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RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE PLURALIST THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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[Editor's Note: The so-called pluralist theologians, who recognize the covalidity and coefficacy of other religions and saviors, appear to share a common vision of the character of humankind's religious knowledge. The pluralists seem to be united in regarding all religious knowledge as evolutionary, culturally determined, pragmatic, and polar. The author attempts to substantiate this thesis by investigating the writings of leading pluralists, including John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Raimundo Panikkar.]

THAT THE AGENDA for the contemporary theology of religions is being set by the so-called pluralist school, represented by, among others, John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, there can be little doubt. The pluralist theology of religions is characterized by the "move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways."[1] Within the framework of pluralist discourse, the term "plural-

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[1] Paul Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* ed. J. Hick and P. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) viii. Within the theology of religions, pluralism is usually distinguished from inclusivism and exclusivism. According to the exclusivist position, salvation cannot be conceived apart from an explicit faith in Christ. Inclusivism, the model associated especially with Karl Rahner and implicitly espoused by Vatican II, acknowledges the positive role played by other religious traditions, but regards Christ as the ultimate source and/or normative symbol of all salvation and conceives of explicit Christian faith as the completion of every religious system. For a discussion of the three classical tendencies see A. Kreiner, "Die Erfahung religiöser Vielfalt," in *Religiöse Erfahung und theologische Reflexion: Festschrift für Heinrich Döring,* ed. A. Kreiner and P. Schmidt-Leukel (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1993) 323–35. For Catholic inclusivism, Christ is always implicated in the salvific process, either as the font of saving grace (including that grace that is operative in the non-Christian religions), or as the goal of all humanity's religious striving (in which case he is the norm against which all religious systems are to be measured), or as a catalyst for the operation of the Spirit of truth who fills all of creation and draws all persons to the Father (through diverse religious traditions). As examples of these three approaches, one thinks of Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, and Gavin D'Costa respectively; see Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the

ity" no longer denotes the mere fact of multiplicity or diversity. It now includes the concept of "parity," or at least of rough parity, that is to say, the quality or state of being equal or equivalent. Langdon Gilkey can write that in our day the acknowledgement of religious plurality involves the (perhaps reluctant) recognition "that in some sense the efficacy or even superiority of Christianity are claims we can no longer make, or can make only with great discomfort." Expressed positively, the contemporary experience of plurality involves the "recognition of the co-validity and the co-efficacy of other religions."[2]

This recognition is the shared property of pluralist theologians; it establishes a unity among them that far outweighs any divergences occasioned by the tendency of a pluralist to place particular accents in his or her theology. Gilkey has examined the cultural and theological dimensions of the pluralist approach to other religions. For me there is also a philosophical or epistemological dimension that may well be more fundamental than any properly theological considerations.[3] All pluralist proposals for a new valuation of other traditions appear to turn on one major issue, and the pluralist approach to this issue seems to be characterized by an agreement on certain basic principles or presuppositions. The issue is the possibility of religious knowledge,[4] that is to say, the knowledge of whatever is regarded as the object of human beings' religious activities. The religious object can be con-

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Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations* 5 trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 115–34; Hans Küng, "The World's Religions in God's Plan of Salvation," in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed. J. Neuner (London: Burns & Oates, 1967) 25–66; Gavin D'Costa, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," in *A Universal Faith? Peoples, Cultures, Religions and the Christ*, ed. C. Cornille and V. Neckebrouck, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 9 (Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 139–54.

[2] Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* 37–50, at 37. See Paul F. Knitter, "The Pluralist Move and its Critics," *The Drew Gateway* 58 (1988) 4–10. Keith Yandell observes that the pluralist school itself is characterized by a plurality of approaches ("Some Varieties of Religious Pluralism," in *Inter-Religious Models and Criteria*, ed. J. Kellenberger [London: Macmillan, 1993] 187–211). John Hick chides Knitter for describing pluralism as recognizing only the "probability" of other true and valid religions ("Five Misgivings," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, ed. L. Swidler and P. Mojzes [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997] 80). According to Hick, religious pluralism involves "the affirmation not merely of a possible or probable but of an actual plurality of authentically true-and-salvific religious traditions." Knitter acknowledges that "practically and experientially" he does in fact agree with Hick ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" in *The Uniqueness of Jesus* 54 n. 2). The basis for this agreement is Knitter's observation of the ethical and spiritual fruits manifest among the adherents of other traditions.

[3] I have discussed the theological dimensions of pluralist thought in my "The Challenge of the Pluralist Theology of Religions and the Christian Rediscovery of Judaism," in *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners for the Kingdom of God*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 21 (Leuven: Peeters; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 95–132.

[4] It seems advisable to speak of religious knowledge, rather than religious truth, unless the context dictates otherwise. In fact, however, both words, truth and knowledge,

ceived in a variety of ways (e.g. as knowledge, as a personal God, as the extinction of self, etc.). It is religious because it constitutes the ultimate concern of those who pursue it.[5] Pluralist theologies regard all religious traditions as more or less equally well placed regarding the possibility of knowledge of the religious object. This conviction is born of a more fundamental agreement about religious knowledge in general. Despite their manifest differences,[6] and despite Knitter's recent insistence that the pluralist theology of religions is "a project that is not yet complete and that has various proposed versions,"[7] pluralist theologians are united in regarding all religious knowledge as evolutionary, culturally determined, pragmatic, and polar. This fourfold characterization of religious knowledge is discernible, to a greater or lesser degree, in all the major pluralist thinkers, though particular authors tend to concentrate specifically on one of these features. In this article, I will illustrate this claim by discussing several representative pluralist authors and by referring also to parallel lines of thought in others. What results is a sketch of what I call the emerging pluralist epistemology. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith acknowledges, the task of developing a pluralist epistemology is interlinked with, not prior to the task of attaining the universalist vision to which pluralist theology aspires.[8]

EVOLUTIONARY CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Pluralist theologians are united in what might be described as an essentially teleological or evolutionary vision of the emergence of religious knowledge. According to this vision, the world's religions are engaged in a cooperative endeavor, a shared attempt to identify the contours of the religious object which inevitably eludes us. As I cannot canvas the work of all pluralist theologians to illustrate my claim, I shall restrict myself to two highly representative pluralist thinkers, Paul Knitter and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Knitter stated forthrightly in 1985 that a pluralistic perspective on interreligious dialogue is only possible within the framework of a new model of truth that clearly diverges from traditional notions.[9] His epis-

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are often used more or less interchangeably in discussions of the pluralist theology of religions.

[5] For this understanding of religion, I am indebted to John Hick who draws upon Paul Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern" (*An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* [London: Macmillan, 1989] 3–5).

[6] See Keith Yandell, "Some Varieties of Religious Pluralism," in Kellenberger, ed., *Inter-Religious Models and Criteria* 187–211.

[7] Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 23, 29.

[8] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) 189.

[9] Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 205.

temological vision rests on four pillars that might be summarized as becoming, relatedness, reciprocity, and unity in diversity. First, all that is is involved in a dynamic process of self-realization. Second, this process of self-realization is achieved in and through a complex network of interrelationships. Third, interrelatedness involves a profound exchange among the participants, "an ever more pervasive concentration of the many in each other and thus in a greater whole."[10] Fourth, the object of this process of interrelational becoming is a complex unity—a unitive pluralism—that, however, does not detract from the distinctiveness of its component parts. This unitive pluralism stands in stark contrast to absolute or monistic oneness where difference is overcome. Unitive pluralism gives "manyness" ontological priority.[11]

The four structural elements of Knitter's processive-relational view of reality reappear in his analysis of the contemporary religious situation. He argues that the world's religious traditions are being drawn by the creative lure within all reality toward a new sort of encounter with one another. The goal of this encounter is a more pervasive unity among the world's religions within which each, while retaining its unique character, develops and takes on new depths.[12]

The implication of this essentially teleological vision is that religious knowledge, on the one hand, is always provisional, and, on the other hand, is only provisionally complete when it represents the shared insights of all those engaged with religion's object. An adequate description of such knowledge has been proffered by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and is endorsed by Knitter. According to Smith, "true knowledge, in human affairs, is that knowledge that all *intelligent* men and women . . . can share, and can jointly verify, by observation and by participation."[13] This knowledge comes to expression in a corporate or global self-consciousness. To share this transcultural consciousness is to share a religious world citizenship or a postconventional and universalistic religious identity that, for Knitter, is synonymous with unitive pluralism.[14]

Clearly, religious world citizenship represents a goal to be achieved.

[10] Ibid. 9. This vision of the universe and religion's place in it is repeated and supported by additional references in Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* 118–22.

[11] Knitter, *No Other Name?* 9; see also Paul Knitter, "Key Questions for a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 17 (1990) 94; "Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24 (1987) 50.

[12] Knitter, *No Other Name?* 9; see also 219. Knitter acknowledges that the differences among the world's religions are greater than he has previously suggested. In this context, one must take the existing situation of plurality as the point of departure "before we can ever contemplate, much less realize, their possible unity or oneness" (Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?" in Leonard Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* [London: SCM, 1990] 20–21).

[13] Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 102 (my emphasis); see Knitter, *No Other Name?* 11.

[14] Ibid. 11–13. Knitter acknowledges his debt to Wilfred Cantwell Smith for these notions; see Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 102, 59–79.

The most obvious means to this end is the practice of dialogue between religious men and women. Hence, Knitter endorses John Dunne's call for believers from distinct traditions to pass over to the traditions of others, that is, to immerse themselves in the ethos and practices of other faiths with a view to experiencing first-hand something of the dynamic that characterizes the religious life of those others.[15] Knitter recognizes that the achievement of this double belonging is reserved for a minority, but it is a prerequisite if interreligious dialogue is to bear fruit.[16]

The acknowledgment that double belonging is only a possibility for some, taken together with Smith's description of knowledge, including religious knowledge, as the consensus among intelligent men and women, is somewhat unsettling. At the very least, it is rather striking that a system such as pluralism, which eschews all exclusivism, should manifest such elitist tendencies. We shall return to this theme.

We have already indicated that Knitter is indebted to the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the reputed father of pluralism. One of the central tenets of Smith's thought is the essential unity of humankind's religious history. What has hitherto appeared, even to the historian, as, so to speak, a collection of unrelated stories, has been shown in our day to be a complex whole.[17] What is taking place in Christianity is also taking place in other religious traditions, namely, the process of "God's loving, creative, inspiring dealings with recalcitrant and sinful but not unresponsive men and women."[18] The upshot of this is that any adequate portrayal of "the objective pole in religious experience," the "reality greater than man [sic]," the "surpassingly great Other,"[19] must necessarily take account of the whole history of humankind's involvement with the Transcendent.[20] In this regard, it is vitally important not to restrict oneself to the so-called founding moments of any religious tradition. Religions are not to be assessed on the basis of their originating events—what Smith disparagingly calls the "big-bang theory of [religious] origins"—but on the basis of their ongoing contri-

[15] See John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: An Encounter with Eastern Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1973) 53–59, 74–75, 150–54, 220–30. See Knitter, *No Other Name?* 215–16; Knitter returns to Dunne's thought in "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 178. See also Leonard Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion,* ed. L. Swidler (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 16, 17–18, 25. John Hick claims that our response to religious myth should be "to affirm its positive value in touching the more poetic and creative side of our nature, and then allowing our imagination and emotion to resonate to myth as myth" (*The Metaphor of God Incarnate* [London: SCM, 1993] 160).

[16] "Today, what has been called 'double belonging' is possible for religious persons, at least for some" (Knitter, *No Other Name?* 211).

[17] Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 6; see also 124, 152, 156, 172, 180, 194.

[18] Ibid. 171.

[19] Ibid. 186.

[20] Smith speaks of his personal preference for the description of God as transcendence (ibid. 184); see also Hick, *Interpretation of Religion* xiii.

bution to humankind's life of faith. To interpret the history of religion adequately, one must view it as a process of continuous creation, that is to say, as an ongoing endeavor on the part of religiously minded men and women to give expression to the experience of faith.[21] This is what Smith means when he claims that "the truth that one seeks [is] to be found not in the history of religion but *through* it." Hence Smith can describe every religious community as a community in motion, and claim that what "the religious systems of the world have in common . . . is dynamic and personalist, is historical; has to do with becoming more than with being."[22] They are engaged in a collaborative effort. Henceforth, the religions of the world are themselves to be the subject, not the object, of theology. What Smith envisions is a "theology that emerges out of 'all the religions of the world' or . . . all the religious communities of the world, or better still (incipiently) all the religious sub-communities of the world human community."[23] This theology is only now being born.

A new theology needs a new language. Leonard Swidler argues that, in view of the contemporary deabsolutized understanding of truth, Christians must "complement our constantly critiqued statements [of belief] with statements from different 'standpoints'. That is, we need to engage in dialogue with those who have differing cultural, philosophical, social, religious viewpoints so as to strive *toward an ever fuller—but never ending—perception of the truth* of the meaning of things."[24] Swidler proposes that we develop an intercultural language, what he calls an ecumenical Esperanto, to give expression to those insights gathered from our shared experience of the transcendent. In line with the essentially evolutionary vision of pluralism, Swidler goes on to observe that "an 'ecumenical Esperanto,' and the 'ecumenical consciousness' and the 'universal theology of religion-ideology' that it expresses and helps to form, are all *never-ending, never endable,* projects that ineluctably draw human beings on—for human beings unendingly seek reality, even if it be in unendingly differing ways."[25]

In a similar vein, Hick speculates that, "now that the religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in the one world of today, in mutual observation and dialogue, it is possible that their future development may be on *gradually converging courses* [our emphasis]." He continues as follows:

[21] Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 154–68.

[22] Ibid. 191–92. [23] Ibid. 129, 124.

[24] Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue" 12; also 23, 46. See Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 25–26.

[25] Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue" 23. Contrast David J. Krieger's mention of "an approaching global Pentecost," from the perspective of which "the many 'languages' of Babel (worldviews, ideologies, cultures) . . . appear to be true religions" (*The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991] 1).

> For during the next few centuries they [the world's religions] will no doubt continue to change, and it may be that they will grow closer together, and even that one day such names as "Christianity," "Buddhism," "Islam," "Hinduism," will no longer describe the current configurations of men's religious experience and belief. . . . The future I am thinking of is . . . one in which what we now call the different religions will constitute the past history of different emphases and variations within a global religious life.[26]

This vision is typical of pluralist theology. For pluralists, religious knowledge is ultimately the fruit of the human quest to understand reality. This view allows us to dispense with the notion of revelation, if by revelation we mean a knowledge of the religious object given once for all in the past or, in the words of Avery Dulles, "true and divinely certified knowledge, especially of things beyond the normal range of human inquiry."[27] Indeed, Smith insists that in our global age the theologian is "being invited to use the conceptual category 'revelation' only, if at all, in a way that is intellectually appropriate to our new and enlarged awareness of what has in fact been going on."[28] And what has been going on is the process of continuous creation in which "the transcendent, indeed infinite, truth ('God'), beyond history and continuingly contemporaneous" with it, has been engaging religious men and women. Hence, Smith can write that "all human history is a divine-human complex in motion, the process of humankind's double involvement in a mundane and simultaneously a transcendent environment."[29]

Our age is called to give expression to this insight by the development of a critical, disciplined, and corporate religious self-consciousness that takes its lead from contemporary encounters with the transcendent, not from past articulations of that encounter.[30] The articulation of the encounter with the so-called transcendent brings us to the

[26] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993) 146.

[27] See Avery Dulles's review of Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994), *Theology Today* 52 (1995) 398–99. See also Terrence Merrigan, "Revelation and its Mediation: The Contribution of Avery Dulles," in Ross Shecterle, *The Theology of Revelation of Avery Dulles: 1980–1994*, Studies in Catholic Theology 8 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1996) ix–xxix.

[28] Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 128. Knitter remarks that "to experience and speak about salvation as revelation represents a valid, more ecumenical soteriology than the more prevalent salvation-as-historical-transaction perspective" ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 156–57). However, he immediately insists that Christ's role in this regard, i.e. as revealer, ought to be conceived in a representational and not in a constitutive fashion: "Jesus brings about salvation . . . not by constituting or causing God's saving love, but, rather, insofar as he re-presents for us the re-creative love of God that is inherent in the divine nature and is poured out on all creation." Knitter repeats the view that Jesus' story essentially only serves to illustrate "the larger, cosmic story of how the divine is already present and communicating itself to all creation" (ibid. 167).

[29] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Theology and the World's Religious History," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, 67, 59; see also 68.

[30] See Chester Gillis's observation that pluralist theology "does not begin with scrip-

second feature of pluralist epistemology, the view that religious knowledge is culturally determined.

CULTURALLY DETERMINED CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

The pluralists' attachment to contemporaneity appears to be the consequence of a tendency to make present religious experience the touchstone of religious knowledge.[31] This feature of pluralism, in turn, is almost certainly a portion of the inheritance of liberal Protestantism and more particularly of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834).[32] Schleiermacher's response to the rationalist and reductionist interpretations of religion that were characteristic of the Enlightenment was to root religion in the recesses of human consciousness.[33] His aim was to defend faith by grounding it in "the immediate *feeling* of the Infinite and Eternal."[34] By feeling, Schleiermacher did not mean mere emotion. Feeling for him was a profound sense or consciousness of the self as caught up in a mystery of a greater whole, a mystery called God. Schleiermacher equated "the consciousness of absolute dependence" with "being in relation with God";[35] he insisted that religion was not knowledge;[36] in his system, the ultimate authority remains religious experience as such. This experience and its source were regarded as ineffable, essentially impervious to adequate description.[37] For Schleiermacher, the doctrines of religion were simply localized and

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ture or tradition but with the contemporary situation" (*Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology,* Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 12 [Leuven: Peeters, 1993] 22).

[31] It is interesting to note how the advocates of pluralist theology consistently invoke the pluralistic and multicultural character of modern life to justify the development of a new attitude toward other traditions; see, e.g., Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* vii, ix; *No Other Name?* 5; *Jesus and the Other Names* 15–16, 29, 41; Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* 152; *Problems of Religious Pluralism* 5–10; Gilkey, "Plurality and its Theological Implications" 37–40.

[32] On this point, see James L. Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 22 (1995) 67–87.

[33] See Terrence Merrigan, "Newman's Catholic Synthesis," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60 (1994) 39–48.

[34] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* trans. J. Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 15–16. In his *On Religion* (1799) Schleiermacher spoke of "the sense of the Infinite." In his *The Christian Faith (Glaubenslehre,* 1821) he employed the now classic expression, "feeling of absolute dependence." See Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience" 71.

[35] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* ed. H. R. Mackintosh, J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968) 12. "The concept 'God' is derived from the experience. The reverse is not the case. The concept is justified only by its relative adequacy in evoking or expressing the original feeling" (Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience" 71).

[36] Schleiermacher, *On Religion* 57.

[37] On the subject of ineffability, see Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience" 71. See also L. Philip Barnes, "Relativism, Ineffability, and the Appeal to Experience: A Reply to the Myth-Makers," *Modern Theology* 7 (1990) 107–8; Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990) 5–11; "Divine Ineffability," in

historically conditioned expressions of the original religious feeling, the "religious affections as set forth in speech."[38] Dogmas are but the "shadows of our religious emotions,"[39] necessary perhaps, but of decidedly secondary importance to the conduct of the religious life.

The link between ineffability and the alleged inadequacy of traditional religion has been given clear expression by Paul Knitter in his most recent book:

> Historical consciousness, which warns us that all human knowledge is limited, has a flip-side in religious consciousness, which admonishes us that Divine Reality is unlimited. In other words, if historical consciousness tells us that every human grasp of truth is intrinsically finite and conditioned, religious consciousness—the fruit of religious experience—tells us even more assuredly that Divine Reality and Truth is, by its very nature, always more than any human can grasp or any religion can express. This realization is inherent in any authentic religious experience—the paradoxical sense that my particular, historical encounter with God is as mysterious as it is real, as ambiguous as it is reliable.[40]

James L. Fredericks has claimed that Schleiermacher's insistence on the resistance of the religious experience to final description ultimately renders public inquiry into the nature of religious phenomena impossible. The religiously ungifted are simply not able to participate in the discussion. Hence, discourse about religion is effectively privatized.[41] More insidiously, one might argue, religious discourse is left to the insiders, to those intelligent men and women who "can share, and can jointly verify, by observation and by participation."[42]

In addition to its apologetic function, the argument from religious experience has also served later theologians as a heuristic device in confrontation with the plurality of religions. This has been achieved by supplementing the claim regarding the ineffability of religious experi-

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God, Truth and Reality: Essays in Honour of John Hick, ed. A. Sharma (New York: St. Martin's, 1993) 210–20.

[38] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* 76.

[39] Schleiermacher, *On Religion* 122.

[40] Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names* 37. Knitter returns to this theme and suggests that any claim to an unsurpassable revelation in Jesus is "in tension, if not direct contradiction, with the more basic Christian belief that God is an unsurpassable Mystery, one which can never totally be comprehended or contained in human thought or construct" ("Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," in *The Uniqueness of Jesus* 8). Here and elsewhere, Knitter appears to confuse the Christian claim that the Christ-event is God's definitive revelation with the view (which is not part of orthodox Christianity) that the fullness of divinity has been exhaustively expressed in the Incarnation (ibid. 8 n. 10). To claim that Jesus is God's definitive revelation on this side of history, so to speak, is not to deny that God remains mysterious. And recognition of divine mystery certainly does not necessitate acknowledgement of multiple revelations. See Knitter, "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 148, 157, 167.

[41] Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience" 72.

[42] Smith, *Towards a World Theology* 102.

ence with a claim regarding its universal character.[43] Although Schleiermacher already anticipated this universalist understanding of religious experience, it has come into its own among contemporary pluralists. Fredericks identifies Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick among those thinkers who argue that the world's religious traditions are grounded in a universal religious experience.[44]

This view of religious experience, in my judgment, is characteristic of pluralist theology as a whole. From this pluralist perspective, the world's religious traditions represent the culturally conditioned expressions of a universally accessible experience of the Absolute or the Transcendent.[45] Of course, that experience is always shaped by its cultural and religious context. There is no such thing as pure religious experience and pluralists rightly reject the charge that they regard particular religious traditions as, so to speak, accessories after the religious fact. Concrete religious traditions provide the forum within which religious experience becomes possible, and the categories that allow believers both to express that experience and to name its source or ground.[46] Nevertheless, as heirs of Schleiermacher, the pluralists insist that the grounding religious experience is ineffable and that doctrines can never do it justice. This Schleiermacherian inheritance is reflected in the pluralists' tendency to highlight the distinction between faith and beliefs. While among these pluralists Smith is the most prominent advocate of this distinction,[47] it is a consistent feature of pluralist theology.

So Hick can write that the world's great religious traditions (Smith's "beliefs") "embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate, from within the different cultural ways of being human."[48] He insists that "Christianity is one among a plurality of authentic responses to the

[43] Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience" 72–73.

[44] Ibid. 73. Note the parallel between Smith's observation that "the truth that one seeks [is] to be found not in the history of religion but through it" (*Towards a World Theology* 190) and Schleiermacher's claim that "I would have you discover religion in the religions" (*On Religion* 211).

[45] See, e.g., Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 14; *Metaphor of God Incarnate* 38–39; *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM, 1995). Knitter observes that pluralists "would grow uneasy" with George Lindbeck's rejection of the so-called "experiential-expressive notion of religion, which holds that we first have an inner experience of, or an 'inner word' from Divinity, which we then display in our religious beliefs and practices" (*Jesus and the Other Names* 42).

[46] Knitter speaks about religious experience "illuminating the language" of religion at the same time that "the language is forming the experience" (*One Earth, Many Religions* 115).

[47] See esp. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979).

[48] John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985) 91; see also *An Interpretation of Religion,* 240.

divine reality,"[49] the Real postulated as the source of humankind's religious experience (Smith's "faith").[50]

Knitter, much like Hick, locates the origins of religion in "a powerful revelatory event or events" that involved "an intuitive contact with, the grasping and being grasped by, the ultimate."[51] He also describes the ultimate as the unspeakable reality, the "divine mystery ever beyond our comprehension," and "the ineffable content behind all authentic religion."[52] Taking his cue also from Smith, Knitter describes the encounter with the ultimate as "faith,"[53] which he distinguishes from the historically conditioned and manifestly diverse beliefs of the world's religions. He contends that while each religion certainly originates in a powerful revelatory event, the identity of each religion is not given in such events. Instead it is given in the process of history, of which these events form a mere part. A religion's identity is not given in the original event of revelation/religious experience, but emerges from the attempt in history to express the original event/experience. To state this simply, what shapes a religion's truth claim or identity is not revelation but the flux of history. Knitter writes, "Religion, like all creation, is evolving, in constant flux."[54] What is intended here by the word "religion" is not the universal faith experience which, by definition, is always and equally accessible, but the different religious articulations

[49] Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate* 104, 160.

[50] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 243, 249; *Rainbow of Faiths* 68. Of course, this is perfectly in keeping with Hick's Kantian epistemology according to which a distinction must be made between the divine noumenal Reality *an sich,* which exists independently of and outside our perception of it, and the phenomenal manifestations of that reality that occur within the realm of religious experience; see also *God Has Many Names* 105. Hick sometimes speaks of the world's religious traditions as faiths, as in *Rainbow of Faiths* 32.

[51] Knitter, *No Other Name?* 212.

[52] Ibid. 210, 213, 212. Knitter also speaks of the ultimate as something more (229), ultimate reality (209), the one ultimate mystery (211), fullness and emptiness (209). See also his "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus" 8, 10, 13.

[53] "The word 'faith' indicates both the personal experience and the ineffable content behind all authentic religion" (*No Other Name?* 212).

[54] Ibid. 219. Knitter also claims that "the test of the orthodoxy of any new doctrinal declaration or theological viewpoint is not the way it logically dovetails with past normative statements, but rather the way it enables Christians to recognize, celebrate, and enact the power of God-in-Jesus in their lives" ("Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus" 14). This insistence on the priority of present experience is typical of pluralist thought, but begs the question of how, independently of the normative doctrinal tradition, one can ever have any idea of what the "power of God-in-Jesus" actually means. Somewhat later Knitter specifies that that "the real test of fidelity to Jesus and his message is . . . to be measured in one's ability and decision to follow him—to act as a disciple" (ibid. 15). Discipleship apparently has as its goal the realization of Jesus' vision of "a humanity united in love and justice as children of a God of love and justice," a phrase strikingly reminiscent of the Liberal Protestant notion of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. However, it is clear that this vision is not exclusively Christian (see, e.g., Hick, "Five Misgivings" 82), and it is not exhaustive of either Jesus' preaching or his significance for Christians.

of that experience. Beliefs, he notes, are the cultural, intellectual, emotional embodiment of faith—the effort to say, to share, to strengthen what has been experienced. However, no belief or set of beliefs can say it all. Faith, in its experience and in its content, is transcendent, ineffable, and ever open. It cannot be fully or definitively expressed in beliefs.[55] Hence, while beliefs are essential to faith, since faith must come to expression, they have no absolute value. We must be ever ready, he argues, to revise and move beyond them. Our willingness to die for our faith must be matched by a willingness to die to our beliefs. This becomes possible once we recognize that faith experience is a universal reality—and hence presumably permanent—while beliefs, i.e. particular religious and creedal traditions, are contextual and subject to the permutations of history. Although Knitter says that the relationship between faith and beliefs is dynamic and in flux, it would seem that the flux lies only on the side of beliefs.[56]

In his most recent writings, and in contrast to his earlier approach,[57] Knitter claims to have moved away from the appeal to the common ground of shared religious experience as the starting point for interreligious dialogue. He now recognizes that, while similarities in religious experience and expression abound, the differences are even more abundant—and many of them are incommensurable. As an alternative, Knitter proposes what he describes as "a 'multi-normed, soteriocentric' (salvation-centered) approach to dialogue based on the common ground of global responsibility for eco-human well-being."[58] In theological terms, Knitter would characterize this shift as a decision to accord greater priority to the prophetic as distinct from the mystical dimension of religion.

[55] Ibid. 212.

[56] Ibid. 213. Knitter claims that "this dynamic, in-flux relationship between faith and beliefs provides both the starting line and the goal of religious dialogue." He equates the act of faith with the act of religious experience, and portrays both as the total trust and commitment that a person feels when touched by the Divine ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 152–53). These are matters of the religious heart, he claims. Our religious views, on the other hand, are matters of the head, of trying to understand and articulate the divine Mystery that has become so powerfully real for us. While the former can command absolute commitment, the latter must ever be relativized. Since Knitter identifies the content of faith with the so-called relative expressions of faith, it would appear that the object of faith (the divine Mystery) escapes all description. This, of course, raises the question of how we can talk about it at all.

[57] *No Other Name* 17; *Jesus and the Other Names* 24. Despite his claim to have moved away from the focus on mystical experience, Knitter manifests a lingering sympathy for the view that such experience indicates a common source. He quotes with approval Sallie King's reflections to the effect that "if we look at how persons *feel* and especially at how they *act* [emphasis Knitter] after they have undergone some form of mystical experience, we can talk about the likelihood of something in common, even though we can never define it" (*One Earth, Many Religions* 108, referring e.g., to Sallie King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 [1988] 257–79, at 275).

[58] *One Earth, Many Religions* 12, 17.

Knitter's shift does not seem to vitiate in any way his commitment to the principle that religious knowledge is culturally determined. Likewise, it does not represent a real departure from the tenet of the pluralists that all religions are grounded in a universally accessible religious experience. What has changed is simply the locus for the manifestation of the religious object, i.e. the object that inspires culturally determined ritual actions and doctrinal systems. This object was previously disclosed in the recesses of religious consciousness but is now disclosed in the political consciousness shaped by the "common commitment to human and ecological well-being."[59] What I judge to be a turn in Knitter's thinking is completely in keeping with the third feature of the pluralist vision of religious knowledge, namely, its pragmatic character.

PRAGMATIC CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Pluralist theology as a whole is characterized by an essentially pragmatic view of religious knowledge. By this I mean that praxis is portrayed as providing the only reliable access to religious knowledge and that claims to such knowledge are to be adjudicated on the basis of their promotion of human well-being (a synonym for salvation). Pluralist theologians are well aware that the notion of human well-being or wholeness[60] constitutes only a formal principle for interreligious dialogue and that the world's religious traditions are divided regarding the precise content of this notion. A number of pluralist thinkers have analyzed both the potential and pitfalls inherent in proposing human well-being as the goal of interreligious dialogue and using it as the criterion for assessing religious truth claims.[61] The most intractable element of this discussion is clearly the difficulty of arriving at any universally acceptable definition of the human. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to canvass the various definitions of wholeness or salvation developed by particular pluralists, I can illustrate the pluralists' tendency to portray practical engagement in the world as the only reliable path to religious knowledge. Once again, Knitter may serve as a point of departure.

[59] Ibid. 15.

[60] Knitter insists that, "to be true, religion must foster not only individual but societal wholeness" (*No Other Name?* 70).

[61] See, among others, the following articles in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness:* Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective" 149–61; Paul Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions" 178–200; Aloysius Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation" 162–77. See also Leonard Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue" 26–32. A number of authors have highlighted this inherent weakness of pluralist thinking and its universalist pretensions; see esp. Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990) 1–18; J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992); S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

While Knitter would insist that one is not forced to choose between mystical or religious experience and liberative commitment, it is clear from his most recent writings that he considers the commitment to what he now calls eco-human well-being[62] as both the source of religion and the gateway to mystical experience. He apparently accepts the view that all religions take their origins from some kind of a primordial liberative experience, such as, e.g., the Jewish experience of the Exodus, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, the Meccan experience, or Buddha's leaving the palace for a life of homelessness. These experiences testify to a common source that manifests itself as an energy of liberation. Knitter repeats Aloysius Pieris's claim that this source can be identified symbolically as a liberating Spirit, described differently in the world's religious traditions.[63] In the course of the liberative struggle, the religious person posits the Sacred or the Transcendent or wholeness as the ground (for both nontheists and theists) and perhaps even the goal (for theists) of the liberative process.

Despite his protestations that he recognizes a genuine reciprocity between the mystical and the prophetic, or the liturgical and the ethical, Knitter clearly accords priority to the latter when religious truth is at issue:

> From the perspective of how this world came to be and how it is sustained, we will give worship or ritual a priority in religious life, for in liturgy we recognize the priority of the Divine over the finite. But from the perspective of how we come to know the Divine, we will give the priority to ethics, for it is in the struggle for "right living" that we come to know and feel what we are to worship and confess. Again, orthopraxis (right acting) has a practical priority over orthodoxy (right confessing).[64]

In language strongly reminiscent of the experiential thrust of Schleiermacher and liberal Protestantism, Knitter repeatedly insists that this ground or goal is felt, not known.[65] He insists that study, prayer, and ritual sharing can only be truly effective as means to greater sharing among religions when they are mixed with the praxis of global responsibility. Global responsibility serves as a shared context for religious experience, or a source of shared experiences by which believers from different communities can better understand and com-

[62] This is, of course in line with the shift in Knitter's thought signalled by his 1987 essay, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions" (*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* 178–200).

[63] Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* 100; see Aloysius Pieris, "Faith-Communities and Communalism," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 3 (1989) 294–309, at 297.

[64] Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* 102–4; see also "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus" 5; "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 167–68.

[65] Knitter speaks of the experience of the Transcendent in terms of "feeling" on the following occasions (*One Earth, Many Religions* 84, 102–3, 108, 115–16, 123, 125); also 104, 116 (sense); 117, 127 (experience); 118 (touched by); see *Jesus and the Other Names* 27–28.

municate each others' religious stories and language.[66] For him "common ethical struggles can lead us to *shared manifestations of a Power or Sacred Mystery* that animates our global responsibility."[67] Access to religious truth, even as this comes to expression in different religious traditions, is the fruit of practical engagement in the world. As Knitter expresses it,

> Truth, especially truth that really matters to us, is always practical; it is tied together with our struggle to live our lives, to figure out how we want to live and why. . . . If this is so about the general way we search for and come to affirm what is true about life, it is also and especially so about the way we come to know the truth about the Sacred or the Great Mystery. Religious experience, one can say, is born in and nourished by moral experience.[68] Working together for justice becomes, or can become, a *communicatio in sacris*—a communication in the Sacred—available to us beyond our churches and temples.[69]

Knitter expresses a pragmatic conception of truth when he describes the kind of consensus that will emerge out of the shared commitment to the removal of human and ecological suffering. The upshot of this cooperative commitment will not be a single truth that we can all finally come to or a universal foundation on which we can all build a new world order. Nor will it be a propositional statement that we will all affirm. Instead, it will be a way of being together that aims at the well-being of all the world. Knitter approvingly quotes David Krieger to the effect that true in this sense is less something we know than something we do. Truth is what promotes cosmotheandric solidarity, that is to say, the solidarity that "links cosmos, humanity, and divinity in a mutuality and interconnectedness in which we are all responsible for each other's well-being."[70] Such solidarity "realizes itself concretely in non-violent praxis, not in any particular ideological, political, or economic system."[71]

In the case of Krieger, as in the case of other pluralist theologians, the determination to put praxis at the center of the interreligious agenda is as much a necessity as a virtue. In the postmodern context, where universalistic pretensions have collapsed, the only sort of foundationalism that can be tolerated is a foundational praxis, that is to say, "a non-violent praxis that establishes a cosmotheandric solidar-

[66] Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions,* 82, 112.
[67] Ibid. 126.
[68] Ibid. 103; also 85, 112–13.
[69] Ibid. 113.
[70] Ibid. 81–82. Knitter is quoting from David Krieger, "On the Possibility of Global Thinking in an Age of Particularism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990) 223–43; see also 231. Krieger acknowledges Raimundo Panikkar as the originator of the notion of "cosmotheandric solidarity," which, according to Krieger, "stands as a symbol for overcoming a one-sided anthropocentrism, cosmocentrism and theocentrism" (ibid. 231 n. 7). He provides a detailed discussion of Panikkar's thought in *The New Universalism* 45–76, at 66.
[71] Krieger, "On the Possibility of Global Thinking" 239; see Knitter, "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many?" 149, 166–67.

ity."[72] Krieger, together with Knitter, Gilkey, and others, portray praxis primarily in terms of sociopolitical engagement. While the overtly political dimension is less evident in other pluralist thinkers, such as Hick and Smith, they also highlight the ethical dimensions of religious faith.[73] Religion for them concerns those values that further human well-being. For all of them, the pursuit of the values enjoined by religion is the way to knowledge of the religious object. It is no exaggeration to say with Krieger that pluralist theology accords epistemological priority to praxis.[74] For Gilkey, "the structure of praxis is our most helpful clue to the structure of being."[75] Gilkey explains that, in the effort to give one's religious commitment concrete form, especially in the confrontation with demonic systems, the believer's relative and historically limited faith perspective is necessarily absolutized. The demand to act or to engage in a particular praxis brings with it a forced option, one that cannot be avoided. This is the great paradox of the pluralists' understanding of praxis, the fact that it implies a juxtaposition or synthesis of the relative and the absolute that is frustrating intellectually and yet necessary practically. In a bow to the venerable practical American tradition, Gilkey recalls the view of the American pragmatist John Dewey (1859–1952) that what "to reflection may represent a hopeless contradiction . . . can through intelligent practice be fruitfully entered into and successfully resolved."[76]

According to Gilkey, our insight into the paradoxical or polar union of absoluteness and relativity in the case of our own particular tradition is instructive regarding the nature of religious traditions and symbols in general. All religious traditions and symbols, if they are not to be demonic, must be subject to the dialectic inherent in praxis within

[72] Krieger, "On the Possibility of Global Thinking" 240; see Douglas Sturm, "Crossing the Boundaries: On the Idea of Interreligious Dialogue and the Political Question," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30 (1993) 5–6, 13–14.

[73] See, e.g., Hick, *Interpretation of Religion* 316–42, at 336–37; a portion of this text is reproduced in John Hick, "The Universality of the Golden Rule," in *Ethics, Religion, and the Good Society,* ed. J. Runzo (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 155–66, at 159. Hick contends that a religion's claim to be "true and salvific" "is not something to be determined by a priori dogma but by the observation of actual human behavior. . . . on the basis of [a religion's] fruits" ("Five Misgivings" 80). Knitter endorses Hick's observation and remarks that "enough dialogue has taken place among various religious communities for all participants to know, from the ethical and spiritual 'fruits' observed in their partners, that it is not only possible or probable but actual that there is much truth and goodness dwelling within the hearts and beliefs of their partners in dialogue" ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 154 n. 2). Note also Knitter's attempt to define the universal, decisive [and] indispensable character of Jesus in terms of his message, not his person ("Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus," 10), a theme repeated in "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 158 when Knitter inquires into what made Jesus function as he did. See finally Raimundo Panikkar's comments on Knitter's position ("Whose Uniqueness?" in *The Uniqueness of Jesus* 113).

[74] Krieger, *The New Universalism* 126.

[75] Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" 48.

[76] Ibid. 45–46.

a pluralistic world. They must be understood to be relative manifestations of the Absolute. As relative, they must point beyond themselves to the ever-greater Absolute. They must negate and transcend themselves; they are final and yet not the only one.[77]

Gilkey extends the insight garnered from engagement in the world to the new interrelationships of religions to one another. Here, too, praxis, now in the form of dialogue between diverse positions, pushes and lures us into the middle of a maze we still can hardly enter intellectually. Just as we do in creative political action, so now in doing dialogue we embody and enact the pluralist paradox of relative absoluteness.[78] The theological divisions remain, but in and through the praxis of dialogue they are seen for what they are, subordinated to the real cause that religion serves.

Among pluralist thinkers, Hick has insisted with most force on the necessity of relativizing religious truth claims in view of the real goal of humanity's religious project. He describes that goal as "human transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new centering in the Real, the Ultimate."[79] The actual differences among the world's religious traditions, whether these concern questions of history, metaphysics, or doctrine,[80] are only penultimately important for the realization of this goal. Hence they ought to be de-emphasized in the interreligious encounter. What counts is the process of transformation from "self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness,"[81] a transformation that "is most readily observed by its moral fruits, which can be identified by means of the ethical ideal, common to all the great traditions, of . . . love/compassion."[82] Within the world's religious traditions, Hick continues, those who bear such fruits are regarded as authentic mediators of the transcendent reality (or the "Real").[83]

The focus on praxis, conceived as commitment to human well-being, is well suited to the universalist thrust of pluralist theology. As I have indicated, it allows pluralist theologians to relativize the doctrinal differences among religions. However, it does not provide an intellectually satisfying solution to the persistence of those differences. A number of pluralist theologians have taken up this challenge. Their attempts to integrate the multiplicity of truth claims into a comprehensive pluralist theology results in what I identify as the fourth major feature of the pluralists' characterizations of religious knowledge.

[77] Ibid. 49.

[78] Ibid. 47.

[79] Hick, *Rainbow of Faiths* 106.

[80] See John Hick, "On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983) 75–80, reprinted in *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985) 89–95; *Interpretation of Religion* 362–76. Hick resumes the discussion in his *Metaphor of God Incarnate* 140–49, where he speaks about conceptions of the ultimate, sets of metaphysical beliefs, and historical questions, and where he reverses the order of presentation by beginning with conceptions of the ultimate.

[81] Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* 91; *Rainbow of Faiths* 114–16.

[82] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion* 14.

[83] Ibid. 326.

POLAR CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

In discussing the debt of the pluralists to Schleiermacher, I pointed out that they share with that great German Romantic the view that religious traditions and doctrines necessarily fall short of the ineffable religious experience. However, pluralist theologians go one step further than Schleiermacher in arguing that the reality that is partially disclosed in religious experience can be adequately described only by allowing for the variety of religious traditions. To accommodate such variety, pluralist thinkers develop what I describe as a "polar" understanding of religious knowledge.

I use the word "polar" here in the sense given it by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). Inspired by the structure of magnetic fields, Coleridge posited the existence of a polar unity, i.e. a unity born out of the coincidence of opponent and oppugnant forces that have their origin in a common source.[84] According to Coleridge, a polar unity is necessarily a tensile unity, what one commentator has described as a "sort of contrapuntal symphony" which becomes richer and more sublime to the degree that it incorporates divergent elements.[85] This feature of the model of polar unity is precisely what makes it so appropriate to the present discussion. Pluralist theologians insist that the integrity of our portrayals of the religious object (i.e. our theologies) is dependent on their incorporation of complementary, rival, or even "dipolar" and "multipolar" descriptions of that object.[86]

[84] For a discussion of the notion of "polarity" in Coleridge, see Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (London: Oxford University, 1972). I have discussed the model of polarity at length in *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman,* Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 1991) 7–19; and in "Newman's Experience of God: An Interpretive Model," *Bijdragen* 48 (1987) 446–50.

[85] J. H. Walgrave, "Oosterse mystiek en christelijke spiritualiteit," in *Communio* [Dutch edition] 1 (1976) 450.

[86] Raimundo Panikkar speaks of the differences among religions as "dialogical tensions and creative polarities" ("The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel—A Meditation on Non-Violence," *Cross Currents* 29 [1979] 226). Knitter insists that "the world religions, in all their amazing differences, are more complementary than contradictory," and that "all religious experience and all religious forms are, by their very nature dipolar" (*No Other Name?* 220). Elsewhere he speaks of "the dipolar, indeed multipolar, character of divine truth" (ibid. 223). He describes many current opinions in one comprehensive paragraph: "The West is awakening to this necessary dipolarity of religious experience and identity. Paul Tillich saw it in his proposed 'dipolar typology' for interpreting the entire history of religions. W. C. Smith encapsulates it in his assertion that 'in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and.' More recently, John A. T. Robinson argues the same in his elaborate case that 'truth is two-eyed,' and that Western Christianity, with its emphasis on the personality of God, the historicity of faith, the importance of the material world, has been peering into the mystery of God with only one eye. John Cobb, in his proposal for a mutually transformative dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, shows that the 'profoundly different' experience of Buddhists and Christians are not contradictions but 'mutually enriching contrasts.' Contained in this growing awareness is the insight that all religious

Gavin D'Costa has pointed out that it is a characteristic plea of pluralist theologians "that truth-claims should and can be harmonized by means of a both-and, rather than an either-or, model."[87] This is certainly the case, although in my judgment it is possible to distinguish at least three distinct tendencies regarding the pluralist justification of such harmonization. The first tendency, represented by Knitter, consists in the claim that transcendent reality, in all its mysterious complexity, is best described by recourse to multiple descriptions, a version of the classical doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum.* The second tendency, represented by Hick, consists in the claim that transcendent reality is beyond all description, though rival offerings are inevitable given the culturally determined character of all thought and experience. The third and most radical tendency, represented by Raimundo Panikkar, consists in the claim that Truth or Being is itself essentially plural or even that the religious object is ultimately unknowable, a sort of *docta ignorantia.*[88] All these tendencies share a conviction that transcendent reality, called God by Christians, ultimately remains shrouded in mystery. What distinguishes these tendencies is the degree of agnosticism each professes in regard to that mystery.[89]

Knitter's proposal, though lacking the philosophical sophistication of Hick's proposal, appears to me the most characteristic of pluralist theology. As I have noted, Knitter insists that competing descriptions of the religious object are essentially complementary. This view, evident in *No Other Name?* (1985), is equally evident in *One Earth Many Religions* (1995).[90] The earlier work contains an intriguing passage that

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experience and all religious language must be two-eyed, dipolar, a union of opposites" (ibid. 221).

[87] Gavin D'Costa, "The Pluralist Paradigm in the Christian Theology of Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986) 221.

[88] See especially Raimundo Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?" in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* 118–53, esp. 129–32; "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* 89–116, esp. 103, 109–10; "Whose Uniqueness?" in *The Uniqueness of Jesus* 114. Regarding Panikkar's suggestion that truth is plural, see Thomas Dean, "Universal Theology and Dialogical Dialogue," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* 170–72; Paul Williams, "Some Dimensions of the Recent Work of Raimundo Panikkar: A Buddhist Perspective," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991) 511, 513, 517–18. See especially John Hick's description of Panikkar's view as a "(to me) somewhat obscure kind of ultimate pluralism" (*Rainbow of Faiths* 70 n. 30).

[89] Gavin D'Costa has described Hick's position as issuing in transcendental agnosticism ("Taking Other Religions Seriously: Ironies in the Current Debate on a Christian Theology of Religions," *The Thomist* 54 [1990] 526); see also his "John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution," in *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick,* ed. Harold Hewitt (New York: St. Martin's, 1991) 3–18.

[90] See, e.g., *One Earth, Many Religions* 107, 113.

might be read as a critique of Hick's agnostic view of the legitimacy of rival religious truth claims:

> The world religions, in all their amazing differences, are more complementary than contradictory. What this complementarity implies extends beyond the imagination of most Westerners. The import of the new model of relational truth goes beyond the recognition that the view of the Absolute enshrined in each religion is limited, beyond the admission that each religion is a map of the territory but not the territory itself. In asserting that the maps are *really* different and that these differences are necessary in order to know the territory, the new model of truth implies that all religious experience and all religious forms are by their very nature *dipolar*."[91]

Hick's position may be understood as consisting in the claim that "each religion is a map of the territory but not the territory itself." But what Knitter is here advocating is certainly not a mere willingness to live with rival claims. Instead, it seems to consist in a recommendation to embrace positively, even to delight in the tension that such rivalry involves. The tensions or polarities, as Knitter prefers to say, are dialogical and creative. Hence, Knitter refers approvingly to the Taoist principle of yin and yang which sees ultimate reality as composed of a dynamic coincidence of opposites. According to Knitter, that reality is dipolar is evident in our experience, especially our religious experience. As we discover the personality of God, we realize that God is beyond personality. As we awaken to the "already" of God's kingdom in this world, we become ever more conscious of its "not-yet." The fact of the dipolar character of our religious experience has real implications for attempts to articulate religious truth. As Knitter expresses it, all religious experience must be dipolar, a union of opposites. Accordingly, "every discovery, every insight, must be balanced by its opposite," and "every belief, every doctrinal claim, must . . . be clarified and corrected by beliefs that, at first sight, claim the contrary."[92]

CONCLUSION

As indicated at the outset, the four features of the conception of religious knowledge I have described are elements of an emergent pluralist epistemology, although each element in this fourfold grouping has its own particular antecedents. Moreover, not every element is equally well represented in the thought of particular pluralist authors. Given the variegated themes addressed by pluralist theologians, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, these four elements are present to a greater or lesser degree in the writings of all those theologians defending the pluralist paradigm.

Within the space of a single article, it is not possible to engage in a

[91] Knitter, *No Other Name?* 220.

[92] Ibid. 221. See also "Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus" 10 n. 14, 13 n. 19; "Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 152.

critical dialogue with pluralist thought. However, the view of religious knowledge as evolutionary, culturally determined, pragmatic, and polar is not without significance for a religious tradition that locates the heart of saving revelation in a past event, that ascribes a universal significance to this event, that regards the content of this event as, at least in part, a doctrine concerning God's very self, and that insists that truth is one.[93] Indeed, in my judgment, the pluralists' understanding of religious knowledge cannot be ultimately integrated into any recognizable version of orthodox Christianity. I do not deny that pluralist thought highlights themes that need desperately to be addressed, nor do I wish to gainsay insights into the Christian and non-Christian traditions that emerge from their reflection. Nor do I impugn the sincerity and religious conviction of pluralist thinkers.

Still, it is not clear to me how pluralist authors hope to sustain the constant Christian tradition of narrative, praxis, and worship on the basis of those principles that constitute the bedrock of their thought. Among those essential elements of traditional Christianity that pluralism seems to preclude, I would highlight the following three (though this listing is by no means exhaustive): the very possibility, let alone the reality, of a distinctive historical revelation;[94] the understanding of faith as what Newman described as certitude, namely, the firm and reasonable conviction that the object of our faith is knowable and known, and worthy of absolute commitment;[95] and the

[93] I have discussed the relationship between pluralist thought and traditional Catholic theology in "The Anthropology of Conversion: Newman and the Contemporary Theology of Religions," in *Newman and Conversion*, ed. Ian T. Ker (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 117–44.

[94] A number of authors have pointed to one of the great paradoxes of pluralism, namely, that a theology that claims to respect and promote particularity is characterized by such universalistic pretensions, both in its claim to be able to encompass manifestly divergent understandings of the Transcendent, and in its claim that all religions are engaged in essentially the same salvific project. See, e.g., Kenneth Surin, "Towards a 'Materialist' Critique of Religious Pluralism: An Examination of the Discourse of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith," in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*, ed. Ian Hamnett (London: Routledge, 1990) 114–29; "A Certain 'Politics of Speech': 'Religious Pluralism' in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger," *Modern Theology* 7 (1990) 67–100; Alister McGrath, "The Challenge of Religious Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church" and his "The Christian Church's Response to Pluralism," both in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992) 361–73, 487–501.

[95] For a discussion of Newman's views on faith and certitude, see my *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts* 193–228. The question of the nature of faith is one of the major issues in the pluralist theology of religions, but one that pluralists have hardly even begun to address. Knitter appears to suggest that the depth of conviction that faith has traditionally been understood to imply is incompatible with love ("Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus" 6). From this perspective, Jesus' own Jewish conviction regarding the uniqueness of Yahweh was presumably also misplaced. In any case, I do not see how the cosmic trust that pluralism seems to understand by faith can found the concrete religious commitment that finds its goal and end in a personal God. In the words of Newman, "without certitude in religious faith . . . there can be no habit of prayer, no directness of devotion,

retention of any meaningful form of trinitarian discourse and worship.[96]

In the last analysis, the challenge of pluralist theology touches the very foundations of Christian life and practice. What is at stake is not simply purging Christianity of antiquated elements with a view to the encounter with the world's religions, but the survival of Christianity as a distinctive faith tradition with a claim to represent a divinely sanctioned narrative, praxis, and spirituality.

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no intercourse with the unseen, no generosity of self-sacrifice" (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [London: Longmans, 1913] 220). Note Hick's remark to the effect that Knitter and other pluralists "cannot take it for granted that that which is ultimately real is a personal God, still less a Trinity of Three Persons" ("Five Misgivings" 84).

[96] Knitter's attempt to employ trinitarian categories is not convincing ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 158–59). See Hick's refusal of Knitter's attempt to retain the claim to the divinity of Christ within a pluralist framework ("Five Misgivings" 83–84). Pluralist theologians, including apparently Knitter, tend to favor Spirit-christologies. However, as G. W. H. Lampe, one of the leading advocates of Spirit-christologies, has pointed out, "Spirit christology cannot affirm that Jesus *is* 'substantivally' God." It "must be content to acknowledge that the personal subject of the experience of Jesus Christ is a man." According to Lampe, the affirmation that Jesus is substantivally God "is in the last resort incompatible with the belief that Jesus truly and fully shares in our humanity" (Lampe, "The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ," in *Christ, Faith and History,* ed S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972] 124). It is striking that Knitter claims to be combating a Christology that issues in a "dehumanized humanity of Jesus" ("Can Our 'One and Only' Also Be a 'One among Many'?" 159).