

[This is from a lecture for an introductory course in theology at Christian Theological Seminary, around 2000.]

**Embodying Communion for *All Others*: Christian Faith and Other Religions  
Not “Different Paths to the Same Summit”  
But “Different Paths to Different Summits’ Communion”**

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The Gospel (according to CWA): In eccentricity and brokenness, the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ embraces each and every one of us just as we are and draws us to embody that communion for all others, now and always.

“Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.” (BCP, p. 101)

The Gospel and the above prayer both imply that something of ultimate importance has happened in the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ that has not happened anywhere else, and we believe others need to appreciate this just as much as we may need to appreciate their distinctive stories.

So in some sense we are called to evangelize (“share the good news with”) all people, no matter what they may believe.

But we are also called by the Gospel to be open to the “otherness” of other people’s testimonies and traditions, and that’s where things get tricky.

I do not think the Gospel allows us to be “exclusivist,” claiming that the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is the only legitimate way to speak of what is happening to ultimately heal our brokenness: “we know and they know not.”<sup>1</sup>

An attractive alternative for many has been to downplay the significance of Jesus Christ altogether.

According to John Hick, Jesus Christ is to be regarded as no more than a powerful illustration for Christians of the universal and unconditional love of God (or “the Real” understood as the ultimately salvific reality), the implication being, apparently, that if this illustration doesn’t work for you, then just stick with whatever does seem to work and don’t trouble yourself any more over this one. There are plenty of equally powerful illustrations to go around. Hick calls this a pluralistic proposal, but I have my doubts.

This would amount to renouncing one of the very *few* convictions that *all* the New Testament writers seem to share, namely, that the proclamation of God’s ever-present love is inseparable from the life and ultimate destiny of the proclaimer, Jesus of Nazareth.

Furthermore, if we say that the unconditional love of God is the *real* truth behind all the peculiar illustrations of it in the world’s religions, we are still doing the very thing this step aimed to avoid--judging other religions in terms of views that are peculiarly ours: Western, monotheistic, Kantian, etc. That’s not pluralistic at all

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<sup>1</sup>See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *Relating to People of Other Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 31-41

And what could be more anti-Jewish, or more typically patriarchal, than discounting particular stories of particular people as mere illustrations of some ahistorical, universal truth?

So Hick's brand of pluralism won't work.

Another attractive alternative, first proposed by Justin Martyr and popularized in our day by Karl Rahner, is labeled "inclusivism": "we know in full; they know in part" or "we know and know that we know; they know and know not that they know."<sup>2</sup>

This is actually what many Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews do with other faiths, including ours, each claims to have THE final truth, but allows others to have important truths as well, though never quite as important.

This is certainly a kinder, gentler way to handle differences, but it still sounds smug and condescending.

It also sounds like a denial of our eccentric and broken relationality.

Both Hick's pluralism and inclusivism are versions of the "different paths to the same summit."

**I want to propose a different alternative: different paths to different summits? communion.**

As the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us, creation and redemption pivot around a center whose unity is multiple in ways we can't pin down. If this doctrine makes any sense (a big "if"), then it makes sense to say that God's redemptive work can pivot just as crucially around more than one event (though of course these other events would all be in some sense "one" just as the Trinity is "one").

Furthermore, the ultimacy of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ carries with it an eschatological proviso: **in certain unforeseeable respects, the "Christ-event" has yet to be completed.** Who knows what else that may involve?

While I can therefore say that communion with Jesus Christ in some sense plays an unsurpassably pivotal role, for God and for all humanity, in realizing God's unconditional love for the world, I cannot dismiss the comparable claim that, say, **Jewish faithfulness to Torah, including a refusal to convert to Christianity, may play just as pivotal a role here.**

Indeed, given Judaism's unique relation to us as our parent tradition, I believe we are called to affirm this claim as complementary to our own: it fulfills our faith every bit as much as ours could ever fulfill Judaism.

(Remember, neither tradition professes to be a completely finished product. Both point to an eschaton beyond anything we can now imagine.)

The same line of thinking can be extended to involve other traditions, including those that seem non-theistic.

But this is not to render all traditions automatically equal, or equally pivotal. There is still room for disagreement about important matters.

For example, I think that Christians should abandon exclusivism and inclusivism, and so should Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, etc. I can still say that some religious viewpoints are just plain wrong, whether they get called Christian or something else.

The proper setting for addressing such issues is an interfaith conversation where everybody gets to make sweeping claims and nobody gets to play a final trump card

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-83.

(except maybe for the final trump card history itself may play for us, but that is not for us to determine).

The church waits and works for a time when its own "Christo-eccentric" history of reconciliation will be justly and peaceably interwoven with all other comparable histories, in such a way that the unsurpassable import of its own history need not detract from, or be diminished by, whatever comparable import other histories might have for the church.

What I hope is that each of our traditions can interpermeate to the point where I could, say, become more Buddhist and in so doing become even more Christian, and where a Buddhist might become more Christian and in so doing become even more Buddhist, and so on, maybe without the process ever coming to an end.