

# Christianity and the Religions in the History of the Church

*As we look at the history of Christianity vis-a-vis the non-Christian religions, Paul's motto relative to the full range of religious beliefs and practices around him might well have summed it up "I resolve to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified." May Paul's motto be equally ours.*

by James F. Lewis

The above title suggests a very ambitious task. The best I can do is to offer a brief account of how certain individuals have thought about and interacted with religious others and the consequences of those developments.

The history of Christian religious other interaction is more than the history of how thinkers, churches and communities have viewed the discrete religions. It is also a history of how Christians have come to understand religion as a human phenomenon. As we shall see in the last section of the article, Christianity helped to stimulate the modern academic study of religion experiencing, both positive and negative outcomes, in its understanding of its relationship with the religions.

The individuals I have selected to carry the narrative have been chosen either for the significance of what they did and/or thought or for what I think they symbolized. Accordingly, I have chosen the apostle Paul for his role in leading the Jesus movement out of Judaism to gain an identity of its own. Tertullian was one of several outstanding apologists who sought to offer early formal responses to pagan folk religion and the classical intellectual tradition in which Greco-Roman life was rooted.

William of Rubruck's debate with Buddhists (1254 C.E.) symbolizes the difficulty Christians had (and continue to have) in understanding important segments of this religious world. Luther's attitudes to Islam are examined and shown to be a response based not so much on reliable information about Muslims as on theological and geopolitical concerns.

In the modern period I wish to show how the missionary movement played a small but important part in the rise of the academic study of religion and how that development is impacting Christian self-understanding and interreligious views.

## Period of Apostolic Foundation

Referring to the first century Andrew Wall says, "For one brief, vital period, Christianity was entirely Jewish" (Wall 1990:17). This period saw the emergence of a Christian community that at first was socially and religiously tied to a Palestinian Jewish world. Until about 50 C.E. almost all Christians were Jews or had been converts to Judaism. These followers of a Jewish Jesus practiced Judaism while gradually but painfully and inexorably revising and transcending their Jewish heritage. Their Jewish heritage, especially the acceptance of the Old Testament, provided them with the first paradigms for dealing with religious others.

As the Christians moved outside Jewish enclaves they very naturally viewed religious others as similar to the Jewish division of humanity into Jews, Greeks and Barbarians. Thus Christians inherited a bi-polar way of conceptualizing religious outsiders. Greeks stood for culturally sophisticated pagans and the barbarians the uncultured. In some form, this "we-they" conception was to be the typical and largely unchallenged Christian attitude toward other religious communities until the late twentieth century.

Paul's response to the first century religious world was at each of the levels of his contact with it: Judaism,

classical paganism, and pagan folk practices. The Judaism of Paul's time was confident of two things, each of which evoked different responses from Paul. They held that God was one and could only be worshipped spiritually without the aid of man made images. Paul stood foursquare behind this truth and made it a fixed point in his preaching to pagans (Ac 17). But secondly, according to the Jewish mind, followers of the Jesus movement seriously threatened the unity of God. Paul's response to this was unaccommodating: Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) yet in such a way that did no violence to that unity. Jesus is the "fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9). Paul agreed with his Jewish contemporaries in their message about one God. But he radically departed from that heritage in regarding Jesus as God. The Apostle asserts twin doctrines: God is one and Christ is God. In promoting these doctrines, Paul and the other apostles launch a new religion in human history.

One other point about Paul and Judaism. Though he grieves over their rejection of Messiah, he foresees a future for them. They will be co-inheritors of the eternal ages as a result of a supernatural operation which will enable them to accept the Lord Jesus whom they have so recently rejected (Ro 9-11).

Paul's writings and his recorded experiences at Lystra, Athens and Ephesus demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the pagan Roman world and the Hellenistic culture embraced by it. He knows some classical poetry and is able to carry on dialogue with contemporary philosophers (Ac 17). He seems to find no

place to incorporate ideas from writings of classical Greek philosophers and moralists. Rather, he treats non-Jewish religion, both in its philosophical and more popular forms, with sternness. In 1 Corinthians the wisdom of the Greeks is regarded as foolishness. The popular pagan rituals and beliefs, occult practices of spiritism, divination, spell casting and spirit possession are opposed, excised and exorcised. In Romans 1 he condemns pagan morality as moving away from the truth and descending into a self-destructive spiral.

Yet there are glimpses of a kinder and gentler side. When Paul compares the moral Greek to the self-righteous Jew, he seems to suggest the moral Greek may be less severely judged (Ro 2). But in all, Paul seems to draw a sharp contrast between the gospel and the beliefs and practices of the non-Jewish world. Paul's motto relative to the full range of religious beliefs and practices around him might well have been his words in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I resolve(d) to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

In summary, Christians in this period first gain their identity vis-a-vis Judaism and then go on to sharpen that identity even while contextualizing the message in terms understandable to the broader Roman world. The most fundamental material product of this period is the emergence of the New Testament, a Scriptural corpus which became the touch stone to guide subsequent inter-religious relationships.

### The Patristic Era

Andrew Walls notes that the most significant internal religious development for Christianity at this time is the rise of orthodoxy. "Of all the new religious ideas which entered with the Christian penetration of Hellenistic culture, one of the most permeative for the future was that of orthodoxy, a canon of right belief, capable of being stated in a series of propositions arrived at by a

process of logical argument" (Wall 1990:16)

The Christians were faced with religious communities, pagan and Jewish, which had already worked out some systematization of their beliefs. This was clearly true of classical paganism which included the writings of Plato and Aristotle and their various spin-offs. It was also true of Judaism, to some extent, with its rabbinical schools. In view of these realities there was a need to attend to Christian systematics and the result during this period was "orthodoxy, a logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation and maintained through effective organization" (Wall 1990:18).

In this setting Patristic apologists sought to defend their beliefs and state their views against contenders in the market-place of religious ideas. In dealing with Judaism, the apologists could turn to the New Testament to guide their ideas. But there was comparatively less to draw on from the New Testament in dealing with the philosophies of classical thought. "Theologians had almost no biblical precedent for their apologetic to pagan thought" (Pelikan 1971:27).

The early church fathers also had to respond to Roman state religion which called on Christians, like other citizens, to worship the Emperor. But according to George Williams, they were less concerned with the contemporary religions of their own day than they were with classical Greek paganism and pre-Christian Judaism. In dealing with these entities this "new community of faith which thought of itself as a third race, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Barbarian nor Greek," developed eight distinct positions to explain how these religions related to the revelation of truth through Christ (Williams 1969:322-3). The views are as follows:

1. The view that there might be a few *individuals* elected from amidst the

vast numbers of pagan lost. The religions, quareligions, however, were false religions (Williams 1969:323).

2. Some were possibly saved who could be called "Friends of God" who were heirs to limited portions of the primal Edenic message that had survived and been passed down to certain pagans.

3. Through the influence of the eternal *Logos*, some of the classical Greek moralists and philosophers had received divine guidance in working out their philosophy. This ubiquitous influence of the pre-incarnate Christ was a down payment on the "plenitude of the revelation of the Word as incarnate in Jesus Christ" (Williams 1989:323). Justin was foremost among those who saw a connection between the philosophers and the preexistent Logos who "enabled pagan thinkers like Socrates to see dimly what came to be clearly seen through the revelation of the Logos in the person of Jesus" (Pelikan 1971:32).

4. There was good in the religions. However, whatever was good had been borrowed (or stolen) from either the Hebrews and/or the Christians. This is the most wide spread interpretation of the church fathers. Christians were here taking the same approach which many Jewish apologists, for example Josephus, had taken against the Christians. Specifically apologists alleged pagans read Moses (Justin) and plagiarized Scriptures (Theophilus of Antioch).

5. The religions were counterfeits deliberately spun by Satan to tempt the weak and sinful to embrace them rather than the true faith.

6. National angels guided all people toward the truth which they experienced in various stages and degrees of obedience and disobedience.

7. The non-Judaic-Christian religions were a judgment on various people for having rejected Edenic monotheism and the perfect worship enjoyed by Adam in his pre-fallen state.

8. Finally, there is a universalistic strain in the writings of a few of the apologists: “God intended the salvation of all men and would eventually bring about a *restitutio omnium* (Acts 2:21), including the fallen angels.” (Williams 1969:323).

In a general way these theories echo a theme of opposites: old vs. new; the before vs. the after; the imperfect vs. the perfect; and the lost vs. the restored (Williams 1969:320).

In selecting a representative for this period one might choose a spokesman for either the more generous or more conservative of the above polarities. Origen certainly has been a favorite source for modern exponents of a universalist view. He was regarded by Byzantine Christianity to be the most creative of apologists. But on the other hand the Byzantine theologian Pselus was probably right when he said: “the famous Origen...was the pioneer of all our theology and laid its foundations, but on the other hand, all heresies find their origin in him” (Pelikan 1974:244). Tertullian, on the other hand, according to Pelikan, ranks with Augustine and outweighed all the Greek apologists (Pelikan 1971:28).

Tertullian was concerned to speak to two bodies of religious literature from the past and those who continued to draw on that wisdom to shape their religious conceptions. First, he addressed the philosophers such as Socrates and Plato and other classical pagan religious thinkers. Second, he reached back to the “poets” of Greece’s antiquity, not so much for the purposes of arraying a separate Christian critique against them as to use them against the philosophers. In his view, it was equally unreasonable to follow either the philosophers or the poets in their theology. Thirdly, he is aware of the day-to-day idolatrous practices and traditions regarding deities

in his native north Africa, as well as abroad in the empire in such places as Boeotia, Syria, and Arabia.

As to the contemporary scene it was one where, in the minds and experiences of the masses, gods held influence and power over certain buildings, cities, territories, states, and nations.

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It was a world governed by deities, by astrology and the occult. Tertullian spares no criticism of temple worship of the many pagan gods. “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment is idolatry” (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 2.1; in ANF, Vol 3, p. 61).

Tertullian recognizes the existence of some laudable elements in paganism but rather than interpret this due to the constitutionally given *Logos* in the mind of all, as did Justin and Origen, he understood this as due to natural law given first in an unwritten form to Adam and Eve and through them passed down orally to the nations. This corresponds to number two above. This is the theory that what is true in pagan thought is a residual from primeval times. In this Tertullian, of course, speculates.

He also believed, along with other apologists, that the ancient pagans must have read Hebrew scriptures to have arrived at their truth. In his argument against Marcion he says: “Moses and God existed before all your Lycurguses

and Solons. There is not a single later age that does not derive from primitive sources” (Pelikan 1971:35). This, along with the belief in the transmission of a residual truth, takes the view that the earlier is the better. It doesn’t matter that neither Tertullian nor the fathers could prove this claim, what mattered was its effect on contemporary pagan

thinkers who were inclined to place a high value on antiquity. The older was indeed the truer.

In sum, Tertullian takes a very exclusive position toward paganism in all its manifestations—philosophical and contemporary. Robert Grant summarizes it this way. Though Justin, Irenaeus and Clement were “friendlier to Greek Philosophy than other Christians of

their time (e.g. Tatian and Tertullian) they really had no use for Greek, Roman and oriental religions. They identified such religions as idolatry and considered them false” (Grant 1988:288).

### The Age of Barbarian Christianity

Western Christianity in the period from 400 to 1500 now crosses additional cultural and religious boundaries penetrating into the barbarian territories of western and northern Europe which are to be the setting for new states. What is new in western Christianity, says Andrew Wall, is the idea of a Christian nation.

Of apparent significance to our topic in this period is Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Against the Gentiles*. It was written to Christians about “Gentiles” meaning of course pagans. Ironically there were very few living “Gentiles” around, and those there were could not have appreciated the polemic directed against them. Aquinas was writing against a backdrop of many centuries of conflict with classical thought without himself personally having contact with non-Christian thinkers. His work, of great importance for subsequent

centuries of Catholic Christians, did not constitute anything new in Christianity's perceptions of and encounters with the larger religious world (See Pelikan 1971:39).

Perhaps the most significant development outside Europe, but profoundly impacting it during this period, is the rise of Islam and its threat to Christian states. Pelikan says that Islam posed "the most powerful organized alternative to Christianity until the rise of the Comintern in the twentieth century" (Pelikan 1974:27).

### Christianity in the Far East

But it is not the new religious competition in the form of militant Islam that I want to highlight in this period. Rather I wish to turn to a late medieval occurrence to examine what a rough time Christians had and continued to have for some centuries when dealing with religions in the Far East.

When Franciscan friar William of Rubruck arrived in the court of Mongke Khan in Mongolia in 1253 C.E. he was one of ten Dominican and Franciscan monks who over a period of 100 years from 1245-1346 were attempting to win the Mongols to Christ (Moffett 1992:404-420). What he, his brother missionaries and subsequent missionaries to the East in succeeding centuries discovered, was a religious world the likes of which they had never before encountered and which constituted an absolutely new religious challenge in the history of the church.

Richard Fox Young examines William's experience in debating with a Buddhist monk in the year 1255 (Young 1989:100-137). Besides calling attention to the fact that this debate is the first ever recorded between a Buddhist and a Christian, the value of Young's study is in showing the difficulty which William had in dealing with the religions against which he was competing for acceptance. William's experience symbolizes the immense work that remained

to be done to understand the sophisticated Eastern religious thought world Christian missionaries were now encountering. Though there were notable inroads into the mysteries of Indian and Chinese thought by subsequent Catholic missionaries like Robert D'Nobili and Matteo Ricci, it remained a religious world which was not carefully studied until the modern period.

Prior to their conquests the Mongols had remained undisturbed in their centuries old shamanistic beliefs and practices. Their understanding was that the world was populated with gods and spirits that controlled their lives yet could also be harnessed for good. Similar to the autochthonous religious world of ancient and contemporary cultures, at the top was "Eternal Heaven" (*Mongke Tngri*) or "Father of Heaven" who dwelt in the sky, the image of which was the sun. But there were a host of *tngri* (powers) numbering as many as 100 that were more approachable and intimate with daily life. There were also miscellaneous spirits: familial, territorial and ancestral.

William arrived at the court to find this indigenous Mongol religion in transition since it was being challenged from several directions. Buddhist and Taoist functionaries from China, Central Asia and Tibet were also present in the Khan's court to explain the way of the Buddha and the Tao. They had been invited by previous Khans to join the bevy of court counselors on things spiritual, administrative and political. As religious representatives they were in the vanguard of Chinese religionists who sought to introduce a better way to the Mongol barbarians. The presence of these Buddhist and Taoist believers had the potential of usurping the function of the traditional shamans. But from the Khan's perspective they merely offered an opportunity for him to intentionally supplement and improve, though to that degree also alter, the traditional Mongol religion.

William's presence is then some what unique. He found himself in dialogue with sophisticated barbarians (Buddhists and Taoists) who saw themselves as seeking religious change of those whom they too considered barbarians (Mongols and Christians).

According to William's account, the Khan sponsored a quadrilateral debate on Pentecost eve, 1254, between representatives of the indigenous Mongol religion, Buddhists, Taoists and Christians. The court debates were to provide the Khan with the opportunity to hear these representatives interact, debate and argue. The Khan would draw the conclusions he felt were appropriate.

There was not much actual camaraderie or tolerance between the Buddhists and Taoists at court. Some decades before this debate Chang-chun the Taoist (1148-1227) had attempted to improve his status at court by placing the Buddhist Yeh-lu Chu-tsai (1189-1243) in a bad light by making statements to the Khan from which it could be inferred that Buddhists were "envious of the ecstatic experiences enjoyed by the Taoists" (Young 1989:107). Further tension occurred when financial privileges were sought by Taoists and granted by Genghis Khan leading to uncivil relations at the time William came on the scene.

The Buddhist, Yeh-lu Chu-tsai, viewed Taoist grounds for the claim to superiority quite differently. Ever since the Chinese Tang dynasty times Buddhists, Taoists and Confucians had been recognized as three religions (*san chiao*) with a common origin and common goal. The goal, stated in largely Confucian terms, was self-cultivation and each religion brought its own unique helps to that end. The religions were thus co-religions with a common aim.

Yeh-lu Chu-tsai's views show how this traditional conception of mutual tolerance was more an ideal than reflection of fact. His interpretation of the *san chiao* (three religions) theory placed

these religions into a hierarchy with Taoists at the bottom, Confucians in the middle and, not surprisingly, Buddhists at the top. Yeh-lu Chu-tsai encouraged his patron Genghis Khan to become a Buddhist sage since it was a better way for him than becoming either a Confucian or Taoist sage. This, then, is the setting for the debate at the Khan's court.

According to William's journal the Khan's summons to debate read as follows: "each of you says that his doctrine is the best, and his writings the truest. So he (the Khan) wishes that you shall meet together, and make a comparison, each one writing down his precepts, so that he himself may be able to know the truth" (Young 1989:111-12).

The opening exchange between William and Fu-Yu was whether the debate should be about the origin of the world and the nature of the soul as suggested by Fu-Yu or as suggested by William that it be concerning God "about whom you think differently from us." In the exchange that followed Fu-Yu offered that only fools believe God is one while the wise say there are many. Further, he proposed that "though there is one (God) in the sky who is above all others, and of whose origin we are still ignorant, there are ten others under him, and under these latter is another lower one. On the earth they are infinite in number." William asked if this one God was omnipotent to which Fu-Yu countered: "If your God is as you say, why does he make the half of things evil?" This did not go anywhere but when William proposed they return to the question "whether....any god is omnipotent" Fu-Yu responded that no god is. This was followed by William's response: "Then no one of your gods can save you from every peril, for occasions may arise in which he has no power. Furthermore, no one can serve two masters: how can you serve

so many gods in heaven and earth?" (Young 1989:113-115).

The debate between the two abruptly ended here as Fu-Yu appeared to be speechless. That night William confesses in his journal that he felt he had won the debate. That is why he was so surprised when he was summoned to the

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court the next day and told that he must forthwith leave the kingdom while Fu-Yu could stay.

William records the final exchange between Mongke and himself. Admonishing William not to put down what Mongols held sacred the Khan said: "We believe that there is only one God by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart." Given Mongol belief in a large number of deities surrounding them but headed up by *mgri* or "Eternal Heaven" he could only have been thinking of Eternal Heaven as a sort of first among equals.

When William attributed this to the grace of God, Mongke added a caveat to distinguish the Mongol worship of Eternal Heaven from Christian monotheism: "God gives you the Scriptures, and you Christians keep them not. You do not find in them that one should find fault with another do you?" (Young 1989:104).

With this the interview was finished and William's only choice was to follow the sovereign's directive. What went wrong? It was not a matter of tactlessness nor any personal failure. Rather it was that William, though perhaps as knowledgeable as any Christian alive about Buddhist beliefs, did not understand one of the main tenets of

Chinese Buddhist thought *upaya*. For William, if one affirmed that there was only one god, it could not be rationally maintained that there were many. William followed the logical and historic Christian position so nicely expressed by Tertullian in his argument with idolaters of his day. To them he said: "You cannot continue to give preference to one without slighting another, for selection implies rejection" (Tertullian, *Apology*, Ch 13 in *Ancient Nicene Fathers*, Vol.111, pt 1.29).

But the selection of one religious truth did not imply the rejection of its opposite to Fu-Yu. And ignorance of this not only cost him the debate and resulted in his banishment,

but removed him as a contestant for the Khan's conversion. The field was now left to Buddhists and Taoists who as disputants did understand the doctrine of *upaya*.

*Upaya* was a doctrine proposed by the Chinese Tien-Tai patriarch Zhi-yi (538-597) in the sixth century C.E. to account for conflicting and logically irreconcilable Buddhist texts originating from India while at the same time claiming to be authentic. Which, if any, of these texts were taught by the Buddha, was the question. If one took a strictly logical approach, one would have to select one or some and reject a great many others. They could not all be right (on logical grounds) but how could any be wrong when they came from Indian Buddhist missionaries and enjoyed extensive support?

Into this context Zhi-Yi proposed the interpretation offered in one of those texts, the *Lotus Sutra (Saddharma-pun-darika)*. It states that the Buddha taught all the texts as *upaya* or "skillful means." That is, the Buddha taught his disciples according to their readiness to understand. To the immature, he taught the *Tripitaka*. To the more mature he taught the *prajna* texts. To the fully mature he taught the *Lotus Sutra* as

the highest and most complete statement of the truth. The texts taken together were so diverse in their teaching that some said the Buddha was a man while others said he was a god. Some taught that one could only attain *nirvana* by strenuous personal effort while others taught that personal effort was insufficient and only the grace of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas would avail. Some refused to comment on what happens to the individual at death, while others (*Sukha-vatuyuha*) promised a paradise for those who had faith in the Buddha.

Young analyzes Fu-Yu's advantage over William in this way: "Buddhism is purposely pluriform because the Dharma is difficult to grasp. If from the outside it appears contradictory, from the inside it is perfectly consistent, in terms of *purpose* if not of *meaning* and *logic*. Provisional truth is not absolute; lower truth can obscure or even conceal higher truth. Nevertheless, all truth is *valid* as such and should not be condemned, excluded, or withheld from individuals who do not yet recognize its inadequacy" (Young 1989:131).

William did not succeed with Mongke because he took an either/or attitude toward Mongol belief in many gods. In his view there were only two choices: God was one or gods were many. But William lost out to Fu-Yu in the view of the Khan, because Eternal Heaven and the other Mongol *ingri* were accepted by the Buddhists while William's religion made no room for them. Fu-Yu accepted the *ingri* provisionally, not because it was true, but as an expedient means. Due to Mongke's limited karmic development, he "had no capacity at that moment to conceive of anything higher" (Young 1989:134).

This is only a single incident but it was not to be an isolated one. Again and again Christian witnesses in the Far East failed to understand the religious thought forms of those they encountered.

Would an understanding of *upaya* by William have enabled him to succeed?

Probably not. But at least he would not have failed on that account. He may have found a different way to deal with his opponents.

### Age of Revision and Expansion

Three significant developments in this period are the success of revisionist Christianity under the leadership of the Reformers, expansion of the Christian mission as European nations discovered and aggressively conquered overseas lands within the reach of their maritime technology and the intellectual challenges arising through the "Enlightenment" which provoked defense and accommodation.

There is not a lot to be said about Protestant attitudes toward and relationships with non-Christian religions at the beginning of this period other than with respect to Islam.

Although the religious leaders of the Age of Reformation were seldom directly concerned with the significance of non-Christian religions, the problem at times claimed their attention in connection, especially, with the threat presented by the Ottoman Turks or with the question of the salvation of virtuous pagans, raised with urgency by both the recovery of classical literature and the discovery of new peoples overseas (Williams 1969:319).

The Reformers did not have the intimate contact with the non-Christian world which the writers of the Patristic era experienced. But the Patristic writers seem to reflect more on religions of the past, now largely superseded by Christianity, than on the religions current with their times. The Reformers, on the other hand, though much further from living contact, had to deal with a contemporaneous religion directly affecting their lives. They lived under the looming shadow of expansion of the Muslim Ottomans into Europe. Already three patriarchates in the East had come under their rule and religion.

Concerning the issue of classical pagans, Luther did not reflect overly much about this question though he does

take a considerably more conservative approach than either Erasmus or Melancthon. He held the opinion that those elements in the pagan writers which echo divine truth were probably handed down to them from pre-Noachian times. Luther was thus affirming a position taken by Tertullian, which, as we saw above, was itself one of eight taken by the church fathers regarding the pagan philosophers. "This is one of the few instances of Luther's use of a patristic theme in speaking of non-Christian religions" (Williams 1969:351).

Prior to Luther, theologians of the Middle Ages had proposed three theories regarding Islam, at least two of which were affirmed by Luther. 1) Islam was a chastisement of Christians by God for their schisms and moral declensions. 2) Muhammad was either an emissary of Satan or the Anti-Christ since he usurped the finality of Jesus Christ and his revelation. 3) Allah was merely another name for the true and living God and that God might give Muslims salvation by virtue of their obedience to the Quran (Williams 1969:323-324).

Luther took a kinder view of the Muslim philosopher he did know than of the ordinary Muslim he did not. He thought it not likely that a philosopher like Avicenna, devoted as he was to mind and reason, actually believed in the Quran. One pursuing unrevealed truth would not find much of value in something so obviously bogus. But there were the general rank and file Muslim believers whom he referred to in inflammatory terms as "gross filthy sows." Of them Luther says "they do not know why they live or what they believe" (Williams 1969:347). Strong language! But one must be cautioned that Luther, in the same context, referred to Popish Christians as "plain sows."

From the biblical and theological perspective Luther applied to Islam what he applied to the Pope: they were a religion that sought to be accepted with

God by good works. By taking this view, Luther contributed something of his own to the menu of Christian interpretations that had been growing since the Patristic era. For Luther, Christianity had become a religion of self-righteous recitation. Recitation of truth without the reality of experience. Recitation of doctrine and creed that had been fatally corrupted by medieval scholasticism. Luther hoped to turn Christianity back from dead religion to a pristine doctrine and experience. He saw Islam like he saw Christian works righteousness. All those who attempt to gain acceptance with God by good works are bound to be excluded by God.

Yet there may have been some admiration for Islam here too, for Luther must have known something of *salat*, the practice of prayer five times a day. He may have favorably contrasted the austere and imageless mosque with the lavish cathedrals of Europe. Indeed, Luther may have complimented Islam when he observed there was a more intense earnestness among pagans (meaning Muslims) than among Christians. He drew on Jesus' words in Luke 16:8; "the sons of this world are wiser than the sons of light." Yet Luther makes no statements that would lead us to believe there could be salvation for Muslims or for pagans.

Luther took limited interest in the Quran. It had been available in Europe as early as 1143 C.E. when it was first translated into Latin by Robertus Ketenensis but apparently he had not read it until late in his career. He had read a 1320 C.E. polemic against the Quran entitled *Confutatio Alcorani* and translated it into German with his own added apologetic. In 1542 he read the Quran and concluded that three-fourths of it was nothing more than a tissue of lies.

A new translation of the Quran was prepared by Theodor Bibliander, a

Zurich theologian, which was opposed by the authorities. Luther demurred, however, and in the preface which he was invited to write, he took a very hard line against Islam by indicating that evangelical Christians should separate themselves from "Jews Turks and Gentiles...if they really do consider that it is alone God eternal, creator and sustainer

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**But if religious pluralists have their way, all ideological positions, not just Christian ones, will be set aside as mere cultural variations rooted in matters other than claims to ultimacy.**

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of all things, who hears our prayers and is ready to give us eternal life." To this Williams adds: "Never before had Luther made it so explicit that he regarded his God as utterly different from that not only of Muslims and Jews but also of Papists, Anabaptists, and other heretics" (Williams 1969:350).

Luther also viewed Islam from a political perspective. He regarded the menace of the Turks as God's instrument in judging the false and idolatrous ways of the Roman Church. In a context in which Luther opposed the Pope's power of remitting the penalties of sins for the purpose of raising revenues for the crusades, he remarks that the Pope's anti-Turk crusade in fact opposed God's intent to use the Turks as a punishment for the church. The Turks would bring about a judgment which the church was unable to avert through repentance. Leo X's rather accurate summary of Luther's view is this: "To fight against the Turks is to resist God's visitation upon our iniquities" (Williams 1969:339). This did not mean that Luther had a positive view of Islam but only that it was an agent of God for punishment. In Luther's view, the

Turks were "God's rod and the Devil's servant" (Williams 1969:341).

Luther's experience with and attitude toward Islam teaches us at least two things. 1) Social and political realities can and often do influence one's attitude toward the religions of others. 2) Wherever the church is in understanding its own theology will surely affect one's out look on the religions. This is made abundantly clear in the next period.

#### Global Christianity

It was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Christianity significantly penetrated two of the last remaining centers of historic religions. After 1860 India and China

receive hundreds and even thousands of Christian witnesses who established churches in the heartland of Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian traditions. It was at about the same time that the academic study of religion with its non-theological interpretations was launched with the effect of removing Christianity from any special status vis-à-vis other religions. These two developments were interrelated.

This vigorous nineteenth-century missionary movement not only assured that Christianity would be truly global, but that the religions encountered would never be the same. Regarding China, John King Fairbank said that the missionaries alone sought to change China not just trade with them (Fairbank 1974:2).

In both China and India, the missionaries won comparatively few converts but their influence in indigenous social and religious matters was significant. That is seen especially in India. William Carey's commitment to translate selected Hindu classics including the *Ramayana* was so that missionaries and young Indian Christians alike could become conversant with the religious views of Hindus and thus

avoid appearing to them as “barbarians.” According to Carey,

It is very important that we should gain all the information we can of the snares and delusions in which these heathens are held. By this means we shall be able to converse with them in an intelligible manner. To know their modes of thinking, their habits, their propensities, their antipathies, the way in which they reason about God, sin and holiness, the way of salvation, and a future state, to be aware of the bewitching nature of their idolatrous worship, feasts, songs, etc., is of the highest consequence, if we would gain their attention to our discourse, and would avoid being barbarians to them (Speer 1933:147).

It is a matter of history that Carey’s mission contributed to significant Hindu reform. Ram Mohun Roy’s Brahma Samaj joined with the missionaries in criticism of widespread practices of infanticide, *devadasi* and *sati*. Roy did not become a Christian but accepted a monotheistic orientation and was opposed to idol worship. While many Bengalis were influenced to think seriously about revising their religious practices if not their beliefs, others such as Dayananda Saraswati took a more defensive stance in launching the Arya Samaj which continues today. The attack on other Hindu institutions including women’s social and educational conditions helped to stimulate what has been called the Hindu Consciousness movement, which helped to give Hindus an identity vis-a-vis western Christianity.

Carey’s skills as a Sanskritist led to his employment by the East India Company to teach British employees Sanskrit literature at Ft. Williams College. While he was only one contributor to the growing interest in the indigenous religious and philosophical literature of India, by mid-century the foundations had been laid for the modern discipline of *religionswissenschaft*, the science of religion. Other missionaries contributed their part as well. James Legge (1815-1895) sent out by the London Missionary Society in 1839 translated the *I-Ching* and other ancient classics and took the first chair of Chinese literature

established by Oxford University. Journals and ethnological materials of missionaries provided academics information about cultures and religions.

In the latter half of the century pioneers in the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and sociology all made religion an important subject of investigation. Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Cultures* (1871) explained the rise of religion and the belief in God based on his speculations about primitive people’s mistaken interpretation of deceased relatives they met in their dreams. Durkheim gave a sociological interpretation to the genesis of belief in God and Freud saw religion as rooted in illusion.

While religion was debunked by some, others synthesized and harmonized it into some essential unity. The emphasis was not upon their distinct identities, religious goals and religious means but upon their intuited essences or their phenomenological similarities. Scant or no attention was paid to their differences, their opposites or contradictions.

The study of comparative religions and the science and philosophy of religion tended with many, and in its popular effect, to create the idea that religion is a universal and essentially identical thing always and everywhere, and that each historic religion, Christianity included, is only a branch of a common trunk (Speer 1933:170).

Christians were now offered alternative ways to understand the religions. They could choose to continue to evaluate religions as before based on the Bible and theology which, since the Patristics, had been almost uniformly negative as saving entities. Or they could adopt some combination of the traditional and the modern. The impact of *religionsgeschichte* in America along with critical biblical studies and theological liberalism steadily eroded the special nature of Christianity in the understanding of many mainline Christian

leaders.

This change in the way Christians looked at themselves and religious others has to do with what Lesslie Newbigin calls the prevailing plausibility structure. The “prevailing plausibility structure” is that which tells a culture what is true and what is of value. The reigning plausibility structure places religion, morality and values in the same category as aesthetics. There are no absolutes governing anything nor assisting moderns in distinguishing the true from the false in the religious arena.

If Newbigin and others are right, Christianity with its view of the religions in the broader culture is at a crisis moment on the threshold of the twenty-first century. Throughout the history of Christianity it was seldom questioned that the truth was knowable, subject to rational supports and worthy of pursuit. Christians have honestly believed the gospel message to be finally true. But if John Hick, Paul Knitter and other religious pluralists have their way, all ideological positions (their own excepted!), not just Christian ones, will be set aside as mere cultural variations rooted in matters other than claims to ultimacy.

Gordon Kaufman’s analysis of Don Richardson’s book *Peace Child* is a good example of this trend. The Richardsons went to the Sawi of Irian Jaya to teach them the Christian faith centering on Jesus Christ as God and Savior. Kaufman notes how the presence of the Richardsons resulted in intertribal warfare before the preaching of Christ could occur. When the Richardsons decided to leave, the Sawi villages agreed to make peace by the traditional manner, the exchange of a child between the two sides with each pledging to care for the child of the other tribe. Kaufman comments: “The Richardsons were able to recognize these analogies and see that precisely this sort of actual reconciliation and peacemaking, with resul-



tant human fulfillment, was what Christianity was all about" (Kaufman 1976:120). He goes on to ask "Is the meaning of Christ to be understood as primarily (though of course not exclusively) a matter of subscribing to certain ideas (about God, Christ, humanity, etc.)? Or is the primary significance of Christ fundamentally non-ideational, having to do with the basic quality, style, and character of human life?" Once this proper subordination of the ideational to the existential in Christian faith is recognized, much of the theological difficulty for moderns with traditional christological talk can fall away" (Kaufman 1976:120-121).

Kaufman's abandonment of the "ideational" is only one manifestation of the serious challenges directed at "traditional" Christology. By implication other religions must also give up their ultimate truths as well if the present trend continues.

In conclusion, it may be that in order to respond to this relativist approach, Christianity and the religions will have to form a common front against those who would destroy what is precious to them. Should that unlikely occurrence happen, that too would be a part of the history of Christianity and its relationship with the religions of the world.

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*Dr. James F. Lewis teaches at Wheaton College and Graduate School. He served in Pune, India for four years as professor at the Union Bible Seminary, and also served four years in Vietnam with the Christian Missionary Alliance. He and his wife Marylan live in Wheaton, Illinois*

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