

The Gospel and the Religions

by Lesslie Newbigin - An Outline

If we are to reject religious pluralism and acknowledge Jesus Christ as the unique and decisive revelation of God for the salvation of the world, what is the proper attitude which believers in that revelation ought to take toward the adherents of the great world religions?

1. "Religion" covers a wide range of entities and the way we relate to them will vary accordingly. Two classifications:

A. **Nichol Macnicol, Is Christianity Unique?**: Those which understand God's self revelation in historical terms - Judaism, Christianity, Islam

and Those whose religious experience is A-historical - Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism

B. **Dr. Harold Turner**: a classification of worldviews that takes the primal religions into account:

Atomic - Western contemporary society, Greek philosophy - sees reality in terms of its individual units.

Oceanic - Like Hinduism - all things ultimately merge into one entity

Relational - primitive societies, including the Biblical view - everything is constituted by relationships, whether the material world or human society.

2. When Using the word "religion" - some assumptions to be considered:

In most cultures religion is not set apart from the rest of life, as it is in the West.

"In practice all the life of society and in thought what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience. The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture."

Our thought must not be directed just to the religions so called; we must ask about the relation of the gospel to all who live by other commitments whether they are called religious or not.

Three Basic Views:

The PLURALIST VIEW: God's grace is at work with indiscriminating generosity among all peoples and in all the great religious traditions.

John Hick The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, The Rainbow of Faiths: A Christian Theology of Religions argues that the other faiths show just as much spiritual vitality as Christianity, and that in light of the global nuclear and ecological threats there is a need for unity (not aggressive claims by any one religion) - there are no absolutes - a claim to absolute truth is oppressive, God reveals himself in the present.

Newbigin responds: "No absolutes" is a myth of contemporary culture; Our spiritual experiences are neither individualistic, nor cut off from those of the past - What grounds does contemporary tradition have as criteria for assessing the diverse claims to divine revelation? This thinking comes right out of our supermarket culture..."*in a society which has exalted the autonomous individual as the supreme reality, we are accustomed to the rich variety offered on the supermarket shelves and to the freedom we have to choose our favorite brands. It is very natural that this mentality should pervade our religion.*"

“There is no dichotomy between the inward experiences of the heart and the outward history . . . the Spirit leads us into fuller understanding of God’s self-revelation in Jesus . . . it is not a matter of our own individual subjectivity.”

The EXCLUSIVIST VIEW: holds that all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior are eternally lost. It is through Jesus Christ that God is reconciling the world.

The INCLUSIVIST VIEW: acknowledges Christ as the only Savior, but affirm that his saving work extends beyond the bounds of the visible church, non-Christians can be saved - and non-Christian religions have a salvific role.

Karl Radner: has four reasons for taking this view: God’s relation to those who lived before the incarnation occurred or was brought to their knowledge. Non-Christian religions are lawful and salvific until the gospel is brought to the attention of their adherents. Non-Christians who faithfully practice their religion can be saved, but the one who accepts Christ has a better chance of being saved. (This view is widely accepted by contemporary culture). The other religions will not be displaced by Christianity - pluralism will continue and conflict will get sharper.

The Triune God’s love and grace reaches out to every creature. There is not person, of whatever kind or creed without some witness of God’s grace in heart and conscience and reason. We must begin here. “But the same revelation in Jesus Christ compels us to acknowledge that this world which God made and loves is in a state of alienation, rejection and rebellion against him. Calvary is the central unveiling of the infinite love of God and at the same time the unmasking of the dark horror of sin.” All true thinking must be held between these two “poles.”

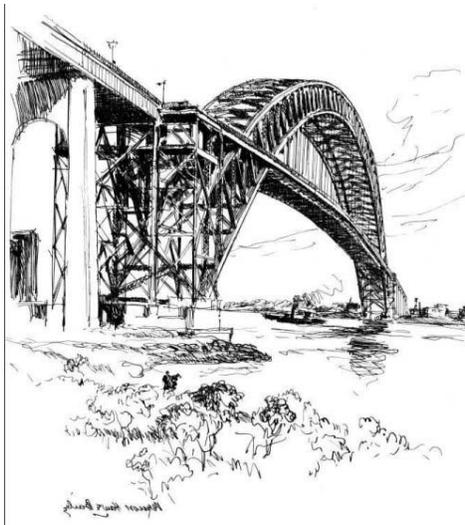
“The Christian life lived between the two poles of the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin I share, has a corresponding synthesis of godly confidence and godly fear. The fear is lest I should put my trust in anything other than God’s grace in Jesus Christ, the confidence is the infinite abundance of his grace to me and to every one of his creatures.”

When we slacken the tension between these it affects our attitudes toward those outside the household of faith.

A leaning towards Universalism blunts God’s action in Christ - assuring everyone that they will be alright in the end - doesn’t take sin into full account. On the other hand, overwhelmed by the abyss of sin, it is a matter of one in the lifeboat and the other drowning - no place for any kind of dialogue.

The improper question: “Who will be saved at the end?” fails to take into account that God alone has the right to give the answer. We should not preempt the final judgment of God - even Jesus taught it will be a day of surprises, reveals, astonishment. For anyone who has

understood what God did for us all in Jesus Christ, the one question is: “How shall God be glorified?” We begin with the mighty work of grace in Jesus Christ and ask how is he to be honored and glorified.





On Dialogue

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- **Christians should expect, look for and welcome all the signs of grace at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord.**

"In our contact with people who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, our first business, our first privilege, is to seek out and welcome all the reflections of that one true light in the lives of those we meet."

- **Christians should be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian's understanding of God's purpose in history.**
- **As we work together with people of other commitments, we shall discover the places where our ways must separate. Here is where dialogue begins.**

"If we are doing what we ought to be doing as Christians, the dialogue will be initiated by our partners, not by ourselves. . . They will discover that we are guided by something more ultimate and more immediate than the success of the project at hand. And they will discover that we have resources for coping with failure, defeat, humiliation, because we understand human history from this side of the resurrection of the crucified Lord."

- **The essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be telling the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible.**

• **Finally:** *"The Christian mission must be an affair of love, not truth. But not a love that encourages people to believe a lie. It is not true that all roads lead to the top of the same mountain. There are roads which lead over the precipice. In Christ we have been shown the road. We cannot treat that knowledge as a private matter for ourselves. It concerns the whole human family."*



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The Gospel in a Pluralist Society pp. 180-182