from within its own ranks, with which cooperation is easier because it does not impose far-reaching preconditions for participation in the dialogue.

### **pThR often demonstrates superficial knowledge of religions**

As a scholar of religions, I have noticed that the representations of other religions on the part of many representatives of pThR are often quite superficial. One often finds that a likable variant of a world religion is constructed, which rarely does justice to the enormous range such religions possess in their various facets. Often, only certain “politically correct” players are taken into consideration. What the respective viewpoint means for assessing Jehovah’s Witnesses or voodoo is not addressed. The immense diversity of religions and varieties within a particular religion makes it practically impossible to make statements regarding all religions or about a world religion as a whole.

This is of course also true in the Evangelical sphere, for example when Miroslav Volf, whom many count as belonging to the Evangelical camp, states—as we have already seen—that Christians could actually say the Islamic creed and that

<sup>91</sup> Francis X. Clooney. *Komparative Theologie. Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie* 15. Schöningh: Paderborn, 2013 (cf. the entire book series).

<sup>92</sup> von Stosch. *Theologie*; Reinhold Bernhardt, Klaus von Stosch (eds.). *Komparative Theologie*. TVZ: Zürich, 2009 (with many advocates).

Muslims disagree with the Trinity only because it is misrepresented. This is certainly not a useful guideline for Christian-Islamic dialogue because, first of all it presupposes that all Christians follow Volf's theology and all Muslims follow the Islamic mysticism favored by his interlocutors. If I am allowed to choose in advance who talks to whom, dialogue is always easy. In Nigeria, for example, it is a matter of bringing real Christians into conversation with real Muslims, locally as well as at the highest level. However, this cannot be achieved by burdening the conversation in advance with philosophical or theological prescriptions that are alien to one's own faith and impose conditions on the interlocutor in advance.

In my book *The Koran and the Bible*, for example, I have shown how Islam and Christianity are diametrically opposed to each other in pretty much every question on the understanding of the "word of God," i.e., the role of the Koran and the Bible. This is true whether one thinks that both speak of the same God or not. Volf completely overlooks such questions.

### **What is religion and what does this imply for truth claims?**

pThR functions only with a narrow, so-called substantial definition of religion that presupposes some form of venerated transcendence. If one follows a functional definition of religion, so-called secular religions also belong to the field of religious studies.<sup>93</sup> However, this should only be noted in passing since pThR simply ignores this worldwide discussion.

### **Constant condemnation of atheists**

pThR also excludes non-religious people at the expense of dialogue among religions. For John Hick, "all people who are open to divine influence, no matter what human tradition they are affiliated with, have an equal opportunity to experience redemptive transformation."<sup>94</sup> And what about atheists and the non-religious? Hick, after all, claims that in a pluralistic world one must not make an exclusivist claim. However, from the atheistic point of view, he raises an exclusivist claim of all religions against non-religious people. In the case of Hick, it has to be asked if one can afford that in today's world.

For Evangelicals, it makes no difference whether people who do not believe in salvation in Jesus Christ follow a religion or an atheistic worldview. On the other hand, pThR follows the pattern of many religious people, namely that it is still better to believe something than to believe nothing, better to have some idea of the supernatural than to deny the supernatural. This cannot be justified biblically or otherwise.

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher. *Hitlers Kriegsreligion: Die Verankerung der Weltanschauung Hitlers in seiner religiösen Begrifflichkeit und seinem Gottesbild*. 2 Vols. VKW: Bonn, 2007. Vol. 1. Pp. 51–72; reprinted in: by the same author. *Zum Problem der vielfältigen Religionsdefinitionen*. *IIRF Bulletin Jahrgang 1, Heft 6* (August 2012). <https://iirf.global/?p=1845>

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Neuer. *Heil*. 63.

Within the worldwide human rights discussion and human rights legislation, religions and worldviews are equal; freedom of religion means religious freedom and worldview freedom. I believe that Evangelicals often have less of a problem with this than pThR, which believes that a worldview that involves worshiping something supernatural is somehow closer to the truth than an atheistic or agnostic worldview.

### **Religious criticism gets passed over**

We have already seen that pThR largely ignores the inner-biblical criticism of religion. However, pThR also ignores modern religious criticism, by which not simply everything is to be rejected. Behind religions, something principally positive is seen as common to all. In my opinion, this does not do justice to reality—neither to that which our media report, nor to that which can be found in the self-representations of religions.

### **The dark side of religion is downplayed**

pThR is very weak when it comes to the dark side of religions or to the dark side of certain wings of individual religions.<sup>95</sup>

The biblical idea that religion can also have demonic features<sup>96</sup> is passed over. One would at least wish for an explanation of what the Scriptures mean by this and what this means for the dark side of all religions, including of course the dark side of real Christianity.

What does the New Testament mean when it calls the devil the “father of lies” (John 8:44) and the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4)? Even if you don’t think these are statements about the real world, what do they mean then?

Above, we rejected fundamentalism as a militant claim to truth and pointed out that since 2001 the question of the legitimization of violence by religions has been superimposed upon the question of dialogue between the world’s religions. Is this not a matter of demonic traits, even if this is done in Christian garb? Is not religious criticism the only way to proceed at this point?

It should be noted, by the way, that dialogue with “real” and even violent fundamentalists of different religions worldwide is necessary. After all, there are always a large number of individuals who have opted out and who have allowed themselves to be convinced by others. And some formerly violent movements have subsequently become peaceful.

### **pThR seeks to and has to evaluate—but by what standard?**

pThR advocates say they do not want freedom from evaluation, meaning not to relativistically equate all religions. What remains is to ask what criteria the evaluation of religions follows. In the case of Hick, it is love for the “real” and love

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<sup>95</sup> Gäde. *Christus*. 140–163 and 121–132.

<sup>96</sup> Steube. *Christentum*. 352–355.

for other people. Is it a coincidence that the standard of love was chosen by a Christian theologian? Is this not an inclusivist way of making an ultimately Christian principle the standard applied to all religions?

Who stands above all religions and can set up such criteria? And is this point of view over religions, then, not itself a religion? Moreover, what is declared to be common is imposed on all religions, if not forced upon them.

This is due to the fact that what is valid here as a standard for all is not the result of a broad dialogue between religions after many discussions, negotiations, and, if necessary, compromises. Rather, it is something conceived at the desk of a Christian theologian that is then prescribed to others.<sup>97</sup>

In the case of John Hick, for example, all “pre-axial” religions (i.e., all ethnic religions) are inclusivistically devalued in favor of world religions. His starting point, however, is that today, in view of the diversity of religions, one simply has to think pluralistically. Nevertheless, he allows himself to devalue millions of followers of ethnic religions and, of course, also atheists in an inclusivist way, whereby the underlying standard, a historically disputed thesis from Karl Jaspers, is very thin and, moreover, simply postulated by Hick and not thoroughly proven. At this point, one has a historically disputed construct becoming the basis of dogmatics or of an assessment as to which religions are good because they lead to salvation.<sup>98</sup>

For Evangelicals, it is then not comprehensible why a nature religion in the Amazon is automatically considered worse than Buddhism, which is atheistic in its original form, or Salafism, which is ready to use violence but is post-axial.

### **pThR is actually a form of inclusivism**

Such inclusivist tendencies among representatives of pThR are found again and again and raise the question of whether pluralism is not rather a matter of rhetoric while reality is inclusivist. When even John Hick writes that the “presence of this reality ... meets us in the lives of the world’s great spiritual leaders,” but continues by saying “that among them we have found in Jesus our primary revelation of this reality as well as the primary guide for our lives,”<sup>99</sup> even though he may only be making reference to Christians (“we”) with this, one has to wonder what distinguishes this view from other forms of inclusivism.

### **pThR often ignores religions’ concrete ethical demands**

pThR mostly ignores ethics. One might see dogmatics as an expression of the worship of the same ultimate greatness behind everything, but in ethics this is not so straightforward. A religious right to kill others cannot simply be made compatible with a religious prohibition against killing others, with a declaration

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<sup>97</sup> Thus in particular Gnanakan. *Proclaiming*. 51.

<sup>98</sup> Neuer. *Heil*. 173–176, 141–145.

<sup>99</sup> Translation of the 1993 quotes according to Perry Schmidt-Leukel. “Theologie.” 54, for Schmidt-Leukel this is even the summary of *pThR*!

that the two are different expressions of the same truth. The demand for stoning and its rejection cannot be regarded as two aspects of the same truth. We have already dealt with this problem when discussing pThR's avoidance of the dark sides of religion.

This statement is not directed against Hans Küng's "world ethos" or similar drafts, for Küng wants to formulate ethical commonalities only where there is real content in religions and to position these against wings of the religions that question fundamental ethical values. That this attempt also runs the risk of finding more common ground than actually exists is another matter.

### The "Real": Hick as a founder of religion

John Hick<sup>100</sup> has equally called the greatness standing behind all religions "God" since the 1970s and, since his main work *An Interpretation of Religion* in 1989, "the Real." It does not correspond to any existing religious tradition. "The Real" is a philosophical construct that logically is not worshipped by anyone religiously. This is no accident, since it necessarily presupposes considerations by the philosophers Immanuel Kant and by Karl Jaspers,<sup>101</sup> without which his view collapses.

The "Real," Hick argues, is the transcendent being that stands behind all legitimate religions but is only inadequately addressed in all of them and borrows from cultural and individual precepts. It is not, however, what a religion says or teaches that is decisive. Rather, it is the practical purpose of conveying salvation, which seemingly contradictory concepts can equally fulfill.

I would like to put forward the thesis that with "the Real" Hick himself has turned into a founder of religion. "The Real" is neither a person nor a non-person, and indeed is not identical with any known image of God or what is transcendent in any religion. Rather, it is the incomprehensible, absolute reality behind all religions. All religions are true insofar as they reflect "the Real." All are not true insofar as none experience "the Real" as it really is.<sup>102</sup>

### Why should only Christians back down?

Why is the requirement to renounce one's own claim to truth before and in discussion expected only from Christians and not from participating Muslims or Buddhists? Sung Ryul Kim aptly states regarding pThR that "its goal is theologically unacceptable because it does not respect its own tradition while being uncritical of other traditions."<sup>103</sup>

I have also personally experienced that representatives of pThR have been much friendlier to certain religious representatives and more interested in what

<sup>100</sup> Cf. on Hick, for example, Bernhardt. *Absolutheitsanspruch*. 199–225 and Neuer. *Heil*.

<sup>101</sup> Thus in particular Stanislaw Kusmierz. "Philosophische Aspekte der Begründungsmodelle des religiösen Pluralismus." Pp. 107–120 in: Agan. *Religionstheologie*.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Gäde. *Christus*. 62–64

<sup>103</sup> Kim. *Gott*. 223.

they had to say than to the more conservative Christians of Catholic or Evangelical orientation who have been present.

### **Hick denies basic Christian truths**

It is characteristic that in Hick's case, precisely that which constitutes the core of the Christian conception of salvation completely disappears: both the negative overlay, i.e., the sin and lost nature of man, and the positive goal of personal fellowship with the Creator, along with the way to get there through forgiveness of guilt and reconciliation with God, which are established by God. Thus, the reconciling explosive power of Christianity, the basis for "love your enemies," has irrevocably departed.

Christianity clipped of its wings can then be nicely and conveniently incorporated along with other religions under "the Real."

Hick rejects a personal revelator just as categorically<sup>104</sup> as any revelation that conveys revelational content.<sup>105</sup> It is only a matter of salvation, which, however, may under no circumstances be somehow described on the basis of content.

For Hick, salvation is not a grace-filled restoration of a former state. Rather, it is the process away from a natural self-centeredness on the part of humankind to a loving relatedness toward humankind and God.<sup>106</sup> All this, however, characteristically takes place through one's own strength and not by grace or with the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why there is always talk of "salvation" in Hick's sense as fulfilled humanity. However, it is for practical purposes not a matter of redemption, reconciliation, or forgiveness, certainly not in the Christian sense.

The Christian doctrine of justification is explicitly rejected,<sup>107</sup> even in the Catholic form. Hick leaves all religions standing, but he takes away the heart of Christianity.

No model of pThR takes the Christian doctrine of sin seriously<sup>108</sup> or describes salvation in a way that comes close to any of the views of the classical denominations of Christianity. The core of Christianity is always first redefined before it can become partially compatible with other religions.

Christianity is greatly altered by Hick in that Jesus is indeed the mediator but not God, and his Christology in the first place constructs a Jesus that no one has ever represented or preached in this way.<sup>109</sup> Hick primarily justified his break with traditional Christology in his 1977 book that carried the significant title *The*

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<sup>104</sup> Documented in Neuer. *Heil*. 168–169.

<sup>105</sup> Documented in Neuer. *Heil*. 147.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Kothmann. *Apologetik*. 127.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. see as documented in Neuer. *Heil*. 101, 191, 195.

<sup>108</sup> According to Kothmann. *Apologetik*. 117–118.

<sup>109</sup> The most detailed synopsis has been undertaken by Koziel. *Rekonstruktion*. 789–846, see also the good critique in Neuer. *Heil*. 104–109, 123–127.

Myth of God Incarnate.<sup>110</sup> The main point of criticism is the early church's view of the divinity of Jesus. Hick started with a certain historical-critical view of the reconstruction of Jesus' life in the Gospels, but then he left this basis in favor of an account of who or what Jesus could and must have been.

Why can't Hick leave classical Christianity as it is, just as he leaves Islam and Hinduism as they are? Ulrich Dehn writes: "Hick combines his concept with myth criticism that explains everything metahistorical and transempirical, including Jesus' sonship with God, as a hypothesis for underscoring, for example, Jesus' important role, etc."<sup>111</sup>

However, the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter also rejects early-church Christology and adopts Hick to a large extent at this point.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, Hick, Knitter, and other representatives of pThR do not accept traditional Christology. The only question, then, is where they get their Christology. They do not work it out from any religious sources, nor do they try to make the Christian view compatible with the view of Jesus in other religions. Rather, it is a Jesus constructed by them, as he must be, such that their pThR works.

If Jesus Christ is truly real and historically resurrected, which the majority of Christians still believe, a Christian in dialogue cannot ignore this fact. The resurrection of Jesus alone would pose an enormous challenge in dialogue. However, I know of no presentation of pThR that holds the resurrection to be historical and then explains how the pThR view is nevertheless possible.<sup>113</sup> Paul's view is that if the resurrection did not occur historically, then one is in great error (1 Corinthians 15:17). Dialogue is then unnecessary, and Christians in such a case would do better to keep silent.

Even Gerhard Gäde criticizes the reinterpretation of Christology in pThR and views this as a justified criticism made by "Dominus Iesus," because pThR overshoot the mark.<sup>114</sup>

A typical example of how Paul Knitter deals with all religions is shown by Knitter's essay "Jesus – Buddha – Krishna."<sup>115</sup> All three stories are myths, all three praise the "mythical presence,"<sup>116</sup> all three persons are signs that "myth and symbol exert saving power." It is that simple!

<sup>110</sup> German version: John Hick (ed.). *Wurde Gott Mensch? Der Mythos vom fleischgewordenen Gott*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh, 1979.

<sup>111</sup> Dehn. "Religionswissenschaft." 95.

<sup>112</sup> For example Knitter. *Horizonte* 136–155, 304–313; Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 74–85, 101–134; Paul Knitter. "Theocentric Christology." *Theology Today* 40 (1983): 130–149, <http://academic-commons.columbia.edu/item/ac:146170>.

<sup>113</sup> A good example is Knitter. *Ein Gott*. 141–147, who sees the resurrection as an attempt to describe conversion experiences, such as Buddhists, for instance, may have.

<sup>114</sup> Gäde. *Christus*. 76–79.

<sup>115</sup> Knitter. *Horizonte*. 303–320.

<sup>116</sup> Knitter. *Horizonte*. 319.



In short: Up to now, in my view, no one has shown how one can advocate pThR without questioning the central beliefs of the Christian faith as they are confessed, for example, in the great ecumenical creeds of the historic church(es).

## 6. Conclusion

Jürgen Moltmann writes: “It does not serve the dialogue with other religions if Christians relativize what is particularly Christian and surrender it in favor of a general pluralism. Who should be interested in a dialogue with Christian theologians who no longer want to clearly represent what is Christian? In theological dialogue with Jews and Muslims, Christians understand and interpret the doctrine of the Trinity anew. This is due to the fact that while one also comes to understand oneself anew in new relationships, they will not relativize or surrender the doctrine.”<sup>117</sup>

## 7. Questions for further investigation

Did the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 have consequences for dialogue between religions, and if so, what were they?

To what extent can or should we distinguish a dialogue between religious leaders for social and political reasons (e.g., for peace, speaking out together to the government) from a dialogue for the purpose of exchanging views on the content of the respective faiths?

Is apologetics a help or a hindrance for the Christian interlocutor in a dialogue between religions?

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<sup>117</sup> Jürgen Moltmann. *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes*. München, 1991. p. 11.

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pThR = pluralistic theology of religion

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