

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

1-1-2021

RECLAIMING APOLOGETICS AS SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP: A METHODOLOGY FOR AN OPEN-ENDED EXPLORATION OF CHRISTIAN INCLUSIVISM

Lonnie Marvin Vining
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Vining, Lonnie Marvin, "RECLAIMING APOLOGETICS AS SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP: A METHODOLOGY FOR AN OPEN-ENDED EXPLORATION OF CHRISTIAN INCLUSIVISM" (2021). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2069.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2069>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

RECLAIMING APOLOGETICS AS SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP:
A METHODOLOGY FOR AN OPEN-ENDED EXPLORATION OF CHRISTIAN
INCLUSIVISM

A THESIS
PRESENTED FOR THE
MASTER OF ARTS
PHILOSOPHY DEGREE
THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

LONNIE MARVIN VINING

MAY 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Lonnie Marvin Vining
All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a methodology for a writing project I have undertaken on Christian inclusivism. My approach to Christian inclusivism is drawn from Paul Tillich, but it is updated and improved by postmodernism and Derrida's "religion without religion." To wit: Whatever relief from suffering there is to be found in comparative religion, Jesus must have in principle taught it or something comparable, else by definition he was not the Christ. This type inquiry is unavoidably a form of Christian apologetics, but one that is designed to restore and renew Christian theology in light of the truths of comparative religion rather than the other way around. The questions I grappled with in this thesis are such as these: How do I formulate a truth criterion that is both effective and tradition-neutral among the various religious traditions? How can I conduct interfaith dialogues without falling into syncretism? Most importantly, if I have not structured this inquiry with complete agnosticism and intellectual honesty such that Jesus cannot fail as the Christ, then it is not serious scholarship—hence the title.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving wife, Andrea Mihelic. Thank you for all your sacrifices so I could return to school and pursue my calling.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank my committee members Dr. Neil Mansion, Dr. Timothy Yenter, and Dr. Drew Billings. I would especially like to thank Dr. Manson for recruiting me into the University of Mississippi Philosophy Department so that I could resume my studies after many years of struggle and many obstacles. I will always be grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT-----	ii
DEDICATION-----	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS-----	iv
INTRODUCTION-----	1
I RECLAIMING APOLOGETICS AS SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP-----	4
1. THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY-----	4
2. JUSTIN MARTYR’S METHOD-----	5
3. THE THREE MAJOR PARADIGMS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY-----	11
4. TILLICH’S RENEWAL OD INCLUSIVISM-----	13
5. WHY INTERFAITH DIALOGUES ARE A FORM OF APOLOGETICS-----	15
II CLARIFYING WHAT IT MEANS TO SPEAK OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH-----	19
6. COMPARATIVE SOTERIOLOGY-----	21
7. MAKING A TACTICAL ALLY OF POSTMODERNISM-----	24
8. AVOIDING METANARRATIVE-----	30
9. DECONSTRUCTION AS THE CRITIQUE OF IDOLS-----	32
10. DERRIDA’S “RELIGION WITHOUT RELIGION”-----	34
11. THE IDENTITY THEORY OF TRUTH-----	35
12. A PROVISIONAL APPROACH TO TRUTH-----	36

III	METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS-----	40
	13. BIBLICAL CRITICISM-----	40
	14. PHENOMENOLOGY-----	43
	15. LESSER INCLUDED TRUTHS-----	43
	16. UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD-----	44
	17. AVOIDING SYNCRETISM-----	47
	18. TOLERANCE AND NONVIOLENCE-----	52
	BIBLIOGRAPHY-----	56
	VITA-----	60

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is intended to develop and improve the methodology for a writing project I have undertaken for many years now. It is a series of essays that explore the logical possibility of *Christian inclusivism*—the idea that Jesus is the full and complete incarnation of the transcendental Logos to which all religions correspond. That is, if Jesus is really the Christ, then by definition there can never be found any religious truth anywhere incompatible with Jesus’s original teachings. Hence, I will look to comparative religious teachings as a valuable and readily available means of *correcting* and *refining* Christian orthodoxy, teachings such as Neopagan feminism, Eastern mysticism, Shamanism and Buddhist nonviolence. This may sound like the “cafeteria” spirituality found in New Age but it is not. Not a single truth anywhere can be ignored. All truths everywhere must be fully integrated into Christian orthodoxy. Essentially what I am doing is opening the “experience” leg of various Christian truth-seeking formulae to include that of other religions. For example, Catholics look to the triad of papal authority, scriptural guidance and experience of the faithful. Methodists look to the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scriptural guidance, tradition, reason and experience of the faithful. But in each formula only Christian experience is presently contemplated. I argue that to fully accept Jesus as the Christ we must also look to the experiences of other religions just as the apostle Paul and Justin Martyr often did.

It is important to distinguish my inclusivist approach from that of an exclusivist like Karl Barth or a pluralist like John Hick. An exclusivist elevates his preferred religion above all others and denies that their teachings are in any way relevant. A pluralist presumes many or all religions are true, or from the skeptic's point of view that no religion is completely true. Neither of these approaches encourages genuine dialogue for neither really asks that you look outside your own religion for correction. My approach is also different from that of an orthodox inclusivist like Karl Rahner (1904–1984) Unlike Rahner, I am a radical Protestant. Thus, I am more willing to subject Christian orthodoxy to self-judgment in light of other religions. My goal is to explore the logical possibility of Christian inclusivism with intellectual and moral honesty, not defend it dogmatically. In fact, my approach removes the distinctions altogether between apologetics and dogmatics. I believe Christianity is worthy and capable of worldwide evangelism only to the extent it fully answers all human suffering.

My inclusivist approach is largely drawn from Paul Tillich, but updated and improved by postmodernism. In other words, I grapple with each and every comparative religious teaching on its own terms and avoid using an oppressive metanarrative. My use of postmodern methods is essential to my approach because otherwise I would suppress the very truths that Christianity should incorporate. This quote from Tillich at the outset of the first section says it best: "If we are to try and conquer the concept of religion which seems to relativize Christianity, we have to do it by putting the Christ against every religion, or God manifesting his judgment on the Cross against every religion, but not by elevating Christianity as a particular religion." What Tillich was trying to say is that it is actually an idolatrous temptation to think of Christianity as a

religion; it is supposed to be the fulfillment and simultaneously the negation of *all* authentic religions.

Developing this methodology was necessary in order for me to address certain scholarly problems inherent to Christian inclusivism, such as how to formulate a truth criterion that is both effective and tradition-neutral among the various religious traditions, or how to avoid syncretism when engaging in interfaith dialogues. Most importantly, if I have not structured this inquiry with complete agnosticism such that Jesus cannot fail as the Christ, then it is not serious secular scholarship. The essays this method envisions will not cover each religion systematically; instead they will address *good ideas* one at a time that may be found in one or a group of religious traditions. Though theoretically these essays could fill endless volumes, my priority for selection of the essays will be to choose issues where I think mainstream Christianity is most in need of reform.

CHAPTER I: RECLAIMING APOLOGETICS AS SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

If we are to try to conquer the concept of religion which seems to relativize Christianity, we have to do it by putting the Christ against every religion, or God manifesting his judgment in the Cross against every religion, but not by elevating Christianity as a particular religion.¹

—Paul Tillich

1. THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

It is altogether fitting to redefine Christianity by means of apologetics, for the apologetic movement was the birth of Christian theology. Because I am trained in both law and philosophy, apologetics come very naturally for me. To the ancients, to *apologeisthai* meant giving an answer to a judge in court when someone had accused you. Socrates' *Apologia* was his answer to his Athenian accusers. In the same sense, the earliest Christian apologists gave answer to those who were claiming Christianity was dangerous to the Roman Empire and claiming that Christianity was superstitious nonsense. It fell to the apologists to justify and defend Christianity against both claims, and in the process define Christianity theologically. Later apologists defined Christianity against “out groups” such as the Gnostics. When councils of bishops were finally assembled to formulate specific Christian doctrines, they chose which apologists they would follow. Some like Tertullian (c. 150–240) were endorsed as orthodox. Others like Origen (c. 185–253) were condemned as heretical. Perhaps generations from now mainstream Christians will

¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 28.

regard my work as orthodox. Today, most church authorities will surely proclaim it as heretical. Only time will tell who prevails.

2. JUSTIN MARTYR'S METHOD

It is now *de rigueur* not to regard apologetics as serious scholarship. I chose to write my first book, *Jesus the Wicked Priest; How Christianity Was Born of an Essene Schism* (2008), in the form of an apologetic, even though I knew this would likely disqualify it as serious scholarship in the minds of many scholars. But I had very good reasons for this. I was not writing a book just for scholars. My goal was show other Christians how far we have strayed from our origins.

The premise of my book *Jesus the Wicked Priest* is that Jesus was raised with the Essenes, a first-century Jewish sect who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, but he broke from them at the outset of his ministry due to sharp theological differences, at which point they branded him a “Wicked Priest” and had him crucified. When we read certain of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find descriptions of Jesus from the point of view of his enemies. Likewise, I identified the Essene Dead Sea Scrolls authors as the “scribes” in the New Testament whom Jesus generally spoke of as his enemies (cf. Mt 23:13 “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”). We are no longer limited to speculation how Jesus *might* have interacted with the Essenes because they were part of his general milieu. We now know how Jesus *actually did* interact with the Essenes because the New Testament and Dead Sea Scrolls are finally opened to one another.

However, my opening the Dead Sea Scrolls and New Testament to one another not only reveals how Jesus differed from the Essenes; it also shows that some Essene doctrines remained

and are recognizable in Jesus's teachings, and that helps us recover early Christian doctrines long lost. It is surprising more scholars have not covered this, but there are passages in the scrolls that very clearly show the Essenes believed in reincarnation.²

In explaining why Christians, especially evangelical Christians, should be concerned whether Jesus and the early Church taught reincarnation, I argued in *Jesus the Wicked Priest*:

If one is to take seriously universal truth claims ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels, that he is “the true light that enlightens every man” (Jn 1:9), then one must adopt the inclusivist approach of the early Christian apologist Justin Martyr. Namely, we must not be afraid to incorporate overlapping teachings. To paraphrase Justin: If anywhere there is found even a single existential truth that cannot be found in Jesus's teachings or an organic outgrowth thereof, Jesus was not the Christ. That is the demanding standard Justin set for Christianity, a standard we Christians cannot shy away from and be true to our faith. If reincarnation does occur and Jesus is the “true light that enlightens every man,” then he must have addressed it.³

Reincarnation has been the main sticking point between East and West. Removing this obstacle would have enormously positive effects for Christian evangelism and world missions.

Fr. Thomas Ryan is a Catholic priest who directs the Paulist North American Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. He has taken the orthodox Christian position that one cannot believe in reincarnation without sacrificing key tenants of the Christian faith. But even he recognized he is fighting an uphill battle. He conceded: “To be sure, we're not dealing with a ‘nonsense’ notion here. Nearly a billion Hindus have for thousands of years held a cyclical view

² See especially 4Q186, the Horoscopes fragments. These texts forecast men's births under their sun signs, and they also forecast physical descriptions that correspond to the number of times their spirit dwelled in the “House of Light” (Heaven) or the “House of Darkness” (Hell). There is little doubt these texts refer to reincarnation. The belief that one's physical features reflect prenatal karma are found in reincarnation religions all over the world. Jesus even encountered this belief among his disciples when they asked if a man was born blind because of his prenatal sin or that of his parents (Jn 9:2).

³ Marvin Vining, *Jesus the Wicked Priest: How Christianity Was Born of an Essene Schism* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company), 78.

of life.”⁴ What is more, Fr. Ryan wrote that according to data released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009 survey), “not only do a quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation, but 24 percent of American *Christians* expressed a belief in reincarnation.”⁵ As a matter of fact, far more world religions teach reincarnation as a fundamental belief than not: Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism; even many Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe in it.

It is often speculated that in order for Jesus to have taught reincarnation he would have had to travel to India or be exposed to ancient Buddhist or Hindu teachings. There probably was a good bit of cross-fertilization between distant ancient cultures. However, I tend to see the similarities among world religions as owing to a common perennial Logos, or, to word that a little more directly, because different cultures around the world are responding to the same underlying phenomena. Why is the pentatonic musical scale found in nearly every primitive culture around the world? Because it is based upon the harmonic overtone series and the immutable and universal laws of acoustics. Why do Mayan and Egyptian pyramids have the same degree of slope? Because both cultures used the Pythagorean ratios in the 3+4+5=12 knots of the rope stretcher’s triangle. Why are reincarnation references found in the New Testament and in Buddhist and Hindu literature? Perhaps it is simply because reincarnation is really happening worldwide and most of the world religions have responded to it in their scriptures.

The Second Council of Constantinople concluded in 552 CE that reincarnation could not be a proper Christian doctrine because they believed it was wrongly imported from the Greeks

⁴ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/10/21/25-percent-us-christians-believe-reincarnation-whats-wrong-picture>, harvested March 15, 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

and had no basis in Judaism. They were wrong. Dead Sea Scrolls clearly show otherwise. In *Jesus the Wicked Priest*, I identified the Essenes as the ancient Hasidim. Hasidic Jews today will tell you that reincarnation is based on the Hebrew scriptures and has been all along. They interpret the serpent in the Garden of Eden story as a graphic symbol of reincarnation because it sheds its skin in limitation of the life, death, and rebirth cycle. They believe in the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days (Ezekiel's dry bones), but until then they believe the spirit keeps rolling through the death and rebirth cycle. They call it *gilgul neshamot* ("cycle of souls").⁶ After years of intensive study, I have concluded that Jesus and the early Christians held the same beliefs.

It is long past time that Christians recognize the rejection of reincarnation by the early fathers for what it was: a costly error. If Christians want to meaningfully interact with followers of reincarnation religions (much less evangelize them) we have no choice but to incorporate at least some of their doctrines, it is as simple as that. This example is but one of many. The reason the Great Commission is incomplete is largely due to the fact that Christian theologians have been unwilling to acknowledge the truths of comparative religion. We have yet to realize Justin Martyr's method is the most direct and effective means of bringing the Great Commission to fruition.

Justin (c. 100–165) boldly proclaimed "Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians" (*Second Apology* 13). This was not arrogance. He was not saying that Christians are right and everyone else wrong. What he was doing was taking

⁶ Note that "souls" is plural. In Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament, the singular spirit transmigrates and a new soul is formed with each body (4Q186; Ec 12:6–7; Wis 8:19–20; Lk 1:17, cf. Mt 11:13–15). I coined a term for this in *JTWP* to aid our understanding, *metempneumosis*.

seriously the idea found at the outset of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus was the Logos incarnate. Justin realized if this idea were true, Jesus must have taught all forms of truth wherever found, at least in principle. That is what the author of the Fourth Gospel meant when he wrote that the Logos became flesh and walked among us “*full of grace and truth*” (Jn 1:14; my emphasis). Accordingly, Justin had no problem endorsing as Christian the truths taught by Elijah, Socrates, Plato and many other philosophers. Note that whether truths came from traditions outside Christianity or its parent Judaism did not matter. Just as Paul had done in Athens a hundred years earlier, Justin did not hesitate to build upon what is now called “natural theology.”

It is sometimes said there is a real difference between *natural* and *revealed* theology.⁷ Natural theology is man-made theology, theology discovered by natural reason, whereas revealed theology is handed-down by prophets of God. But which God? whose God? As any serious student of the history of ideas will tell you, today’s philosophy is often yesteryear’s religion and myth. How then can Christians possibly engage in comparative religious dialogue in good faith when we assume at the outset that all wisdom outside our own tradition is false? Fortunately, the apostle Paul set a precedent of blurring the lines between natural and revealed theology by sometimes incorporating natural theology into his preaching.

For instance, Luke records in Acts that Paul endorsed quotes by the Greek philosophers Epimenides and Aratus in his address to the Athenians (17:27–28). Paul’s first quote in this passage was from Epimenides’ poem *Cretica*. In the poem, Minos addressed Zeus:

They fashioned a tomb for you, O holy and high one,
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies.

⁷ See an excellent discussion of the perceived conflict between natural and revealed theology by Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

But you art not dead: you live and abide forever,
For in you we live and move and have our being.

Paul's second quote in this passage was from Aratus's *Phaenomena*:

Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken.
For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.
Even the sea and the harbor are full of this deity.
Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus.
For we are indeed his offspring . . .

Most Christians will be surprised to learn this for they have never read the poems Paul quoted in full context: What is stunning about these two quotes is that they were originally and undeniably written for the Greek god Zeus, yet Paul showed no hesitation applying them to YHWH.

Ironically, most Christians now consider these quotes revealed theology merely because Paul said them and Luke recorded it. But the reason Paul endorsed these quotes is because he felt these revelations were worthy additions to the gospel in their own right.

Paul, however, did not incorporate all the Greeks' ideas wholesale. He carefully gleaned the wheat from the chaff, such as his condemnation of idols (cf. Acts 14:16). Likewise, Justin endorsed only those teachings of Socrates, Plato and other philosophers that he believed true and discarded the rest. Justin believed each of these men only a partial incarnation of the Logos. He wrote, "For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic Logos, seeing what was related to it" (*Second Apology* 13).

There are many similarities between Paul and Justin Martyr. But because he was better trained academically, Justin's apologetic method was far more rigorous than Paul's. If Jesus were indeed a full and complete incarnation of the Logos, as the author of the Fourth Gospel claimed, Justin knew we could put this idea to the test. We Christians cannot merely claim *some*

of the truths of comparative religion as ours. We must claim *all* of them as ours. To reiterate Justin's method: Wherever we find in comparative religion teachings that are true and good, Christians are *compelled* to recognize those teachings as ours originally. In fact, if anywhere there were to be taught even a *single* truth that was not taught by Jesus or to be found in an organic outgrowth of his teachings, we would be wrong to proclaim him the Christ. He would be merely one teacher among many, only partially true and subject to error.

3. THE THREE MAJOR PARADIGMS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

To better understand my approach in this book, the reader should at least be familiar with the current religious diversity discussion. When it comes to evaluating whether religions are true, contemporary scholars generally adhere to one of three paradigms: pluralism, exclusivism or inclusivism.⁸ *Pluralists* believe many or all religions are true, or from the skeptic's point of view that no religion is completely true. *Exclusivists* believe only one religion is true. And *inclusivists* believe there is at least one true religion with other religions teaching lesser and incomplete versions of the truth.

These definitions are greatly oversimplified because adherents of these paradigms rarely if ever follow them in unqualified form. John Hick (1922–2012) was a qualified pluralist, for example, because he believed only a handful of major religions are true. Since he accepted some religions as true and rejected others, the question then arises as to what criteria he used to evaluate them. Hick was a Neokantian who believed “the Real” inspires all true religions, although each religion is culturally conditioned. Arguably Hick's concept of the Real is itself a

⁸ See Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

new form of religion and he has often been criticized for this (we will soon deal with this problem).

Exclusivists tend to limit their discussion of religion to a certain type of truth. For Christian exclusivists such as Karl Barth (1886–1968), that truth is salvation, which is usually interpreted to mean safe conduct to an afterlife heaven. Other religions may teach similar truths, but none that really matter. Actually, most Christian inclusivists are similar to exclusivists in this regard. For instance, Schubert M. Ogden (1928–2019) was a Christian inclusivist dedicated to identifying the paths found in other religions whereby one might be saved without a conscious conversion to Christianity.⁹ This “anonymous Christian” approach was pioneered by Karl Rahner (1904–1984), author of the Roman Catholic view toward other religions adopted after Vatican II. Interestingly, Ogden referred to himself as a “pluralistic inclusivist,” which points out that the distinctions between the three paradigms are somewhat artificial. Case in point: a truly unqualified pluralist would really be a pluralistic inclusivist in that they would believe all religions teach each other’s truths. The basic question is: To what extent, if any, do various religions teach each other’s truths? Most scholars of religious diversity fall somewhere along the spectrum, either by qualifying what one means by “religion” or by qualifying what one means by “truth.”

⁹ See Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist U. Press, 1992).

4. TILLICH'S RENEWAL OF INCLUSIVISM

One figure stands apart from the crowd, however. Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was a Christian inclusivist in the classical Logos tradition whose approach to religious diversity has largely been misunderstood or ignored. Tillich had been exposed to exclusivism in Karl Barth and to pluralism in his teacher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) who favored a cross-fertilization of the high religions. A prolific scholar of religious diversity, Gavin D'Costa, wrote that Tillich attempted to “mediate” between exclusivism and pluralism, which would place Tillich somewhere along the spectrum described above.¹⁰ But I think this is a fundamental misinterpretation of Tillich's work. John Hick, widely recognized as the most thorough analyst in this field, also misunderstood Tillich, largely because he overlooked him. In analyzing inclusivism, Hick limited himself to Karl Rahner because his attempt at inclusivism was in Hick's words the “best known.”¹¹ Tillich's version of Christian inclusivism stands in sharp contrast to Rahner because unlike the Roman Catholic Rahner, who was interested in defending orthodoxy, Tillich was a Protestant dedicating to reforming orthodoxy.

What really makes Tillich stand apart from the crowd was his willingness to seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was the full and complete incarnation of the Logos that is working both inside and outside the institutional church. To put it another way, Tillich was *Logocentric*, not *Christocentric*.¹² A Christocentric criterion of truth basically means if Jesus

¹⁰ Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 12.

¹¹ John Hick, “Religious Pluralism” in F. Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 153.

¹² Inclusivist Gavin D'Costa follows a Christocentric criterion of truth and wrongly labeled Tillich as doing the same. Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 132, 82. A Christocentric criterion of truth too easily devolves into an ad hoc form of idolatry. In my view, John Hick rejected this form of inclusivism because he saw no other options.

reportedly taught something is true, it is true no matter what. Like the early apologists, Tillich saw the Logos, the Word, as “the principle of divine self–manifestation in all religions and cultures.”¹³ Tillich believed that the inner dynamics of every religion drives them toward questions that are only completely answerable by Jesus. Far more is claimed here than Jesus is the only path to salvation in the afterlife. Tillich believed that whatever truths there are to be found in world religions, Jesus must have in principle taught them; else he would not have been the Christ by definition. As Tillich worded it, “If anywhere in the world there were an existential truth which could not be received by Christianity as an element of its own thinking, Jesus would not be the Christ.”¹⁴ Tillich revived an uncompromising approach to inclusivism that had not been seen since Justin Martyr.

My approach to Christian inclusivism is based largely on Tillich. However, I will introduce elements of Anabaptist theology and postmodernism, which I believe will greatly improve and clarify Tillich’s thinking. In *The Politics of Jesus*, the great Anabaptist thinker John H. Yoder (1927–1997) echoed Tillich’s demand that the Christian message should address every aspect of existence by arguing Jesus’s teachings on nonviolence and social justice are equally important as salvation.¹⁵ We Anabaptists are also known as “radical Protestants,” the most radical of all the Reformers, which fits well with using comparative religious study as a means of correcting and refining Christian orthodoxy. Postmodernism is also a good fit with Christian inclusivism. It is perhaps the best methodological safeguard to ensure that Christianity is, as

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World’s Religions* (London: Columbia University Press, 1963), 34.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 28.

¹⁵ See John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

Tillich wrote, genuinely universal in embracing “all classes, groups, and social stratifications of mankind.”¹⁶

5. WHY INTERFAITH DIALOGUES ARE A FORM OF APOLOGETICS

Exclusivists rarely understand why, from an inclusivist perspective, interfaith dialogues are a form of apologetics. In 1970, a group of German Lutherans issued the Frankfurt Declaration in opposition to the recently announced inclusivist position of the World Council of Churches: “We refute the idea that ‘Christian presence’ among the adherents to world religions and a give-and-take dialogue with them are substitutes for a proclamation of the gospel which aims at conversion.”¹⁷ Note in this declaration that conversion and interfaith dialogue are placed in binary opposition, an “either/or.” Tillich has been misunderstood as favoring dialogue over conversion. D’Costa noted that Tillich once wrote, “Not conversion, but dialogue. It would be a tremendous step forward if Christianity were to accept this.”¹⁸ This quote is taken out of context and is not Tillich’s last word on conversion. Regardless, an either/or approach to dialogue or conversion is not the way that I choose to read and apply Tillich. In one of his later books, Tillich clarified his earlier thinking:

[The] relationship of religions to one another cannot consist primarily of desire for conversion but must consist of a desire for exchange, a mutual giving and receiving at the same time. A transition from one religion to another may result from such dialogues, but this is not their aim. The aim in these encounters is to break through mutually to that point at which the vision of the holy–itself

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 28.

¹⁷ See the full text of this declaration in *Christianity Today*, 14 (1970): 844–846.

¹⁸ Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 12, quoting Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 95.

liberates us from bondage to any of the particular manifestations of the holy. (my emphasis)¹⁹

The reason Tillich deemphasized conversion in favor of dialogue in many of his writings on Christianity's encounter with other religions is because he recognized every religion has a tendency towards idolatry. In every religion there is a fight of God against distortion, and nowhere, not even in Christianity, has the struggle been radical enough for complete liberation from distortion. Accordingly, Tillich condemned the methods of Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Harnack and others for defining Christianity as a religion and saying it is the highest of all religions. He likewise condemned followers of Barth for saying Christianity was a revealed religion against all others. It is in the context of this discussion that the quote I used at the outset of this chapter appears. To reiterate, Tillich wrote:

If we are to try to conquer the concept of religion which seems to relativize Christianity, we have to do it by putting the Christ against every religion, or God manifesting his judgment in the Cross against every religion, but not by elevating Christianity as a particular religion.²⁰

Obviously, it is a misreading of Tillich to conclude that he was a pluralist or relativist who placed no emphasis on conversion. He favored "putting the Christ against every religion" which is clearly the approach of an evangelist, albeit an evangelist in a very different and more enlightened manner than an exclusivist. The reason one puts the Christ against every religion is because Christianity must be able to incorporate every good teaching found among them if Jesus is truly the Christ.

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 141, emphasis added.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 28.

The problem with the exclusivist approach to evangelism is that it does not place enough emphasis on the truth of the message one is evangelizing. I wrote at the outset of this chapter that I have very little desire to convert anyone to mainstream Christianity in its present form; that my goal is to reform Christianity so it is worthy of conversion. I did not mean to suggest that all efforts at Christian missions should cease until Christian orthodoxy reaches some Platonic ideal. Rather, I was trying to make the point that Church growth and rejuvenation are integrally related. One of the best illustrative examples in contemporary times is how the feminist spirituality movement is changing the face of Christianity. Thwarted in her efforts to bring about feminist church reform in the early 1970s, Roman Catholic Mary Daly (1928–2010) began calling herself a “postchristian radical feminist” and embraced Neopaganism. She felt forced to turn to another religious tradition altogether in search of truths the orthodox Christian churches wrongly denied her. Numerous marginalized women followed her lead, causing Neopaganism to become one of the fastest growing religions in Northern America and Western Europe. But now that feminists are beginning to gain a voice in orthodox Christian churches, these previously marginalized women are slowly returning. As numbers of these pioneers grow, they correct and refine orthodoxy, which in turn attracts more marginalized women, and so on. One of the greatest periods of Christian growth was due to conversion by first-century Roman women, who were attracted to Jesus’s teachings on radical feminism and equality (unfortunately Roman men converted to Christianity soon afterwards and orthodoxy suppressed Christian feminism for nearly two thousand years). Islam is currently a faster growing religion worldwide than Christianity and recently passed Judaism as the second largest religion in the United States. Instead of subjugating our Christian women as some fundamentalist Muslim countries do,

perhaps evangelicals would gain more ground on Islam by rediscovering Jesus's teaching on feminism so that we can reach out to oppressed Muslim women? Evangelical Christians can send missionaries, pass out tracts and flood the airwaves to hell and back, but until we preach a message worth hearing no one but those who are already Christian will listen.

CHAPTER II: CLARIFYING WHAT IT MEANS TO SPEAK OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH

One of the biggest difficulties in making Tillich's approach to inclusivism more workable is the ambiguity in his language. For instance, when he wrote, "If anywhere in the world there were an existential truth which could not be received by Christianity as an element of its own thinking, Jesus would not be the Christ".²¹ Tillich arguably meant to say, simply, "all religious truth is Christian truth." I think Tillich chose the term "existential truth" over "religious truth" because the latter term is too limiting. When Tillich wrote statements like, "Truth concerning existence, wherever it appears, is Christian truth," he meant to include every aspect of existence, not just the "Sunday-go-to-meeting" kind.²² But what exactly is existential truth?

Recall the famous question that Pilate asked of Jesus, "What is truth?" (Jn 18.38). In the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, this dialogue is more complete than in John's Gospel. Like John's Gospel, it begins with Jesus stating that he came into the world to bear witness to the truth. Pilate then asked, "What is truth?" Jesus said, "Truth is from heaven." Pilate said, "Therefore truth is not on earth." Jesus said to Pilate, "Believe that truth is on earth among those, who when they have the power of judgment, are governed by truth, and form right judgment" (Nic 3.11–14). This interesting dialogue shows how different the worldviews may have been

²¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 28.

²² *Ibid.*

between Pilate the rationalist and Jesus the mystic, and how hard it can be for someone of each of these camps to understand each other.

There are many types of truth that have nothing whatsoever to do with religious truth. And it strains our faith and reason to try and force these type truths into a religious context. For example, fundamentalists who believe every word of the Bible is literally and factually true are hard put to explain why the author of 1 Kings 7:23 set the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter (commonly known as π) equal to the integer 3, instead of the transcendental number represented by its decimal equivalent, 3.1416. There are those who reject science because it is inconsistent with the Bible, and those who reject the Bible because it is inconsistent with science. Both suffer from what philosopher S. H. Nasr called a “flattened out” and unaccommodating concept of truth that does not satisfy the human spirit.²³ Scientific truths are not necessarily found in the Bible, nor any other religious text for that matter. Science is an important concern of life, but it is not what Tillich called life’s “ultimate concern” grasped by those who wrote the ancient sacred texts. Such authors were concerned about all embracing truths about the meaning of existence. The great battles that were fought over whether a heliocentric solar system or evolution is consistent with the Bible were mostly a waste of time and energy. When we speak of truths in a religious context, it has to do with the type truths one lives by, *existential truths* as distinguished from scientific truths. The same can be said of philosophical truths as the ancients understood them. For the ancients, to be a philosopher meant something much different from

²³ Nasr said in an interview, “Without modernism . . . there would not have been any fundamentalism as we understand it today. They are two sides of the same coin: secularism itself is totalitarian; it rejects any opposition to itself; it considers its views to be pervasive, it considers all its enemies to be fanatical, blind, unintelligent . . . What we call fundamentalism in a political and social sense will not go away until this deeper crisis of modernity and post-modernity is solved.” “The Sacred World of the Other,” *Parabola*, Vol. 30 No. 4 “Fundamentalism,” (Winter 2005), 31.

what it means to be a philosopher today. It meant one belonged to a philosophical school, such as the Pythagoreans or Platonists. And that meant one's entire life was defined by the lifestyle and teachings of that school. The same can be said of Buddhism. I would also add psychology to this category, especially Jungian psychology because Carl Jung (1875–1961) often expressed religious truths in psychological terms. It should not go unnoticed that Bill Wilson, the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, corresponded with Jung in order to formulate the now popular twelve step method, which begins by surrendering to one's "higher power."²⁴ When I speak of *comparative religion*, I mean to include all these and related schools of thought where one goes to find existential truths.

6. COMPARATIVE SOTERIOLOGY

To add even more clarity to this discussion of comparative religious truth, I point out that I am really interested in whether religions share similar soteriological concerns. *Soteriology* is the rationalization of that which an entire religion has to do, the study of its plan of salvation. One of the greatest difficulties in comparing the soteriologies of different religions is that, in formulating the main problem a religion seeks to address, its particular solution to that problem is often already built-in.

For example, the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths states, "The noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*), monks, is this: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is

²⁴ "Spiritus contra Spiritum: The Bill Wilson/C.G. Jung Letters: The roots of the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous." *Parabola*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1987), 68.

suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering—in brief the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering” (*Samyutta Nikāya*, 56:11). Few if any adherents of major religions would argue with the basic idea that suffering is a universal problem of the human condition. But to accept the idea that birth *itself* is suffering is to become locked into Buddhist soteriology, for it presupposes freedom from suffering is impossible in bodily form. In fact, Christian and Buddhist soteriologies directly conflict on this point. From a Buddhist point of view, mental preoccupation with the cessation of aging, death and decay is harmful escapism, but Paul taught this is the very objective of the Christian faith because Jesus has conquered death itself through his resurrection (cf. Rom 5:13–14).

This raises the question of whether and how it is possible to evaluate comparative religious teachings without giving one religion an unfair advantage. Most philosophers of religion resort to some form of verifiability criterion. The problem is the more tradition–neutral the criterion, the vaguer and less useful it usually is in evaluating one religious tradition against another. Conversely the more concrete and specific the criterion, the more tradition–dependent it usually is.²⁵ Philosopher of religion Keith Yandell, however, offered the following criterion that I think would be both effective and neutral given a few changes:

A religion proposes a diagnosis of a deep crippling spiritual disease universal to non–divine sentience and offers a cure. A particular religion is true if its diagnosis is correct and its cure efficacious.²⁶

Yandell is a confessing Christian, but there are numerous presuppositions built into his criterion

²⁵ See Gavin D’Costa, “Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from Which to Judge Religions,” *Religious Studies*, Vol 29, No. 1 (March 1993): 79–95.

²⁶ Keith E. Yandell, “How to Sink in Cognitive Quicksand: Nuancing Religious Pluralism,” reprinted in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson & Raymond J. Vanarragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 191.

that I disagree with even from a Christian point of view. For example, Yandell insists that all religious diseases are spiritual. This sounds too much like otherworldliness to me. The diseases of the body, especially the material needs of the poor, are very much a Christian concern. I think the term “existential disease” would work better here. Also, Yandell insists that religions are only concerned with non–divine sentience. Actually, when questioned about his own claims to deity, Jesus quoted the Psalmist’s revelation that we are all divine: “You are gods, all of you, sons of the Most High” (Ps 82:6 quoted in Jn 10:34).

Here is my version of Yandell’s criterion with the changes I think it needs:

A particular religious teaching proposes a diagnosis of a deep crippling existential disease to some sentience or society of sentience and offers a cure. A particular religious teaching is true if its diagnosis is correct and its cure efficacious.

Note that I kept the language that religion is concerned with disease, or as Derrida would write, dis–ease. I like this language because I believe all authentic religion is concerned with alleviating suffering in some form or another. We may disagree with its causes, we may disagree with its remedies, but no one can deny that suffering is a universal problem of the human condition because we have all experienced it.²⁷ Note also that I removed the requirement that all existential diseases must be universal. Yandell may have intended that his criterion presuppose one and only type disease, but that would entirely kill the open spirit of interfaith dialogue I have in mind. Yandell’s criterion as I have modified it may not always appear explicitly, but I will use it in each of the interfaith dialogues in this book.

²⁷ John Hick similarly argued that all authentic religions are concerned with alleviating suffering. Admittedly, this criterion is not completely neutral. It does not recognize murder/suicide cults as authentic religions, for instance, because they cause suffering instead of alleviating it. Hick recognized the same problem but did not think it a significant drawback for this approach. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale U. Press, 2004), 32.

7. MAKING A TACTICAL ALLY OF POSTMODERNISM

The biggest change I made to Yandell's criterion was to remove its demand for universality. The tendency throughout Western thought has been to exclude any religious teaching which cannot be shown universally true. But there have always been truths whose meanings are best understood within a particular culture, as well as truths best understood as addressing limited aspects of existence. The universal applicability of the Christian message does not necessarily imply that all its truths are universally applicable. Therefore, rather than compare whole religious systems to one another where important subjective truths might be overlooked, I think it best to limit the scope of interfaith dialogues in this book to specific teachings which may be found in one or a group of religious traditions. In other words, I will proceed on a truth-by-truth basis. This is where my method is undeniably postmodern, an approach arguably found in Tillich's writings all along, although he lacked all those wonderfully obscure French neologisms to describe it because the great postmodern thinkers had not yet come upon the scene. But now we are presented with the greatest of all ironies. How is it possible to use postmodern techniques, techniques derived from philosophies that appear to deny universal truth, in order to establish universal truth?

Here again, John H. Yoder's thought is very helpful. Yoder took it as a given that we live in a postmodern age but challenged Christians to try and find ways to present Jesus's claims to universal truth in postmodern terms. Yoder wrote, "To ask, 'Shall we talk in pluralistic/relativistic terms?' would be as silly as to ask in Greece, 'Shall we talk Greek?' The question is

what we shall say. We shall say, ‘Jesus is Messiah and Lord’; but how do you say that in pluralistic/relativistic language?”²⁸ I believe I can best solve this dilemma by adopting postmodern techniques without necessarily ascribing to postmodernism as a worldview. If I can accomplish this feat, I will have fulfilled the wish of Yoder that Christians may “be tactical allies of the pluralist/relativist deconstruction of deceptive orthodox claims to logically coercive certainty, without making of relativism itself a new monism.”²⁹

Chinese Bibles usually translate the Logos found in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel as the “Dao.” This is noteworthy because Laozi wrote in the opening verse of the *Daodejing*, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao.” A colorful example of this principle is found in the apocryphal story of Augustine’s encounter with his inner child, as depicted in Gozzoli’s painting of Augustine at the seashore. According to legend, Augustine was walking along the seashore contemplating the mysteries of the Trinity. He saw a child who, having dug a hole in the sand, was filling it with water. When he asked the child what he was doing, the child replied that he intended to pour the entire sea into the hole. When Augustine assured him his task was impossible, the child replied that it was equally impossible for him to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity with the human mind.³⁰ The point is, if Jesus truly is the full and complete incarnation of the Logos, nothing less than the ineffable Logos can ever

²⁸ John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: U. Notre Dame Press, 2001), 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61. Since Yoder wrote these words, a postmodern Anabaptist movement has begun. See Susan & Gerald Biesecker–Mast, *Anabaptists and Postmodernity* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2000). One cover reviewer wrote, “The ethical motivation of postmodernism has always been to end the violence imposed by marginalizing metanarratives and totality systems. In such a context Christians can speak of the truth of the Jesus story with integrity only if equally committed to peace. This suggests the Anabaptist tradition is a unique site for engagement between faith and postmodernity.”

³⁰ Joseph T. Kelley, *Augustine of Hippo: Selections from Confessions and Other Essential Writings—Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight 2010), xiii.

enclose, or describe, or evaluate his Wisdom. I invite the reader to meditate on this proposition at length before continuing.³¹

My version of inclusivism has an important element in common with pluralism. Both methods require one to judge whether a comparative religious teaching is true in its own right. But where pluralism ends my work is just beginning. If a comparative religious teaching is true, my focus then shifts to Christian theology to determine whether Jesus taught the same or similar truth and see what if any refinements are needed to that teaching, Christian orthodoxy, or both as a result of the interfaith dialogue. An exclusivist would likely object that my approach makes religion subordinate to philosophy. This is because philosophy is now thought of as concerned with truth claims as regards all human experience, whereas theology is limited to truth claims as regards a particular religious tradition. But the very reason I am adopting postmodern techniques is to address this objection. Allow me to first contrast my approach with John Hick's and hopefully this will become clearer.

A pluralist by definition believes there is more than one true religion. But a pluralist who accepts all religions is exceedingly rare. John Hick, for example, accepted only a few major world religions and discarded the rest because they did not square with his Neokantian philosophy.³² Gavin D'Costa, a former student of Hick, once argued that, due to the fact Hick subordinates all religions to his preferred philosophy, he has essentially created a new religion of

³¹ In the event these mystical allusions confuse the reader, what I am hinting at in this paragraph is that I believe postmodernism functions as a new and better form of negative theology; it is freer of violent metaphysical hierarchies due to its atheistic roots. See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1997); see also Gavin Coward & Gavin Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).

³² See John Hick, "On Grading Religions," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 451–67; "On Conflicting Religious Truth Claims," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 485–91.

that philosophy. Hick replied that his brand of pluralism was “not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta–theory about the relation between the historical religions.”³³ Hick’s own language betrays him. In his groundbreaking book *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean–François Lyotard (1924–1998) wrote, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward the metanarrative.”³⁴ A *metanarrative* is any story about a story (hence the prefix “meta”) that attempts to convince us that all knowledge and experience everywhere is consistent with its teleological objectives. The best example is the Enlightenment belief that reason will light the way for all human progress, social, scientific and otherwise. The aim of postmodernists is to whittle these metanarratives down to size, to show that metanarratives are really just narratives that require as much faith to believe in them as, say, a traditional religion does. Recall how Hick admitted that his brand of pluralism was a “meta–theory”? A meta–narrative and a meta–theory sound a great deal alike, do they not? Let us now look at Tillich’s widely accepted definition of religion:

Religion is a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of life. Therefore this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite concern which is in conflict with it.³⁵

Tillich took the pragmatic approach that if a belief system functions as a religion in the life of believer then that belief system is their religion—sacred or secular, makes no difference. Tillich further explained, “Secularism is never without an ultimate concern; therefore, the encounter

³³ John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa,” *Religious Studies*, Vol. 33 (1997), 163 (emphasis mine).

³⁴ Jean–François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

³⁵ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 4–5.

with it is an encounter of faith with faith.”³⁶ According to this broad but useful definition of religion, most metanarratives would qualify because they function as an ultimate concern for their believers. A so-called meta-theory of religions should certainly qualify because it sets itself up as judge and jury of what is and is not an authentic ultimate concern. Hick further replied to D’Costa that

a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. And so the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition, but invites them to try to produce a better explanation of the data.³⁷

Hick’s philosophy may not consign non-believers to perdition in and of itself, but if by its principles Hick encouraged apostasy from or discourages conversion to a religion that does consign non-believers to perdition, is not the effect one and the same? It was naïve of Hick to think that believers would not be affected by his work. Why did he publish books for the general reader if not to change their beliefs and reshape their ultimate concern? Hick’s clever rhetoric that he had not created a new form of religion is untenable.

What Hick failed to acknowledge is there was a time in most cultures when philosophy and religion were one, and therefore the distinctions between philosophy and religion (especially as regards philosophy of religion) are somewhat artificial. The ancient followers of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle understood perfectly that to embrace a philosophy was to embrace a way of life that they believed asked and answered all the important questions about existence. This is why when Justin Martyr said that Christianity was the only philosophy that he found to be completely true and fulfilling it was so revolutionary. He claimed Christianity was not only on

³⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, 124.

³⁷ John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa,” 163.

par with the ancient Greek philosophies, it was superior to and inclusive of them. In Tillich's words, "Justin taught that this Christian philosophy is universal; it is the all embracing truth about the meaning of existence. From this it follows that wherever truth appears, it belongs to the Christians."³⁸ Moreover, Tillich made a strong historical argument that that the developers of the philosophical systems of the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Hume and Kant, "measured Christianity by its reasonableness and judged all other religions by the same criterion."³⁹ They may have secularized and humanized its principles, such that Christianity is now barely recognizable as the universal philosophy behind their systems, but Christianity was the inspiration for their systems, nonetheless. However, this transition from the sacred to the secular came at a huge price. When secular philosophical systems finally replaced Christianity as universal philosophy in the sense Justin understood it, they took on characteristics all their own. Therefore, Christian encounters with these philosophies are now best understood as competitive encounters of faith with faith. This is especially true of grand-totalizing philosophies that do not back away from political application such as Marxism.

Anyone who engages in interfaith dialogues is in Tillich's words either an "inside participant" who belongs to a particular religious tradition, or an "outside observer." An inside participant "tries to grasp the facts" of another religion "as precisely as humanly possible" but is always interested in how its elements "become embodied in symbols similar to those of his own religion."⁴⁰ The outside observer studies each religion similarly, trying to define and understand its elements in terms familiar to him, such as found in his or her preferred religion or

³⁸ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 27.

³⁹ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

philosophical system. However, the outside observer is always an “inside participant with a part of his being, for he also has confessed or concealed answers to the questions which underlie every form of religion.”⁴¹ For this reason, Tillich slyly referred to himself as an “observing participant” of interfaith dialogues, because he knew he could only convince his modern audience that Christianity is universal philosophy by translating its symbols into contemporary philosophical language.⁴² I will likewise resort to postmodernism in exploring whether Jesus is the Christ, not that I necessarily ascribe to postmodernism as a worldview, but because that is the language my audience understands, and because it is the best way I see to avoid creating yet another competing form of religion from which Christianity must wrest itself.

8. AVOIDING THE METANARRATIVE

What especially concern me in this book are truths at the “edges” of orthodoxy, truths that never quite fit the reigning metanarratives. Take Christian pluralist Huston Smith (1919–2016), for example. Smith used a Neoplatonic metanarrative followed by numerous Christian thinkers since Augustine.⁴³ The basic idea is that there is a transcendental Logos to which each religion/culture/person is responding, but the response can never be perfect due to our noetic imperfections. The specific universal truth claim at work is that humanity is in a fallen state due to our materiality. Christian orthodoxy calls this borrowed Neoplatonic doctrine “original sin.” By and large, we Anabaptists reject original sin. Personally, I feel it is one of the most oppressive

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Of his many books, the one that most clearly reveals his reliance on a Neoplatonic metanarrative is probably Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

doctrines ever wrought by orthodoxy. Original sin teaches we are humanly incapable of following the teachings of Jesus that really matter—universal love, forgiveness and nonviolence—so these teachings are ignored causing repressed guilt. Then it teaches false guilt over our life’s instinctive joys, such as our sensual appetites. Women are in a state of double oppression. First, men resent them for being the more “Christ-like,” the more maternal and passive of the two sexes. Second, men resent them because they are the objects of our repressed sexual desire. Is it any wonder, as Mary Daly argued, that women are the primordial scapegoats of orthodoxy? that sexism is the root and paradigm of all oppression? Daly’s feminist critique of original sin was based primarily on the fact that if humanity is in a sinful state of existence because of our materiality, women become the scapegoats because they are perceived as the more sensual of the two sexes. Thus, Smith’s Neoplatonic metanarrative not only obscures the rational analysis of feminist spirituality, it is a very big part of the problem. John Hick’s Neokantian metanarrative is in the same boat. Kant is the poster child of a patriarchal rationalist; his philosophy promotes exactly the sort of oppressive metaphysics Daly found objectionable.

The failure to address feminist spirituality is just one of many examples of how metanarratives can make false claims to certainty and thereby become oppressive. This is why I will try and avoid the appeal to any form of metanarrative in this book. I will opt instead for what Lyotard termed “localized narratives” in which I will seek to understand how each religious teaching is defined on its own terms. Namely, in applying the criterion I developed earlier—a religious teaching is true if it is efficiently diagnosis and cures an existential disease—I will seek to understand *its* diagnosis, understand *its* cure by analyzing how it applies to human experience.

The diagnosis and cure prescribed may differ from teaching to teaching or it may not; I will simply take things as they come.

9. DECONSTRUCTION AS THE CRITIQUE OF IDOLS

Another postmodern technique I will apply in this book is *deconstruction*. As anyone who has studied deconstruction knows, deconstruction is a hilariously hard term to define. This is because the point of deconstruction in a nutshell is to crack open nutshells.⁴⁴ Basically deconstruction is a type of criticism in which the supposedly secure meaning of texts, beliefs and other forms of language shifts and expands when read in light of the assumptions and absences they reveal within themselves. An important aspect of deconstruction is its Daoist-like critique of binary oppositions, such as presence/absence, speech/writing, thinking/feeling or male/female.⁴⁵ The founder of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), argued that the first term in such binary oppositions has been wrongly privileged throughout Western thought, forming violent hierarchies that must be deconstructed. My discussion of the philosophy/religion opposition in the last two sections is hopefully a good example of this type criticism.

To many orthodox Christians, deconstruction is nihilism and has no place in theology. But I was struck by the similarity between Tillich and Derrida, especially Derrida's later works. Christian deconstructionist John Caputo once wrote of Derrida,

His critics failed to see that deconstructing this, that and everything in the name of

⁴⁴ I wish I could claim this pithy maxim as my own, but credit goes to John D. Caputo. His book *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 1997) is one of the clearest and most concise introductions to deconstruction ever written.

⁴⁵ Though deconstruction was revolutionary for the West, numerous scholars have noted the striking similarities between deconstruction and ideas long found in Daoism. See Robert J. Shepherd, "Perpetual Unease or Being at Ease? Derrida, Daoism, and the 'Metaphysics of Presence,'" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 57 No. 2 (April 2007): 227–243.

the undeconstructible is a lot like what religious people, especially Jews, would call the ‘critique of idols.’ Deconstruction, it turns out, is not nihilism; it just has high standards!⁴⁶

This characterization of Derrida’s work reminds me a great deal of an important passage from Tillich:

If missions try to bring about the conversion of many from one faith to another, they try to bring about the unity of faith in humanity as a whole. Nobody can be certain that such unity will be reached in the course of human history; nobody can deny that such unity is the desire and hope of mankind in all periods and all places. But there is no way of reaching this unity except by distinguishing ultimacy itself from that in which ultimacy expresses itself. The way to a universal faith is the old way of the prophets, the way of calling idolatry idolatry and rejecting it for the sake of that which is really ultimate.⁴⁷

Tillich’s prophetic call for Christians to reject idolatry for the sake of that which is really ultimate is essentially the same idea as deconstruction in the name of the *undeconstructible*, a religious concept found in Derrida’s later works. In his book *Acts of Religion* (2002), Derrida argued that laws are deconstructible because they are based on texts and the constantly shifting stratum of human experience, but that justice itself is not. As Derrida worded it, “Deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law.”⁴⁸ Justice is undeconstructible because it is a promise, and a promise escapes the traditional presence/absence binary opposition—it is both present and absent. So it is with Jesus’s promise of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom has both a present and a future reality and as such is undeconstructible. The purpose of Christian orthodoxy is to usher in the

⁴⁶ John D Caputo, “Jacques Derrida (1930–2004),” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (December 2004), 8.

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, 125.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Post–Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (New York: SUNY, 1992), 284.

Kingdom, thus orthodoxy is deconstructible in the name of the undeconstructible Kingdom. My critical examination of orthodoxy in light of comparative religion is a means of deconstructing orthodoxy one truth at a time.

10. DERRIDA’S “RELIGION WITHOUT RELIGION”

In his contributing paper to a multi-scholar project titled *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Derrida penned some of the most remarkable words of negative theology ever written. He cited and commented upon the mystical and apophatic writings of Dionysius and Selesius in pointing to a divine transcendence beyond all names, but he never completely subscribed to them. In so doing, Derrida dared to ask whether his own atheism was not a purer form of negative theology than even these theists: “If the apophatic inclines almost toward atheism, can’t one say that, on the other hand or thereby, the extreme and most consequent forms of declared atheism will always have attested the most intense desire of God?”⁴⁹

Postmodern theologian Richard Kearney correctly noted that this radicalized form of negative theology was present in all Derrida’s work, even in his earliest writings. Derrida’s deconstruction of traditional religion ultimately called for what Kearney recognized as “religion without religion,” a “faith without faith that could scarce give a name to God at all.” More precisely, Kearney said that Derrida

[Embraced] a notion of “messianic” beyond the concrete, historical “messianisms” of the Abrahamic (and other) traditions. Such messianicity serves less as a sacred, incarnate presence in the world than as a quasi-transcendental structure for the condition of possibility (impossibility) of religion in general. This

⁴⁹ Richard Kearney, “Derrida and Messianic Atheism” in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, ed. Edward Baring & Peter E. Gordon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 202.

messianicity involves an endless waiting with no sense of what kind of Other might arrive. It is an unconditional “yes” to what is always still to come.⁵⁰

I think Derrida’s atheistic analysis of messianism was precisely what Tillich had in mind with his Logocentric approach to exploring whether Jesus is the Christ. Tillich noted that Jesus rejected the temptation to let himself be idolized, “and this gives Christianity, in principle, the position of criterion not only against itself, but against all religions.”

11. THE IDENTITY THEORY OF TRUTH

A helpful detail to make my method comprehensible for my philosophical audience is to understand what theory of truth I will employ. Most philosophers use either a *correspondence* or a *coherence* theory of truth. The correspondence theory of truth states that the truth or falsity of a proposition (such as Jesus is the Christ) is determined by how it relates to the world and whether it accurately describes the world. The coherence theory of truth states that the truth or falsity of a proposition is determined by its coherence with some other specified set of propositions. I feel both of these theories are ill suited to the search for religious truth. At the turn of the last century, a British idealist philosopher named Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924) formulated what is now known as an *identity theory of truth*.

I submit that an identity theory of truth has been used by many, if not most, of the religious thinkers throughout history. In fact, the 2016 entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states this is where the identity theory of truth likely originated.

The theory has some roots in the ideas of mystical philosophers for whom the world is a unity in which there is no fundamental divide between the representing

⁵⁰ Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 140.

and the represented. (See, for example, Plotinus, *The Enneads*: 5th Ennead, 3rd Tractate, §5; 5th Ennead, 5th Tractate, §2.)⁵¹

A contemporary philosopher, Julian Dodd, summarized that for Bradley:

There can be precisely one judgment which avoids abstraction; but this judgment can only be non–abstractive by virtue of it *being identical with* the whole of reality. The only way in which a judgment can be true is by exactly representing the whole of reality; but, according to Bradley, a judgment can do justice to the whole of reality by actually becoming the reality it is supposed to be about . . . Only if the whole of reality can it be the case that none of reality’s detail is omitted.⁵²

Religious scholars familiar with Advaita Vedānta should recognize this nondualist approach to knowledge. Bradley himself noted that this position sounds paradoxical, but he believed logically that we have no choice. If we take a true judgment to be distinct from reality as the correspondence truth theorist does, then there can be no true judgments since none of them represent reality exactly.⁵³ In other words, to repeat a point I made earlier, if Jesus truly is the full and complete incarnation of the Logos, nothing less than the ineffable Logos can ever enclose, or describe, or evaluate his Wisdom.

12. A PROVISIONAL APPROACH TO TRUTH

A deconstructive thinker and an identity truth theorist must be willing to work with terms whose precise meaning can never be completely established. This was also a strong theme in Tillich’s work. Like me, Christian inclusivist Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) was greatly influenced by Tillich. Pannenberg suggested that all theological truth claims are provisional until

⁵¹ Richard Gaskin, “The Identity Theory of Truth” (2016) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-identity/>

⁵² Julian Dodd, *An Identity Theory of Truth* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 168–69.

⁵³ F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (London: Alan & Lunwin, 1893), 150.

the eschaton.⁵⁴ Just as one cannot know the truth and meaning of the events of one's life until looking back at the moment of death, one cannot know the truth and meaning of history until its eschatological consummation. A provisional approach to truth means that an apparently valuable proposition is considered proven until it is disproved; until and if that time arrives, it is open to review and revision. There are several areas where the truth claims explored by Christian inclusivism are provisional and, in my view, should always be provisional.⁵⁵

First, Jesus can never be fully and finally proved the Christ. By definition, the Christ is a full and complete incarnation of the transcendental Logos, meaning that whatever truths there are to be found in comparative religion must in principle be found in his teachings. To believe Jesus was a full and complete incarnation of the Logos requires a leap of faith. It requires a leap of faith because it is based on incomplete information. The truths of comparative religion are infinite; no one scholar will ever completely and exhaustively analyze them. Even if we could bind all the truths of comparative religion in a single time and space, we are constantly generating new ones due to new revelation and deeper insight into the ever-changing varieties of human experience. However, the idea that all truth is in principle Christian truth can be disproved by a single negative instance.⁵⁶ If anywhere there were to be taught even a single truth that was not taught by Jesus or to be found in an organic outgrowth of his teachings, we would

⁵⁴ Christians typically define the eschaton as the return of Christ and the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. See generally, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁵⁵ Unlike Pannenberg, I believe a provisional approach to truth would serve us best even after the eschaton because I am partial to a process view of God. If God is open to aesthetic increase, transcendence is never ending. There is life after "happily ever after."

⁵⁶ In this sense, my method is very similar to Karl Popper's falsification theory that demarcates the difference between pseudo and proper science. The hypothesis "Jesus is the Christ" can be falsified but never completely verified. See Karl Popper, *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 39.

be wrong to proclaim him the Christ. Each time we test Jesus by applying this standard and he holds up, we may have more confidence in the hypothesis that he is the Christ. But the hypothesis itself can never be ultimately confirmed, not logically, not without a leap of faith. My approach to Christian inclusivism is apologetic, but it is a form of apologetics that recognizes its own limitations. It is an apologist's job to make the leap of faith as small as possible, not to remove the need for faith entirely.

Second, a truth claim often taken for granted by pluralists and inclusivists alike is that there is a transcendental Logos at all. Pluralists John Hick and Huston Smith postulated the existence of the Logos (or something like the Logos, as in Hick's concept of the Real), but really they asked that one simply accept its existence on faith by appealing to Neokantian and Neoplatonic dogma, respectively. Fact is: the only empirically justifiable way of proving the existence of the Logos is to test whether there is a convergence of ideas across all religious lines, one truth at a time. Testing the existence of the Logos in its entirety is beyond my capability—I would sooner empty the sea into Augustine's hole in the sand. However, one can modestly explore the existence of the Logos provisionally. Namely, insofar as Christian inclusivism is concerned, if it were ever shown that a foreign religious teaching and a teaching of Jesus were both true, but each teaching were mutually exclusive, one would simultaneously disprove that Jesus is the Christ and disprove the existence of the Logos.

Finally, as the previous discussion of feminist spirituality and original sin illustrates, all Christian doctrine must cohere. But it would be a grievous error to judge whether a foreign religious teaching is true based solely on whether it coheres with existing Christian orthodoxy. That would reduce Christian inclusivism to self-serving form of foundationalism whereby one

could easily suppress the truths orthodox Christians find disagreeable. In fact, foreign religious teachings that orthodox Christians find most uncomfortable often provide the greatest opportunity for growth. When even a single Christian doctrine is revised in light of another religion, all of orthodoxy must be reviewed and revised, if necessary. Religions that do not claim universality do not have this problem, but Christianity does. Coherence is a basic demand of Christian orthodoxy, without which it would be immune from rational inquiry. But coherence with existing Christian doctrine is an *additional requirement* of Christian inclusivism, not necessarily an epistemic criterion for judging the teachings of other religions in and of itself. To explore the logical possibility of Christian inclusivism in all honesty, one must be ready and willing at all times to concede Jesus is not the Christ if ever presented with a religious teaching, otherwise true in its own right, which will not cohere with Jesus's teachings.

To sum up my use of postmodern techniques in this book, I am far less concerned with the question "Is this religious teaching true?" than I am the question "What does this teaching mean for the particular culture or range of ideas it concerns?" I am not giving up on the idea of truth; I am saying the best way to approach it is provisionally. My hope and faith are that true Christian orthodoxy will increasingly come into focus when we fix our gaze upon each comparative religious teaching one at a time.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

13. BIBLICAL CRITICISM

While I am on the subject of biblical criticism, I will discuss a few principles I will follow in order that my examination of Christian theology in light of other religions is done soundly and in good faith. The main problem in assessing what Jesus really taught is that he left behind no known writings, thus we can know him only through the writings of his disciples. Philosophers have exactly the same problem when we try and solve *the problem of the historical Socrates* because he, too, left no known writings. Like Socrates, Jesus may have become a vessel into which ancient authors poured their own views in order to give them validity. Further, as an Anabaptist, I am especially skeptical of the doctrines formulated by council Christianity due to the corrupting influences of state religion. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (to the biblical texts alone) distrusts later writings about Jesus for precisely such reasons. It presumes that the earliest recoverable stratum of Christian witness, the New Testament canon, is the best and most reliable Christian witness. The reader will see that I have a high regard for the canon and that the canon is my first and foremost authority in determining what Jesus really taught. But trying to discern what the Bible teaches by looking to the canon alone is inefficient and, in many instances, would leave us completely in the dark.

For example, Jude verse 14 quotes 1 Enoch 1:9 verbatim, and unless one reads the extracanonical book of Enoch one would be wholly ignorant of this fact. I prefer to follow

what has been called the *prima scriptura* approach of biblical criticism, such as found in the Wesleyan quadrilateral.⁵⁷ I will often explore variant texts that were excluded from the canon, including those of the Gnostics. I do this because extracanonical texts often paint a clearer picture of Jesus than the New Testament alone. Like Socrates, Jesus was a paradigmatic individual who spawned numerous interpretations of his teachings. But because he was a real historical person, the different dimensions of his personality usually appear in all the writings about him, albeit in varying degree. The hedonists and cynics claimed Socrates as their inspirational father, for example. Just as one finds evidence of the hedonist, cynical Socrates in Plato's writings, so, too, does the Jesus of the Gnostics sometimes appear in the New Testament.

Some Gnostics, however, taught dramatically different metaphysical views than those held by Jesus's early disciples. The Second letter of John condemned a Gnostic teaching that became known as Docetism. *Docetism* is basically the idea that Jesus did not really appear in the flesh: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 Jn 7; cf. 1 Jn 4:2–3). Gnostics supported Docetism by way of a hermeneutic that transmuted the ordinary meaning of biblical texts. This is why a thorough historical inquiry is important. Every interpretation of a text presupposes some defining culture, and if that culture is no longer with us we must try and recover it historically. The orthodox principle of *apostolic succession* addresses this issue; it states that that unless doctrine can be traced back to Jesus and the early disciples, its authenticity is suspect. The only problem is that reliable historical records of the early Church

⁵⁷ John Wesley taught the Bible is primary Church authority, but it should be interpreted through the lens of tradition, reason and personal experience. I am modifying the "experience" leg of the quadrilateral to include the collective religious experiences of humankind. See the first paragraph of the Author's Preface.

prior to the canon are very hard to come by. Hopefully my restoration of the Dead Sea Scrolls will help. I argued in *Jesus the Wicked Priest* that Jesus was raised with the Essene Scroll authors but broke from them at the outset of his ministry. Thus, by studying the Dead Sea Scrolls we can better frame Jesus within his historical context, better understand which doctrines Jesus accepted and which he rejected, and better understand teachings of Jesus which were entirely new.

But scriptural interpretation should never be entirely reduced to historical inquiry, “for the word of God is living and active” (Heb 4:12a). Deconstruction teaches us that the meanings of biblical texts are constantly shifting and expanding due to new varieties of human experience. This is especially true when we encounter the teachings of other religions. For instance, Jesus said to a scribe, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mt 22:37–38). The Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedānta teaches a nondualist form of mysticism. Could it be that when Jesus equated the two commandments (“and a second is like it . . .”) that he intended to teach nondualism? Did Jesus mean to teach that love of one’s neighbor with all one’s being is essentially the same as loving God with all one’s being? This would certainly be consistent with the First letter of John’s teaching that “God is love” (4:8b). As long as new and creative ways of reading a scripture in light of other religions are not explicitly in conflict with other scriptures I am sure Jesus would give his blessings. Jesus taught, “He who is not against me is with me” (Mk 9:40). All truth is God’s truth.

14. PHENOMENOLOGY

An important question I will often deal with in this book is whether the truths taught in various faiths are phenomenologically similar. *Phenomenology* was the approach used by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) in his now classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, in which he explored the elements of holiness found among all faiths.⁵⁸ A great deal of my work in this book is dedicated to determining whether there are genuine irreconcilable differences that prevent Christianity from incorporating the truths of comparative religion, or whether those differences are due to factors that can be resolved, such as ambiguous language or historical context. I intend to resolve such differences—if they can be resolved—primarily through phenomenology. A phenomenologist brackets a phenomenon to see what it is in itself, and in so doing eliminates irrelevant factors that may cloud our perceptions.

This is a lot easier in practice than it sounds. For example, in the First letter of John, we read, “If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar” (4:20). Confucius said in the *Analectics*, “If you cannot yet serve man properly, how can you serve the spirits and divinities properly?” (11.11). John was a monotheist and Confucius a polytheist, but the same love relation between deity and humankind was expressed by both. Love of deity without love of humankind is counterfeit. Their views are phenomenologically similar in relevant part.

15. LESSER INCLUDED TRUTHS

Oftentimes we will encounter instances where the greater truth includes the lesser. For instance, both Confucius and the rabbi Hillel taught a restrictive version of the golden rule: “Do *not* do

⁵⁸ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

unto others what you would *not* have them do unto you.” Jesus, on the other hand, taught a proactive version of the golden rule: “*Do* unto others as you would have them *do* unto you” (Mt 7:12; my emphasis). In the essay I will write on the golden rule, I will argue at length why the proactive golden rule is better. Even a stone can do nothing and live up to the restrictive golden rule. But Jesus called us to positive social action, to be generous whenever we sense another in need. Obviously the truth of the restrictive golden rule is completely contained in the proactive golden rule. The latter is a higher truth, a more complete truth. This example, incidentally, is an excellent illustration of what Tillich identified as the heart of the apologetic method.⁵⁹ First, the apologist finds mutually accepted ideas in order to establish a dialogue. Secondly, the apologist finds a defect in a foreign teaching, which is best done by applying internal criticism and showing a teaching to be inconsistent with a religion’s own agenda. Finally, the Christian apologist shows Christianity to be more complete, not by casting stones from the outside, but by showing Christianity to be the other religion’s very longing and desire. What separates this book from traditional apologia is that I apply the apologetic method with equal fervor to Christian orthodoxy. If a foreign teaching better expresses Christianity’s longing and desire, I argue that Christian orthodoxy needs correction.

16. UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

Tillich pointed out a danger in apologetics is that too often stones are thrown from the outside that are so offensive they tend to polarize. Another danger is that the common ground is overemphasized over against the differences. Neither approach accomplishes anything, for it

⁵⁹ Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 13–14.

leaves someone exactly as he or she is. Exclusivists have tended toward the former approach, and pluralists toward the latter. Neither has resulted in the rejuvenation of Christianity that I desire from an apologetic dialogue. For example, Gnostic Christians brought many unique and valuable insights to Christianity, but most of them were lost because the early Christian apologists so savagely distanced themselves from them. Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents in Egypt in 1945, most of our knowledge of the Gnostics came from the writings of the early apologists. Gnostic scholars like Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman have made us aware that the ideas found in the Gnostic texts themselves are often very different from how the early apologists described them. We now know that the early apologists did not reject real Gnosticism so much as they did their own watered-down version of Gnosticism. Christian orthodoxy suffered as a result, for in many cases they threw out the baby with the bath. The pluralist approach of saying all religions teach more or less the same thing is no less harmful, because it fails to recognize teachings of Jesus which are unique, such as his call to positive social action found in his proactive version of the golden rule.

To avoid repeating the same mistakes, I will examine each comparative religious teaching with what the psychologist Carl Rogers termed *unconditional positive regard*. That is, I will examine each teaching without preconceptions or prejudices in order to see it in its best possible light. Otherwise I am not engaging in a genuine apologetic dialogue, but instead meaningless propaganda. Far too many apologists have engaged in the latter, which is why apologetics are seldom seen as serious scholarship anymore. One practical rule I can follow to avoid this problem is to study original source texts to the fullest extent possible. And where I need the assistance of other scholars, make it a point to study scholars who are practitioners of

the faith they analyze, and who are recognized internally as the leading scholars of that faith. The Jewish scholar Martin Buber (1878–1965) took this approach in his book *Two Types of Faith* when he used Rudolf Bultman, Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Otto as his primary sources for learning Christianity.⁶⁰ I will do likewise. I will study David Kalupahana (1936–2014) to further my understanding of Theravadin Buddhism, for example, as well as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hahn to round out my understanding of the Mahayana and Zen traditions. It is also good to review the work of other Christian scholars who have tried to establish an interfaith dialogue. Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) comes to mind. Griffiths was a Benedictine monk who ran a Christian ashram in India until his death. He is considered one of the great pioneers of Christian–Hindu dialogue. Language itself presents problems. Ideally, I would be able to learn every language in which a given religion was originally presented so I could study its texts in their original form. But that is simply not possible given my human limitations. I will do well to become thoroughly fluent in Hebrew and Greek, let alone Mandarin Chinese or Native American Lakota. For some religions, this poses a real problem if you wish to understand them on their own terms. Some Muslims, for example, are very adamant that the Qur’an should be read only in its native Arabic. The best guideline I can adopt here is similar to my last one. Where it is necessary to study foreign religious texts, I will use English translations that are generally recognized as trustworthy by the leading scholars of that faith. Oftentimes a religion will not have sacred texts at all, which means I will be limited to direct anthropological study of its practitioners. In such cases I will either study them myself where we share the same language, or else follow in the work of objective scholars.

⁶⁰ Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 37.

17. AVOIDING SYNCRETISM

Syncretism refers to the blending of ideas from different faiths in an effort to gain a unified point of view, but done in a way that is superficial, that obscures genuinely conflicting truth claims. There were many teachers throughout history who have tried to unite the religions: Mani (c. 210–276), who founded Manichaeism; Bahauallah (1817–1892), who founded Bahaism; and Madam Blatvsky (1831–1891), who founded the theosophical society which led eventually to the New Age movement. But my approach is very different. The primary difference is that for these teachers Jesus was not really the Christ; they may have incorporated some of Jesus’s teachings but his universal truth claims were obscured. One can adopt that approach, but if you do you have committed to an artificial and superficial synthesis, not to exploring whether Jesus is the Christ with an open heart and mind. Such an approach will never discover the true depth and breadth of the gospel.

Done properly, interfaith dialogues often produce a dialectic whereby *seemingly* conflicting ideas point one towards higher truths. As long as the conflicting ideas are only seemingly in conflict, that is a good thing. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, God usually appears as an anthropomorphic being–in–the–world, “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8). But when Paul quoted the philosopher Epimenides in his address to Athenians, he brought attention to an idea sometimes found in the Hebrew Bible, but never expressed that clearly: the Greek idea that God is Being–itself, a universal and impersonal force in which “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27). If, as Paul taught, the God of Abraham is truly the God of Socrates then these two ideas must be reconciled. Process theologian Charles

Hartshorne called reconciling the individuality and universality of God “*the question of natural theology*” and noted that, before Paul, the question had never been framed so clearly as to come into focus.⁶¹ In contrast, sometimes genuinely conflicting ideas are joined together in a way that obscures the main principles of each teaching.

For instance, though Carl Jung warned Westerners to be wary of syncretism when studying Eastern religions, he nevertheless incorporated Daoism into his psychoanalytic theory and reinterpreted the yin and yang in Christendom’s terms of good and evil.⁶² For the Daoists, the yin and yang are merely feminine and masculine forces of nature; neither is good or evil in its own right, only the disharmony between the two is evil. In his *Answer to Job*, however, Jung has Job realize that he is morally superior to an amoral God who is both good and evil and beyond caring about it.⁶³ Jung even interprets Satan as a mythical projection of God’s unconscious. This interpretation entirely obscures that fact that we, as readers of a story written in the third-person omniscient voice, are privy to a wager between God and Satan which Job was unaware. The wager was that Satan, acting as his own free-will agent, could induce Job to curse God because Job would mistakenly believe God himself had caused Job’s misery (Job 1:6– 12). God is guilty of nothing in the book of Job but allowing free will, the removal of which would be a greater harm than any offense imaginable. Jung’s interpretation falls into the very theological temptation that the author of the book of Job would have us avoid.

Tillich believed that the early church fathers did not reject all foreign religious ideas

⁶¹ Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 37.

⁶² Like Freud, Jung was at best a Reform Jew and at worst an atheist; he was thoroughly assimilated into the mainstream Christian culture of his day. Thus, many of Jung’s ideas on good and evil were shaped by original sin doctrine. Original sin doctrine is not and has never been found in Orthodox Judaism.

⁶³ Carl Jung, “Answer to Job,” *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol.11, trans. By R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1958, 1969), 355–470.

unambiguously, but neither did they accept them unambiguously, either. In his words, “Christian universalism was not syncretistic; it did not mix, but rather subjected whatever it received to an ultimate concern.”⁶⁴ This is ideally the way that Christianity should progress. Unfortunately, Tillich did not realistically assess church history. From an Anabaptist perspective, most of the harmful doctrines in church history are due to syncretism caused by Christian interaction with perennial forms of what Tillich identified as the “quasi-religions,” namely nationalism and other political ideologies.⁶⁵ Nationalism has a particularly aggressive way of pushing aside Christianity and making the national idea the new matter of ultimate concern, such as how “making the world safe for Democracy” has come to override the Kingdom of God in the minds of rank and file U.S. Christians.

The problem with applying Tillich’s criterion that Christianity “must subject whatever it receives to an ultimate concern” is that it is ambiguous. Each time a Christian encounters a foreign religious teaching, especially one that seems to conflict with our faith, we are forced to judge Christianity in light of another religion, or to judge the other religion in light of Christianity. But which religion’s ultimate concern is to apply? I submit that the ultimate concern of both religions should apply. To clarify this point, let us look at a quote from Christian inclusivist Gavin D’Costa. D’Costa wrote, “Christians through dialogue may discover new aspects within their own tradition which have either been obscured, forgotten or were never properly present.”⁶⁶ I am mostly in agreement with this quote, but I must draw the line where D’Costa says it is a good idea to incorporate foreign religious teachings into Christianity that

⁶⁴ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5–12; Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 134–136.

⁶⁶ Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 122.

were never properly present. To incorporate teachings which were never present at all is to engage in syncretism—no two ways around it. If a comparative religious teaching is true but Jesus did not teach it in any form or shape whatsoever, Jesus fails as the Christ. To apply Tillich's criterion that Christianity "must subject whatever it receives to an ultimate concern" there must be a shared ultimate concern, even if found only in Christian teachings which lay dormant.

How does this work in actual practice? To articulate the ultimate concern of a foreign religious teaching, my approach will be to look to the teaching itself and the culture or range of ideas it addresses. Feminist spirituality's ultimate concern is empowering women and liberating them from patriarchal oppression, for example. Christianity's ultimate concern is the Kingdom of God, although Christians are often in disagreement as to what the Kingdom of God means and how to bring it about. I believe the Kingdom begins and ends in universal love and nonviolence with no cultural divide whatsoever, thus for me feminist spirituality and the Kingdom of God are reconcilable. But I certainly cannot endorse male gendercide as sometimes advocated by radical feminist separatists.

The dangers of syncretism are very real. But it is important not to overact and avoid interfaith dialogues altogether as exclusivists often do, otherwise Christians would miss out on valuable refinements of the best teachings we have to offer. The interaction of liberation theology and Marxism is an excellent illustration. Latin-American-born liberation theology stresses that religious sponsored charity towards the poor often furthers their poverty by making Christians insensitive to oppressive class structures. Consequently, liberation theologians like

Gustavo Guitérrez often use Marxist literature in order to better diagnose the class struggle.⁶⁷ This has often caused the Vatican to distance itself from liberation theology, in no small part because Marx taught violent class overthrow. It is true that violent class struggle differs fundamentally and irreconcilably from Jesus's strict teachings of nonviolence. But it would be a grievous error to suppose that a classless society is not a central element in Jesus's teachings. Jesus was a radical subversive who called for a sweeping social, economic and political reform of society from the bottom up: "But many that are first shall be last, and the last first" (Mk 10:31). Marxist literature is helpful in furthering Jesus's teachings on social justice, but church authorities will never accept its use by liberation theologians until it is thoroughly "Christianized" by unequivocally rejecting Marx's call for violent revolution in favor of strict nonviolence.

Stanley Hauerwas once wrote, "If postmodernism means anything, it means that the comforting illusion of modernity that conflict is, can be, and should be avoided is over. No unbiased viewpoint exists that can insure agreements."⁶⁸ I think this last sentence overstates the conflict a bit. Obviously I believe a mutually expanding conversation is possible or I would not have written this book; a mutually expanding conversation requires at least some initial agreement. But Hauerwas does make a very good point. The aim of the gospel is to produce the *right kind* of enemies. Jesus came to bring a sword; not a sword in the literal sense, but a sword in the ideological sense, to set a son against his own father if needs be (Mt 10:34–35). Not every teaching can be incorporated into Christianity, only the true ones—if our faith in Jesus as the

⁶⁷ See Gustavo Guitérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

⁶⁸ See Stanley Hauerwas, "Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," *First Things* 53 (May 1995), 47.

Christ is justified. Where there is genuine conflict with other religions or quasi-religions, we Christians must argue the truth of the gospel on its own merits.

18. TOLERANCE AND NONVIOLENCE

The last hurdle I must overcome is not so much a problem of method as it is a problem of fear this book is likely to invoke because of historical wrongs. When advocates of a religion make universal truth claims for that religion it has often led to demonic results, like fanatical persecution of those holding divergent views and the most unholy atrocity of all, religious wars. In fact, John Hick argued that the belief in one true religion inevitably leads to oppression and killing in the name of that religion.⁶⁹ Hick's objection is similar to postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who stressed that universal truth claims tend to oppress not only ideas, they also tend to oppress persons, which is why he exercised pessimistic vigilance against them. The Anabaptist theology in which my method is grounded squarely answers this objection. John H. Yoder likewise exercised pessimistic vigilance against orthodoxy's universal truth claims because they tend to obscure Jesus's nonviolent teachings. Yet Yoder taught that an Anabaptist interpretation of Christianity may call for faith in Jesus as the universal Christ and still answer Hick's and Foucault's criticisms *precisely because it is tolerant and noncoercive*.

Like John Wesley, "think and let think" is my motto. I believe the Holy Spirit functions best in an environment where free expression is absolute and the rational debate of ideas unfettered. I celebrate diversity and encourage doubt, for without both Christianity cannot grow.

⁶⁹ See John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2006), ch. 8, "Historical Side-effects of the Church's Dogma."

But this in no way hampers my exploration of universal truth claims about Jesus. Retiring Professor Margaret Farley gave an address to the 2007 graduating class of Yale Seminary that squarely addressed this very issue. Because it was Pentecost Sunday, Farley contrasted the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47) with the tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1–9).⁷⁰ Whereas it was God’s divine judgment to diversify the languages and cultures in the tower of Babel story, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost allowed early Christians to understand foreign tongues. But Farley noted it was not that God took away cultural diversity and made all the different nations speak a single language. Rather, by the Holy Spirit, the early Christians understood and were responsive to “the devout men from every nation,” each “speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:5–6). The universality of the gospel message and cultural diversity are not in conflict.

Contrary to the opinion of some postmodernists, universal truth claims about Jesus were never the problem. The problem was a distortion of the truth for which he stood. For example, there is an excellent book by Charles Kimball called *When Religion Becomes Evil*.⁷¹ Kimball gives five warning signs to watch for when religion goes bad. The first and most important is what he calls “absolute truth claims.” There is a difference between absolute and universal truth claims, which is why I have very carefully chosen the latter terminology. Absolute truth claims leave no room for human error or humility; they are not to be doubted or questioned. Universal truth claims are all embracing and therefore beyond the limitations of the human mind. Absolute truth claims are closed whereas universal truth claims are forever open to inquiry. Kimball gives

⁷⁰ Farley drew from and quoted John H. Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) ch. 3.

⁷¹ See Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

numerous examples of the dangers of absolutist thinking, such as the murder of abortion providers by anti-abortion fanatics. In each and every example Kimball cited, the evil would have been avoided had the wrongdoer adhered to Jesus's true teachings. The great irony of history is that Jesus, who should be recognized as the premier teacher of tolerance and nonviolence, has come to be associated with a religion that has been the very opposite. Lo and behold, practically the only people nowadays who read the Sermon on the Mount and deny Jesus taught tolerance and nonviolence are Christians.⁷² This is the main doctrinal error I mean to correct. The stories of natives who were baptized just before their genocide, the stories of the Inquisition and the Holocaust, bombing of abortion clinics, persecution of women and homosexuals: Christians should reflect on these horrors with great shame and contrition. Authentic Christianity is not about finding groups of people to judge and to hate; it is about loving everyone unconditionally. That is why, as I said at the outset of this chapter, I have very little interest in converting anyone to mainstream Christianity in its present form. My goal is to redefine Christianity so that it is *worthy* of conversion. This is not done by elevating Christianity as a particular religion and suppressing dissent. My apologetic method is intended to bring about the end of religion in this manner. In fact, Christianity as I perceive it is not really a religion at all. It is the fulfillment and simultaneously the negation of all authentic religions. Thus, tolerance and nonviolence are both the means and the end of this journey of discovery. We have more to learn from each other than has ever been dreamed.

⁷² Ironically, authors from non-Christian traditions are now writing some of the best and most authentic interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount. See Swami Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta, 1992).

To paraphrase the poet Kahlil Gibran: Our neighbor is our greater self who is dwelling behind a wall, in whom dwells God as yet unknown. When perfect understanding comes, all walls will fall down.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Forcehimes, Alyssa A. and Tonigan, J. Scott. "Spiritus contra Spiritum": The Bill Wilson/C.G. Jung Letters: The roots of the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous." *Parabola*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1987).
- Bradley, F.H. *Appearance and Reality* (London: Alan & Lunwin, 1893).
- Beyerhaus, Peter. "Frankfurt Declaration on the Fundamental Crisis of Missions," *Christianity Today*, 14 (1970): 844–846.
- Buber, Martin *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Collier Books, 1986).
- Caputo, John D. "Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (December 2004).
- _____. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 1997).
- D'Costa, Gavin. "Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from Which to Judge Religions," *Religious Studies*, Vol 29, No. 1 (March 1993).
- _____. *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
- Derrida, Jacques. "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (New York: SUNY, 1992).
- Dodd, Julian *An Identity Theory of Truth* (London: Macmillan, 2000).
- Gaskin, Richard. "The Identity Theory of Truth" (2016) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-identity/>. Gavin D'Costa, Gavin. *Theology and Religious Pluralism*.
- Guitérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

- Hartshorne, Charles. *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989).
- Hauerwas, Stanley. "Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," *First Things* 53 (May 1995).
- Hick, John. "On Conflicting Religious Truth Claims," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983).
- _____. "On Grading Religions," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981).
- _____. "Religious Pluralism" in F. Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).
- _____. "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 33 (1997).
- _____. *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2006).
- Jung, Carl. "Answer to Job," *Psychology and Religion: West and East, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 11, trans. By R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1958, 1969).
- Kearney, Richard. "Derrida and Messianic Atheism" in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, ed. Edward Baring & Peter E. Gordon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- Kelley, Joseph T. *Augustine of Hippo: Selections from Confessions and Other Essential Writings—Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight 2010).
- Kimball, Charles, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (Harper San Francisco, 2002).
- Lev Shestov, Lev. *Athens and Jerusalem* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- Ogden, Schubert M. *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist U. Press, 1992).
- Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

Shepherd, Robert J. "Perpetual Unease or Being at Ease? Derrida, Daoism, and the 'Metaphysics of Presence,'" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 57 No. 2 (April 2007).

Smith, Huston. *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

Tillich, Paul. *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1968).

_____. *Christianity and the Encounter of the World's Religions* (London: Columbia University Press, 1963).

_____. *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

_____. *The Dynamics of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011).

Vining, Marvin. *Jesus the Wicked Priest: How Christianity Was Born of an Essene Schism* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company).

Yandell, Keith, E. "How to Sink in Cognitive Quicksand: Nuancing Religious Pluralism," reprinted in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson & Raymond J. Vanarragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

Yoder, John H. *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdemans, 2007).

_____. *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdemans, 1994).

_____. *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: U. Notre Dame Press, 2001).

VITA

Marvin Vining is a lifelong learner in pursuit of truth. A native born and raised Mississippian, he matriculated the Monticello High School and the University of Southern Mississippi, where he majored in Political Science with minors in English and Economics. He then matriculated Mississippi College School of Law and has been actively engaged in the practice of law for almost thirty years.

He continued his schooling with graduate courses in philosophy and religion at the University of Southern Mississippi, primarily in order to further his work on the Jesus as Wicked Priest hypothesis, a controversial interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He wrote a book which was commercially published titled *Jesus the Wicked Priest: How Christianity Was Born of an Essene Schism* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2008). However, he continues to struggle to advance his JWP hypothesis among establishment biblical scholars.

Upon graduation from the University of Mississippi philosophy and religion M.A. program, he will attend the M.Div. program at Duke Divinity School, and he intends to pursue a Ph.D. in religious studies after that. Along the way he intends to pursue ordination as a Christian minister.