

EVANGELICAL CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN ASIAN CONTEXTS

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The younger Christian churches in the Third World countries are sometimes faced with a perplexing dilemma caused by radical Western theologies which are not always relevant and meaningful in the Third World contexts. The theology of religious pluralism is one of those examples. Western evangelicals have responded to this theology critically and, sometimes, very competently. However, Western theologians have dominated discussions on pluralism despite the fact that Asian Christians actually have become "victims" in their daily lives due to the increasing pressures from dominant non-Christian religions. Asian societies are culturally and religiously plural, but Asian evangelicals have not produced books or articles on religious pluralism (from now on, the theology of religious pluralism will be referred to as pluralism). One reason for this is that pluralism deviates radically from the Bible and, secondly, because similar ideas have widely spread among Asians for a long time. For example, many Asians think that all religions eventually lead their adherents to the same goal of ultimate reality, whether that reality is personal or impersonal. But other religious experts do not agree with the assumption of religious pluralism that all religions are only different expressions of man's experience of the same ultimate reality. In this respect, Western pluralism satisfies neither Western nor Asian evangelicals nor other religionists.

Most Asian evangelicals are greatly disappointed with the Western pluralism which is promulgated in the non-Western world while the Western churches continue to undertake missionary work there as a top priority. The Asian church's disappointment with John Hick's pluralism is seen in a Japanese theologian's complaint to Hick when he visited Japan in the 1980s. It is reported that a neo-orthodox theologian criticized Hick at the welcoming party for him. The Japanese leader pointed out that Hick's pluralism makes it difficult for Japanese churches to survive in Japan as a small minority because it

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elevates each religion to a level equal to Christianity.² This critique indicates that not only evangelicals but a significant number of neo-orthodox and liberal theologians in Asia question the principles of pluralism. Nevertheless, pluralism is well received in Asia by students of comparative religion and some radical Protestant theologians.

The following points challenge the significance of religious pluralism in Asian churches. First, religious pluralism may be a new idea for some Western theologians, but many Asians have always been exposed to pluralism, because many think instinctively that all religions lead to an ultimate reality.³

Second, this kind of Western pluralism has only served to frustrate and disappoint Christians and lower the status of the Christian church further down which is only at best a minority religious community surrounded by oppressive non-Christian religions and cultures. Paradoxically, at the same time, Western pluralism has elevated the status of these non-Christian religions to the level of Christian religion.

Third, John Hick seems to concentrate only on the view that each religion is a legitimate response to the ultimate reality which they claim to reach. Many people in Asia, however, are not so much concerned with the metaphysical aspects of religion as they use their religion to meet their own felt needs, such as solving health problems, poverty, and using it as a means to become a success in business or in social life. The struggle for political power is a major factor in the religious resurgence movements, so that their promoters are not so interested in the metaphysical aspects of religion.

Fourth, pluralists misunderstand the term "exclusivism," which is used mainly by evangelicals. Pluralists interpret this term as a symbol of arrogance, superiority, and bigotry. However, the term "exclusivism" is a theological, not a sociological concept. This means that, sociologically, Asian Christians who are being persecuted as followers of a minority religion cannot express or encourage an

²This incident was related by Dr. Harold Netland in a lecture which he gave in Korea in 1997. As a missionary to Japan at that time, Netland had attended the party for Hick.

³When Christians in Korea share the gospel with their neighbors or relatives, they often get the response from the unbelievers that every religion is the same. It is said in *Rig Veda* of Hinduism that the truth is one and is only named differently by the wise men. In the Chinese thought of Tao (4th century BC), we can learn, "Seen from the Identity all the manifold things are one." Dr. Andreas Nehring, "Religious Identity in the Context of Religious Pluralism," *CMS Bulletin*, Summer Issue 1995, 3.

arrogant, superior attitude toward their neighbors. Theologically, the terms "absolutism," or "exclusivism," should be understood in the light of the absolute claims of the founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, who said that He alone is the way of salvation and the revealed truth (John 14:6). In this regard, Jesus Christ is the only Savior, excluding all others. However, in His absolute claims He respects the freedom of people to choose a religion. Therefore, the term is essentially a theological term.

Fifth, pluralism does not adequately answer the negative aspects of non-Christian religions under which many Asians are suffering and from which they would like to be liberated. Asian evangelicals would like to make a comparative analysis of the moral impact which these religions exercise on their societies where they dominate. Finally, other religions also claim that they are absolutely true. Thus, their claims to be the exclusive way of salvation also contradict Hick's claims. In this article, this writer is going to deal with the evangelical responses to pluralism in detail.

EXAMPLES OF THE EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO PLURALISM IN ASIAN CHURCHES

Even though Evangelical churches in Asia do not generally agree with theological pluralism, they recognize the need to maintain good social relationships with people of other religions. By doing this, Christian churches, as a minority, can demonstrate their moral and communal integrity. Asian Christians experience religious diversity or pluralism in a way that is vastly different from that of Christians or theologians in the West. In Asia, Christians are usually deprived of the privilege to co-exist peacefully and respectfully with other religions or the dominant religion. Their experience is one of suffering, distress, frustration, and even persecution. Very few Asian evangelical theologians have been engaged in the debate over pluralism, which was initiated and is still generally dominated by Western theologians, thus mostly not relevant or helpful in the Asian context.⁴

⁴Regarding this, see Gerald H. Anderson, "Christian Mission and Religious Pluralism." Among the 176 books and articles listed, only a few are written by non-Western theologians. In this list, there is no Asian evangelical theologian at all. *However, quite a few Asian pluralists are found; they are Wesley S. Ariarajah, Michael Amaladoss, Charles Wei-hsun Fu, Lyn De Silva, Raymod Panikkar, Aloysius Pieris, Raj Sunder, Michael Nazir-Ali.*

The reasons for the lack of interest in religious pluralism in Asia are quite complex. In India, Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the Christian churches are under covert or overt pressures from the dominant religions; and, thus, Christians need to exercise prudence in criticizing theologically. Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, etc., are religiously pluralistic societies; and evangelicals do not feel an urgent need to study the issue. They assume that the answer is already found in the Bible. Thus, in these countries, very few theologians have even written a single volume criticizing pluralism. Strangely enough, in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, some theologians have boldly written books in which they openly attack and criticize theological pluralism. As a result, many evangelical theologians in Asia began to express their deep concern over pluralism because they judged that it could shake the foundations of traditional Christianity. They point out that similar kinds of theological pluralism have already been proposed by native scholars of religion or by liberal theologians and laymen. Thus, the Western theologians should note that the Asian churches have already encountered theologies of religious pluralism before the introduction of John Hick's pluralism into Asian countries, and evangelical churches have already responded negatively to it. Their negative responses and severe criticisms of pluralism are not only prompted by theological reflection, but also by their own deep involvement in their cultural and religious environments in which they live. Christians and church leaders in Asia have not only long grappled with the problem of survival in the midst of a vast "pagan" sea but also with the task of communicating Christ to the followers of other religions. The following five examples help us to understand the pro-and-con debates over pluralism in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and Korea. Prior to the emergence of Hick's and Knitter's varieties of pluralism in the West, some Asian theologians and church leaders had already attempted to develop pluralism by giving high esteem to their traditional cultural and religious heritages.

Evangelical Challenges to Pluralism in India

India is a religiously and culturally pluralistic society. Among the Indian theologians, those who pay high regard to Indian religions and culture have already suggested a kind of pluralism similar to John

Hick's. For example, two representative spokesmen of this view are Stanely Samartha, who is "a leading figure in ecumenical inter-faith dialogue since the 1960s and was the first director of the World Council of Churches Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faith and Ideologies,"⁵ and Raimundo Panikkar, who is "a unique and eminent figure in the encounter of religious faiths in this century"⁶ and is the author of the famous book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. Both have already advocated a kind of pluralism in the Indian context which is equivalent to Hick's, and some scholars argue that they may have influenced Hick and Knitter. If there is any difference between Hick and Samartha, Hick's favorite term "Ultimate Reality" is expressed by Samartha as "Mystery of the Infinite." Thus, according to Samartha, "religious differences are the different responses to the Mystery of the Infinite, so that questions of 'superiority' do not arise. Criticism of one religion based on criteria drawn from another is unwarranted."⁷ It should be noted that his assumption is quite similar to that of Dr. Radhakrishnan, a Hindu reformer, who argued that religion is not a matter of doctrine or dogma but rather of man's encounter with the ultimate mystery of the world. Panikkar also attempted to "marry the personalism of the Semite faiths with the *advaita*, non-dual, experience of Asian faiths in a such a way that diversity is not obliterated but anchored in a transcendent mystery."⁸ If there is any unique idea in Panikkar, it is that "secular tradition" belongs to the same category as other religions. In other words, Panikkar is of the opinion that one can also reach the "Mystery of the Infinite" through secularism as well as through other traditions. He did not mention Islam at all, but he obliquely referred to it under the imagery of fratricidal warfare:

There has been a fellow traveller on my journeys to the different lands of Man. Child of my own time and environment, I thought I knew well who the companion was in my intellectual and spiritual wonderments of over a half-century ago. There came, however, a critical moment when I reached my ancestral dwelling-place at the peak period of my life: my steps to a City of Peace, to look for and perhaps find my

⁵Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, (Cambria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1996), 3.

⁶Ibid., 76.

⁷Ibid., 5.

⁸Ibid., 76.

partner again, I proceeded, alone, to a battlefield ravaged by fratricidal warfare. Shocked and pained, I refused to take a stand and struggle for any of the parties. . . . I remained a conscientious objector, mistrusted by both. . . . Risking my life in offering my services to everybody without accepting their respective dialectics, I found myself suddenly in the World of Time. And from there the sacredness of everything, even of the secular, dawned upon me. Thus I am at the confluence (*sangam*) of the four rivers: Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Secular traditions.⁹

We agree on Panikkar's idea that we should live peacefully with our neighbors as a family in the global village, but he supports the breakdown of traditional Christian concepts of divinity.

Among the Asian churches, the churches in India have played leading roles in church union movements, missions, and theology due to the advantages of English proficiency and a long church history of their own. However, Indian evangelicals do not agree theologically with Hick or Knitter. They seem to be more hesitant in accepting the traditional exclusivist model which is largely embraced by most evangelicals in the West and East. Perhaps this may be due to the influence of the inclusivist tendency within Indian culture which is inherent in Hinduism and also in India's unique religious situation where there is a limited freedom of religion. The evangelical debates over pluralism in India are characterized by strong anti-Western and anti-colonial themes and also by some modifications of traditional evangelical perceptions in theology and missions. Their position is well expressed by an Indian missiologist: "religious tolerance in India is possible as long as one does not claim uniqueness for his religion, as long as he is willing to say that his religion is one among the many, not above the others and probably only part of the one and only universal and eternal religion--'the Sanatana Dharma.'"¹⁰ He comments further that "we should liberate ourselves from the temptation to absolutize Christ and minimize his grace. Otherwise we will have nothing new to

⁹R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 23; cited by Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, 77-78.

¹⁰John M. Prasad, "The Concept of Religious Pluralism in Indian Culture and Potential Modifications to the Existing Missionary Approach," *CMS Bulletin*, Summer 1995 (Centre for Mission Studies, Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India), 11.

offer to the Indian or the Hindu."¹¹

This compromised position can be seen in theological discussions concerning the pluralism engaged in by some theologians and pastors. For example, several theological students of Union Biblical Seminary, which is known as the most evangelical seminary in India, are engaged in pluralism discussion. Of course, their arguments are critical of Western pluralism; but their suggestions are extremely ambiguous for us to understand. Their basic and common assumption concerning pluralism is that it is not entirely new in India. Dr. Andreas Nehring claims that "the opinion that among the manifold there is something that can be recognised identical is not only Christian or western. In Rig Veda it said that the truth is one and only named differently by the wise men."¹² A theological student also expressed the same viewpoint:

To be sure, religious and other pluralism is not of recent origin. It was there even the ancient world, where God called the nation of Israel into covenant relationship with him. The election of Israel to be God's people is also seen in the setting of pluralistic nations and cultures and, most importantly, of religious plurality.¹³

But his article does not contain any kind of criticism of pluralism; rather, he suggests that evangelicals should learn from "pluralists like Samartha, Paul Knitter and Raede" in order to correct evangelical arrogance or superiority.¹⁴ John Parasad mildly criticizes pluralism by saying that "a Christology that reduces Christ to only a mythology will be able to contribute nothing more to our pluralistic context than one more god to the Hindu mythological pantheon."¹⁵ He advocates "the need for a missionary approach that is relevant to the pluralistic context and freed from western garb."¹⁶ However, his potential modifications to the existing missionary approach only involve an emphasis on the personal God of love, compassion, righteousness, and justice; dialogue with other religions; and the importance of experience in Christian

¹¹Ibid., 17

¹²Andreas Nehring, 3.

¹³K. C. Marak, "Christian Mission in a Religiously Plural World," *CMS Bulletin*, Summer 1995, 4.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵John M. Prasad, 15.

¹⁶Ibid., 14.

witness.

Dr. Ken Gnanakan, a well-known Indian evangelical theologian and General Secretary of the Asia Theological Association, wrote a book in which he evaluated Hick's pluralism by arguing that its main weakness was the unbiblical interpretation of Christ's person. Gnanakan goes on to identify the Christian concept of salvation with that of other religions, and suggests an exclusivist-inclusivist model instead of the typical exclusivist paradigm. The former is ambiguous in our understanding due to its departure from the traditional evangelical perception. Nevertheless, he asserts that Hick's theocentricism is only a "Realitycentric" worldview which sees "Ultimate Reality as impersonal";¹⁷ and he also considers Western pluralism as a product of modern, Western rationalization. He says,

Having accepted that pluralists in the "Myth" book have set a purely Western agenda, and have accepted it primarily to be correcting of the Western triumphalistic attitude to mission, it is rather contradictory that the solution offered by Western pluralists is itself a product of modern, Western rationalization . . . that the whole discussion belongs to Western liberal religious thought at the present time.¹⁸

However, Gnanakan also does not agree with the traditional exclusivism model and instead suggests an exclusivist-inclusivist model which he believes is the biblical position. He asserts that "God does not demand pure exclusivism"; rather, "we are confronted with the inclusivistic purpose of God in his salvific intentions for the world."¹⁹

Gnanakan's equivocal statements such as "the manifestation of his grace, his revelation, and his on-going activity through his Holy Spirit in all creation must be acknowledged";²⁰ "it is within this widest circle of God's dealing with all his world that we need to recognize his work in the religions and culture of all people";²¹ and "God is active in religions"²² caused a heated criticism even within India. For example, Dr. Jeevaratnam Buraga, a founder and president of Bharat Bible

¹⁷Ken Gnanakan, *The Pluralistic Predicament*, 106.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 119-20.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 221-22.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 223.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 226.

College in Secunderaba, severely charges Gnanakan by saying that his view poses "a serious challenge to evangelical Bible-believing Christianity, which swears by the uniqueness of salvation for all mankind."²³ After all, Jeevaratnam's harsh criticism directed to Gnanakan's ideas indicates that he thoroughly rejects Hick's and Knitter's pluralism. He says,

Religions as metaphysical systems of man's making are actually perversions of God's revelation in nature. Man's religions do not concur with the Biblical revelation on definitions of God or sin or salvation. They not only contradict Biblical revelation but in fact militate against it. Therefore it cannot be said that God is active in the different religions of the world unless we are prepared to say that the scriptures of these religions are also inspired by the Holy Spirit like we believe the Bible is.²⁴

Dr. Jeevaratnam's strong defense of the traditional evangelical faith demonstrates that he is a "Christian fundamentalist" in upholding the historic Christian faith against the inroads of "liberalism" as well as against the skepticism of pluralist theology.²⁵ In this respect, he is a unique theologian in the Indian context.

Evangelical Challenges to Pluralism in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, where evangelicals are under more pressure from Buddhism than in India, a few evangelical leaders have made clear arguments for the traditional evangelical model of exclusivism, even though they do not directly criticize theological pluralism. They are positive and affirmative in presenting an evangelical theology, basing their arguments firmly on the self-evident and self-sufficient

²³Jeevaratnam Burga, "False Christo-centricity of Ken Gnanakan's Soteriology," a pamphlet printed by Bharat Bible College in 1998, 1.

²⁴Ibid., 2-3.

²⁵Another strong criticism of Gnanakan is seen in his letter dated March 27, 1998, to Dr. Bong Rin Ro, former General Secretary of the Asia Theological Association, when he wrote: "Gnanakan's theology is certainly not Biblical. I am surprised that this man with all his liberal views is the general secretary of Asia Theological Association. His theology is actually a dubious Christ-centered syncretism. . . . We are not true to Bible if we remain silent."

affirmations of the uniqueness and absoluteness of Christ attested in the Scriptures.

The representative evangelical theologians in Sri Lanka are Dr. Ajith Fernando, Dr. Vinoth Ramachandra, and Rev. Tissa Weerasingha. Fernando is a typical evangelical who stands for the defense of the traditional Christian faith with his strong commitment to the spread of the Gospel among Buddhists and Hindus. Accordingly, he rejects pluralism because he strongly believes that it contradicts biblical Christianity. He wrote a significant apologetic book, *The Supremacy of Christ*, in response to the complicated religious situation in Sri Lanka. The book boldly challenges pluralism in the context of the conflicts between Buddhism and Christianity. On the one hand, he strongly denounces Western theological pluralism as being dangerous and unacceptable to the churches in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, he welcomes sociological pluralism in Sri Lanka's complicated religious and cultural context if it can "allow for the existence of political, ethnic, and cultural differences in a society or a church."²⁶ His unequivocal rejection of pluralist theology is seen in his intense zeal for the defense and propagation of the Christian faith. By quoting Stephen Neil's statement on the negation of relativism, Fernando affirms the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ, thus directly refuting pluralist theology.

Yet the uniqueness of Christianity, out of which the ministry of persuasion springs, is something we cannot jettison, for it is something intrinsic to Christianity. The British historian, Arnold Toynbee, accepted the fact that the belief in uniqueness was intrinsic to Christianity. But he added that, however hard it may be, we must purge Christianity of this exclusive mindset. Bishop Neil called this "a very odd piece of argumentation." He said, "If Christianity is purged of something that is unique to itself, it will be transformed to something wholly other than itself."²⁷

The reasons for his rejection of pluralism are as follows. First, he argues that Hick's "understanding of tolerance is built into the

²⁶Ajith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1995), 21.

²⁷Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Pub., 1987), 151.

structure of Hindu and Buddhist thought." He then comments on the intolerance of Hinduism and Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka, respectively: "In practice, however, we are seeing much intolerance among their leaders when one of their adherents becomes a Christian."²⁸ Second, pluralism is nearly the same as the universalism already espoused by the inclusivists, and it was promoted by theological universalists in the early church. Third, Hick's identification of the Christian God with the Ultimate in other religions is inconsistent, because, for example, Hindus and Buddhists take the Ultimate as being impersonal.²⁹ Fourth, Hick's Christology makes the serious mistake of identifying Jesus, the Son of God, with the founders of other religions who are also themselves worshipped as gods. Moreover, Hick's denial of Christ as God incarnate as depicted in the Scriptures can lead Christians into confusion.

In another book, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions*, Ajith Fernando reaffirms that there is no salvation outside of the Christian Church. For example, he argues that "the Buddhist's religiousness, with its independence of God's way, was an affront to God's glory, and thus will not merit salvation."³⁰ He has even written a book entitled *Crucial Questions About Hell* in order to give biblical answers to the issue of punishment after death, which has been negatively presented by Hick who prefers the Hindu and Buddhist theories of rebirth, that is, transmigration, to the doctrine of hell. He concludes that pluralism "fits in well with Buddhist and Hindu thought."³¹ He analyzes the reasons for the denial of hell as follows: First, pluralism refuses to distinguish between the saved and the lost. Second, the idea of human potential maintains that people are good, important, and capable of great possibilities. Third is the emergence of the "feel good generation," meaning that talk about hell is avoided because it does not make people feel good. Finally, it is due to the impact of eastern religious thinking in the East and in the West and to the teaching which promotes the idea of reincarnation instead of heaven and hell after death.³² As Dr. Eryl Davies, who wrote a book entitled *An Angry God*, theologially challenges the annihilationists and pluralists in England, so Fernando "wages a theological war" against pluralism in

²⁸Ajith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, 25.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 22.

³⁰Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude*, 131.

³¹Ajith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, 21.

³²*Ibid.*, 22-24.

the Sri Lankan context. Finally, he urges Christians, including evangelists and leaders, to practice moral purity and integrity so as to earn credibility for the gospel.

Dr. Ramachandra, who earned a doctoral degree in nuclear engineering but turned his back on both nuclear energy and an academic career to become a lay preacher and campus minister, also wrote a significant book in which he attempted to give a theological response to the pluralism of Samartha, Pannikar, and Sri Lankan Aloysius Pieris--all of whom have exerted a strong influence on Asian churches and theology. Accordingly, Ramachandra's response to these three Asian theologians is no different from his response to Western pluralists. He indicates that their views have been influenced by Western philosophy and theology. He says,

We have already noted several affinities with Hegel in Panikkar's christology and doctrine of Spirit, the indebtedness of Pieris to the relatively recent tradition of liberation theologies of post-War Europe) and the influence on Samartha of some of John Hick's and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's work on religious pluralism. Indeed the ideological agenda of religious pluralism in much contemporary theological discussion has been nurtured by older, subterranean streams that have long fed into main arteries of academic theology.³³

His conclusion is that these three influential theologians "are united by a common vision of a pluralist world in which Christian claims to uniqueness and finality are rejected as false and obsolete."³⁴ Ramachandra rejects the assumption that Christianity is the religion of the rich and powerful North. Furthermore, he suggests that Christianity is also a non-Western religion due to the rapid growth of Christian churches in some Asian countries; and he argues that the imperialist experience in Asia has not been exclusively the monopoly of the West, because Japan, India, and China have also been oppressive superpowers in Asia.

Dr. Ramachandra harshly criticizes Hick's view of the Ultimate Reality. First, his view inescapably leads to religious skepticism. Hick

³³Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Rediscovery of Mission* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Pasternos Press, 1996), 116-17.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 138.

uses the illustration of three blind men touching different parts of an elephant to explain religion. According to him, as each blind man has a different interpretation of the elephant, so does each person have his own explanation of religion. Consequently, nobody actually knows the Ultimate reality. Ramachandra states, "If we are all truly in the position of the blind men not only can we never know anything about the real elephant, but we can never even conclude that an elephant exists."³⁵

Second, the theological approaches of Samartha, Pannikar, and Pieris have serious pitfalls in that it is impossible to distinguish the authentic manifestations of the Ultimate Reality from the inauthentic manifestations of the Ultimate Reality. Ramachandra argues that Hick speaks repeatedly of "authentic manifestations of the Real" as if inauthentic manifestations are possible. He then comments on Hick as follows:

But this entails that we have some true information concerning what the Real is like, and therefore that some beliefs must be wrong. The concept of "mythological truth" does not get Hick out of this dilemma. . . . Hick's last-ditch attempt to identify "soteriological efficacy" with the attainment of moral virtue runs into the same dilemma: if the Real is neither good nor evil, how can a moral criterion serve to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate responses to the Real?³⁶

Third, the concept of the Ultimate Reality which Hick advocates excludes the concept of a personal God. Consequently, it will inevitably result in surrender to the concept of the impersonal "Ultimate Silence" of Buddhism and Hinduism. Ramachandra understands this as Hick's bias against the Semitic tradition. He states,

Hick's hypothesis, for all its hospitable accommodation of the world's religions, is ultimately biased against the Semitic traditions. It simply rules out, *a priori*, the possibility that God/Reality is ultimately, and not simply in its manifestations, personal. For to entertain this possibility one must then also be willing to acknowledge the other possibility that this God wills to reveal God's self and enter into personal relationship with us.

³⁵Ibid., 122.

³⁶Ibid., 124.

Hick has effectively excluded any meaningful concept of divine revelation from his "meta-religion" of religions, and so it is doubtful whether any orthodox Jew, Christian or Muslim can subscribe to it.³⁷

Ramachandra indicates that Hick refuses to acknowledge a personal God because he wants to exclude the possibility of revelation from God and a personal relationship with God. Ramachandre expresses his deep disappointment with Hick's illustration of blind men and an elephant to explain the possibility of man's access to the true nature of the Ultimate Reality. He even describes Hick's theological posture as "intellectual imperialism" and complains that Hick gives more priority to Hinduism while disregarding the truth claims of Christianity. Hick postulates that Hinduism is superior to other religions, as far as the experience of the Reality is concerned. Ramachandra shows why Hick's posture is intellectual imperialism. He states,

It is not accidental that Hick should choose as illustration of his epistemology of a story from Hindu culture. There is, in fact, a cunning sleight-of-hand in the telling of the story. For any of the blind men to have postulated that what he really felt was an elephant, he must have known what an elephant was. It is the narrator . . . who alone is "in the know." He alone has access to the true nature of Reality. From his lofty vantage point he can see that the reports of the blind men are clumsy images that need to be complemented by other reports. So, what passes for a truth claim is, in fact, a posture of intellectual imperialism.³⁸

The Reverend Tissa Weerasingha, the senior pastor of a local church in Colombo, Sri Lanka, wrote a mission strategy book entitled, *The Cross and the Bo Tree*, in which he describes how to effectively communicate the gospel of salvation to Buddhists in Asia. The fact that this book is "forbidden" in Sri Lanka indicates that there is no freedom of religion there.³⁹ Weerasingha, of course, staunchly upholds the traditional exclusivist model and denies that there is salvation in Buddhism. He insists that the Buddhist concepts of gods and salvation

³⁷Ibid, 124-25.

³⁸Ibid., 125.

³⁹This has become a prohibited book in Sri Lanka, and it is not available in a bookstore or library.

are inconsistent with the Christian revelation. Though he did not write his book to answer pluralism, yet since it was written in a Buddhist context, he comments on the Buddhist concept of the Ultimate Reality: "The idea of God is rejected so vehemently that any experiential confession of a believer is merely analyzed as the projection of the believer's ideal--the response of the felt need to believe."⁴⁰ In his book, Weerasingha criticizes the Roman Catholic policy of "conquest missions" which subdued and conquered paganism by any means, even by colonial military powers. Especially his criticism of Roman Catholic missions is directed against coerced conversions, discrimination against native clergy, the missionaries' lack of Christian ethics, and syncretistic cultural adaptation to Buddhism.⁴¹ Regarding the latter, he observes,

One reason why Catholicism in comparison to Protestantism had a large measure of success is the fact that the faith itself has a religious ceremonial, processions, images, statues, holy water, fasts, prayers, invocation of saints and such practices that may find their parallel in popular Buddhism. Even though the religion came with all its other dissonant contraptions, the form of the practices itself was not totally foreign to those who decided to convert.⁴²

For Weerasingha, a theology of religious pluralism is unimaginable because Buddhists embrace so many idols that they would never allow Buddhism to be replaced by Christianity. His polemical and evangelistic approach to Buddhism is entirely based on an exclusivist model which claims that Christianity is absolutely true.

Evangelical Challenges to Pluralism in Malaysia

In Malaysia, a limited number of evangelicals has also dealt with pluralistic theology in a strictly restrictive environment. Malaysian evangelicals practice "heightened religious sensitivities" in relations to other faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The term "heightened religious sensitivities" represents the religious

⁴⁰Tissa Weerasingha, *The Cross and the Bo Tree*, 45.

⁴¹Ibid. 113-16.

⁴²Ibid., 115.

situation of Malaysia, which requires caution and deep consideration when one deals with matters related to religion because there is only a restricted freedom of religion there. As to this issue, S. Batumalai, who has been engaged in a dialogue with Muslims "for mutual understanding" and who has written many books and articles about it, accurately represents the religious situation in Malaysia. He says,

Though we enjoy a "limited freedom," there is much restriction for religious practice in Malaysia. According to our Constitution, Malays are also Muslims and they should not be converted to other religions. However, non-Malays have been converted to Islam by the Malays and with the Government's help. Non-Muslims' religious growth is hindered by all sorts of pressures.⁴³

Even in such a difficult context, some evangelicals in Malaysia boldly affirm the exclusivist message of the Christian faith by passing a negative judgment on the Western theological pluralism. However, it should be noted that those who are involved in the theological discussion on pluralism are mostly Chinese Malaysians. Two representative theologians such as Dr. Kim Tan Sai, the principal of Malaysia Bible College, and Dr. Ng Kam Weng, the Research Director of the Kairos Research Centre, challenge pluralism from the exclusivist perspective. In particular, the Kairos Research Centre "has been set up by a group of evangelical leaders to develop a thoughtful and comprehensive answer to contemporary challenges to the life and mission of the Church in Malaysia." Among its objectives, "touching on the uniqueness of Christ in the light of religious pluralism" is included.⁴⁴ Dr. Weng wrote a kind of apologetic book in order to respond to the charges and criticisms directed against Christian churches in Malaysia. Interestingly enough, he suggests that Christians in Malaysia should be engaged in a dialogue rather than in polemics and apologetics.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, his book seems to be basically polemic and apologetic in nature. As a matter of fact, it may be more honest to say that he wrote the book to advocate the practice of "religious pluralism" as a way of a

⁴³S. Batumalai, *A Malaysian Theology of Muhibbah: A Theology for a Christian Witnessing Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Com' Art Services, 1989), 22.

⁴⁴See an advertisement section of Kairos Research Centre in Ng Kam Weng, *Perfect Revelation: The Finality of Christ* (Petaling Jaya: Pustaka SUFES, 1995), 99.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 55.

peaceful coexistence in society.

Weng states in his books that Christians in Malaysia are "challenged to adopt a more tolerant attitude towards different religious beliefs." Critics say that "Christianity's religious exclusivity is inconsistent with its message of love," and that Christians should "abandon all talk of mission and conversion and opt instead for a more sensible decision to live in peaceful coexistence with believers of other religions."⁴⁶ To such criticism, he proposes that Christians in Malaysia practice legal and intellectual tolerance, meaning that "legal tolerance is a formal recognition of each individual's inalienable right to choose and practice his religion," and "intellectual tolerance is related to how one should make a judgment about other beliefs."⁴⁷ Concerning the former, he argues that "it is one of the fundamental liberties recognized by most modern constitutions," and concerning the latter he claims,

It is sometimes assumed that being intellectually tolerant means that one should not make any negative criticism against other religions. This opinion is however groundless since tolerance implies a prior judgment on the set of beliefs in view. It is one thing to practice social tolerance which accepts positively a person regardless of his beliefs.⁴⁸

Among the three possible soteriological options suggested by theologians--universalism, inclusivism, and exclusivism--he strongly defends the traditional evangelical model of "exclusivism." For him, exclusivism "should not be seen as an expression of arrogance or religious imperialism. It is rather a sincere attempt to be faithful to the revealed texts."⁴⁹ He clearly and firmly defends the exclusivist model:

Evangelism oriented Churches have traditionally presupposed an earlier profession of faith and personal acceptance of Christ within this life-time as necessary condition for eternal salvation. Such evangelists may not deny existence of God's general revelation but they are united in insisting that general revelation is an insufficient means of salvation. This leads to a

⁴⁶Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷Ibid., 74.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 80.

disturbing question regarding the eternal destiny of those who have died without hearing the message of the Gospel. Are they lost through no fault of their own? Such evangelists answer unflinchingly that they are lost. The unevangelized deserve condemnation because they have failed to live up to the light which God has granted them.⁵⁰

Weng's criticism is also focused on Hick's conception of the Ultimate reality. For Hick, the Ultimate reality is either indifferent or unable to bridge the chasm between the infinite and the finite.⁵¹ In conclusion, Weng emphasizes the moral adequacy of divine intervention in history because it brings about individual change or transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Due to his strong conviction of the exclusivist model, Dr. Tan Kim Sai does not hesitate to raise harsh objection to Hick's pluralism. He argues that "it is only an old ghost of universalism in a new dress, armed with more sophisticated weaponry,"⁵² because, "as far as the uniqueness of Christ is concerned, the New Testament is certainly exclusivist."⁵³ He proposes to affirm the salvific uniqueness of Christ by the affirmation of "Five Cs."

The "Five Cs" are as follows: "Cradle" as the symbol for Christ's incarnation; "Career" which refers to His life and ministry; "Cross" meaning His redemptive death; "Character" referring to His full sanctification and dedication; "Crown" as the symbol of Christ's resurrection and glorification.⁵⁴

His statements are only a reaffirmation of the Christian faith advocated by the early American fundamentalists during the 1920s, which focused largely on the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

Another Malaysian theologian, Albert Nuy, made the following statement on pluralism at a church conference where he indicated that the object of worship in other religions cannot be the Ultimate reality:

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 7-8.

⁵²Tan Kim Sai, "The Unique Christ in the Midst of Plurality of Religions," in *Macrux*, vol. 3 (May 1995), ed. Tan Kim Sai (Selangor: Malaysia Bible College, 1995), 26.

⁵³Ibid., 29.

⁵⁴Ibid., 31.

The pluralistic religious world challenges the apparent inconsistencies in Christian practices. If in fact idols are not "gods" but the material objects, then there must be no fear of them. There is of course the consideration that the objects of worship are inhabited by evil spirits. Any association with these is prohibited.⁵⁵

From these evangelical spokesmen's strong objections to pluralism, we learn that evangelical churches in Malaysia, though a persecuted minority, are staunchly defending the Christian faith. They remind us of the early Christians who were faithful even unto death.

Evangelical Challenges to Pluralism in Japan

Japan is certainly a religiously pluralistic society where many religions such as Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and many new religions seem to coexist peacefully, without much conflict between religions. In this regard, the Japanese society can be called "the department store of religions," and it leads to a high degree of advance in religious studies. After World War II, as Japan began to emerge as the most advanced country in Asia, it attracted many Western theologians who were greatly interested in Asian religions, among whom were Jurgen Moltmann, R. R. Neibuhr, Emil Brunner, John Benett, John Cobb, and John Hick.⁵⁶ These theologians wanted to investigate how their theological ideas related to Asian culture and society. For instance, John Hick testifies how he experienced a spiritual pilgrimage from "Calvinist orthodoxy" to religious pluralism by encountering men of other religions in Birmingham as well as by visiting some Asian countries including Japan.

⁵⁵Albert Vun, "The Challenge of Religious Pluralism: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *Readings in Malaysian Church and Mission*, ed. Goh Keat Peng (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka SUFES, 1992), 28.

⁵⁶Huruya, a Japanese Barthian theologian, says that, since Paul Tillich visited Japan in 1960, many Western theologians came to make religious surveys of Asia centering in Japan; and they experienced a Copernican revolution in their theology. For example, Jurgen Moltmann, who often visited Japan, seems to include many of the world's religious situations in his book *Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes*. See Huruyama Yasuo, *Theology of Religion* (古屋安雄, [宗教の神學] (東京: ヨルダン社, 1987), 281-82.

Thus it was not so much new thoughts as new experiences that drew me, as a philosopher, into the issue of religious pluralism, and as a Christian into inter-faith dialogue. (Subsequent visits to Hindu India, the Sikh Punjab, Buddhist Sri Lanka and multi-faith Japan were prompted by the initial impact of the Birmingham experience.) Encounters with remarkable individuals of several faiths, people whom I cannot but deeply respect, and in some cases even regard as saints, have reinforced the realization that our very different religious traditions constitute alternative human contexts of response to the one ultimate transcendent divine Reality.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that Japan is a multi-faith or religiously pluralistic society, Hick's pluralism is not much welcomed by Japanese churches. However, a study of Hick's pluralism seems to be more vigorous than in other Asian countries. Some of Hick's books have been translated into Japanese;⁵⁸ and two Japanese philosophers edited a book entitled *A Study of Religious Pluralism: With a Special Reference to John Hick*, which included the Japanese translation of Hick's "A Personal Note." This book consists of papers presented during the seminars conducted from the year 1994-1996 by a John Hick Study Group which was organized in 1994 in order to examine his theory in greater depth.⁵⁹

Hick was strongly criticized both by a Barthian theologian and by many evangelical theologians. Dr. Huruya Yasuo, professor of

⁵⁷John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 141.

⁵⁸The following books of John Hicks have been translated into Japanese: *God Has Many Names* {間瀬啓允, [神は多くの名前を持つ] (岩波書店, 1986)}, *The Second Christianity* {間瀬啓允, [もうひとつのキリスト教] (日本基督教出版社, 1989)}, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* {間瀬啓允, [宗教多元主義] (法蔵館, 1990)}, *The Rainbow of Faiths* {間瀬啓允, [宗教がつくる虹: 宗教多元主義と現代] (岩波書店, 1997)}.

⁵⁹In this book, most contributors are devoted to explain about Hick, without much criticism. However, Umezu Mitsuhiro, professor of Keio University, defines Hick's pluralism as "transcendental pluralism," meaning that Hick focused on the discussion of ultimate reality. Umezu argues that Hick makes a simple generalization on religions by neglecting the differences between religions. He comments, in conclusion, that Hick will receive hot criticism from other religions, especially from Buddhism because Buddhism in Japan will not agree with Hick's condemnation of the absolute claim of a religion as immoral. According to Umezu, "If one rules out exclusivist claim of religion, it means to deny the identity of religion." Umezu Mitsuhiro, "Religious Pluralism Seen from Ethical Perspective", 111. (梅津光弘, "倫理的に見た宗教多元主義," 間瀬啓允, 稻垣久和 編, [宗教多元主義の探究] (東京: 大明堂, 1995).

theology in Tokyo Theological College, repudiates Hick's pluralism from the Barthian theological perspective as "a kind of Christian heretics."⁶⁰ As already mentioned, a liberal church leader in Japan criticized Hick's radical pluralism because his theology could undermine churches in Japan which encounter subtle pressures from other religions.

Of course, evangelical theologians are unhappy with Hick's elevation of all religions to a status on a par with Christianity; they reject a critical approach to the Bible and reaffirm their total commitment to the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. Dr. Hatori, a representative Japanese evangelical theologian, reaffirmed his strong conviction of the Bible as God's special revelation at the theological consultation of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship on the theme of "The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World" in the following way:

In view of the general theme of this consultation with its focus upon the uniqueness of Christ, there seems to be a very basic prerequisite for our discussion of the theme of the unique Christ. It is the uniqueness of special revelation. Referring to the Old Testament, our Lord Jesus witnessed that the Scripture, in that case the Old Testament, was to reveal the Messiah, . . . It is in the New Testament that we come to the revelation which speaks of the uniqueness of Christ when in his own words he said: "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life"; . . . Therefore, it is not through general revelation or natural revelation but through special revelation that we come to the full knowledge of the uniqueness of Christ.⁶¹

Another evangelical theologian, Kazuhiko Uchida, holds to the same view--namely, that the general attitude of pluralism "may be represented by a simple dismissal of the infallibility of the Scripture. If we have no trustworthy revelation, the only way is to resort to the human religious experience."⁶² Basing his arguments thoroughly on the

⁶⁰Yasuo Huruya, "Theological Situation After the War," in *History of Theology in Japan*, eds. Huruya Yasuo, et al. (Tokyo: Jordan Pub., 1992), 178-80. 古屋安雄, 土肥昭夫, 佐藤敏夫, 八木誠一, 小田 雅也, [日本神學史].

⁶¹Yoshiaki Hattori, "The Unique Christ in the Challenge of Modernity," in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 81.

⁶²Kazuhiko Uchida, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," unpublished paper

Bible, he affirms that the incarnation of Jesus is unparalleled in other religions because other monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam repudiate the ideas of a God incarnate and God the Son, and the polytheistic religion of Hinduism claims to have many *avatars*, a word which is often rendered "incarnations." Uchida has attempted to demonstrate the uniqueness of Christ by emphasizing the uniqueness of his atoning death and resurrection, as well as the uniqueness of his authority over nature and the world. Furthermore, Uchida argues that "not only religious pluralism contradicts the scriptural view of other religions, but also it neglects or even destroys the theological foundations of Christianity."⁶³ He reaches the conclusion that pluralistic theology is, in the final analysis, a kind of Hinduism or mysticism:

It is not surprising, therefore, that religious pluralism has been depicted as a form of Hinduism. In fact, it is likely that religious pluralism far better fits in with the Hinduistic religious system than with Christianity. In other words, unless Christianity forsakes its essential characters, religious pluralism is alien to its believers, whereas Hinduism will probably be no substantial difficulty even if it takes in the ideas of religious pluralism. Such universalistic claim as we now see in religious pluralism is exactly what Visser't Hooft found in the challenge of his contemporary syncretistic religions which he describes as a call to the mystics all over the world to be united against those who believe in a particular divine revelation.⁶⁴

Uchida argues that, although the exclusivism paradigm is criticized because of its narrowness and intolerance of other religious beliefs, "Christian exclusivism does not necessarily make us exclusivistic in our relationship with the believers of other religions." Thus, he suggests the proper attitude of Christians to non-Christians is as follows:

We must be cautious not to confuse proclaiming Christ with imposing the so-called Christian culture. (In this respect, we Asians have been "victims" of such cultural imperialism). (ii) we must not be haughty nor aggressive but humble in our

presented at the Asia Theological Association's theological consultation in Manila, June, 1992, 15.

⁶³Ibid., 28.

⁶⁴Ibid., 30.

attitude toward them. (iii) We should not exclude dialogue with them. To learn from them does not mean that we admit a deficiency in the Christianity as such. Nonetheless there may be something in pagan religions which helps us develop in our own Christian faith. Their enthusiasm, loyalty, love and humility, for example, certainly challenge us to seek a greater devotion to and dependence on God.⁶⁵

This is a wise, positive, and humble attitude towards other religions while safeguarding the unique Christian message and mission. Dr. Uchida further describes Hick's pluralism as "scientific secularism" because he views the universe as a closed system of cause and effect and consequently excludes the possibility of miracles.⁶⁶

Dr. Inagaki Huruya, professor at Tokyo Christian University, assumes that Asians have a better understanding of worldviews and concepts suggested by Hindus and Buddhists than Western philosophers and theologians do. He argues that "Hick's concept of the 'self' is, in fact, only the 'self' which returns to the Ultimate Reality by departing from the Cartesian 'autonomous self.' It is a 'transcendental self' which enjoys the 'ultimate-oriented life.'" Inagaki says, "However, this must not be so. Nonetheless, when one theorizes concerning this religion to which Hick's 'self' returns (if we borrow Kant's epistemology) it is only to return to the Cartesian-Kantian rationalistic 'self.' In the final analysis, Hick's 'self' may be identical to the 'modern rationalistic self' which resulted in absolutizing the scientific-technological civilization."⁶⁷

In Japan, apart from Hick's or Knitter's pluralistic theology, similar ideas have been suggested by a liberal Protestant theologian and a liberal Roman Catholic, respectively. Evangelical churches and theologians have responded to the Japanese versions of pluralistic theology with some force. The former is Dr. Seiichi Yagi, a professor of New Testament, who has studied biblical criticism in Germany; and the latter is a famous novelist, Shusaku Endo, who never studied theology. Dr. Yagi rejects the traditional model of exclusivism and

⁶⁵Ibid., 33-34.

⁶⁶Ibid., 13.

⁶⁷Hisakazu Inagaki, *Philosophical Theology and Modern* (Tokyo: Jordan Pub., 1991), 75-76. (稲垣久和, 哲學的神學と現代). Also see Inagaki, "Experientialism of Religion and Transcendental Interpretation," in *The Exploration of Religion*, eds. Takamizu and Inagaki, 93.

suggests a Japanese version of pluralistic theology by way of repudiating the traditional concept of Christology and making a distinction between the "kerygmatic Christ" and the historical Jesus. Thus, he attempts to restructure the meaning of Christianity. Like Hick, he confesses that he experienced a second conversion during his theological studies in Germany from an exclusivist Christian particularist to a pluralistic Christian who embraces the adherents of other religions as brothers and sisters. According to his own testimony, he was born in 1932 and his father was a disciple of the famous Japanese theologian Uchimura Kanzo. While he was studying biblical criticism under Kasemann in Gottingen, he became deeply interested in Buddhism and experienced the "secret" of Zen Buddhism.⁶⁸ His main point is that "Jesus is no more than a man who lived perfectly in the reign of God, but the Christ is this reign of God, transcendental reality. The orthodox Christianity has been mistaken in confusing this transcendental reality (Christ) with Jesus a historical person."⁶⁹ But Yagi thinks that this reality is not found only in Christianity but is also found in other religions such as Buddhism. Therefore, it is natural that Yagi, like Western pluralists, denies Christian exclusivism.

In Yagi's theology, the key idea is "order of personal integration," a term which is difficult to define; but he defines it as "the state of a person" who knows how to maintain harmonious, good human relationships through service to his neighbors as the good Samaritan did. Accordingly, he argues that the reign of God, the Logos, the resurrected Christ, and God produce this type of integrated personality. In the final analysis, this integrated person is the ideal man or the man of charity which Buddhism teaches that a person can achieve on his own. This is different from the Christian concept of regeneration which is the supernatural, radical, transforming work of the Holy Spirit within a person.

Evangelical theologians in Japan reject these liberal views of religious pluralism. For example, Dr. Uchida notices some of the problems related to Yagi's concept of integration.

The integrated personality is, Yagi points out, exemplified by

⁶⁸Seichi Yagi, "Theological Situation after the War, No. 1 (1945-1970)," in Yasuo, et al., *History of Theology in Japan*, 144-45.

⁶⁹Seichi Yagi, *Is Christianity Believable?* (Tokyo: Koudansa, 1970), 4. [八木誠一, キリストキヨ]; cited by Uchida, "Religious Pluralism," 43.

the good Samaritan in Jesus' parable. What this man did to a wounded Jew, his enemy, indicates the fact that the order of integration enables a person to be so integrated that he overcomes the discrimination of race, culture, religion, thought, sex, age and social status. This further suggests the promise that a universal community of personal relationships will be fulfilled beyond the restrictions of ethnic, religious and cultural divisions.

It is far from possible for us to present his highly complicated philosophical arguments on a full scale. Nor is it possible to judge from the viewpoint of a neutral observer whether his claim of the essence of religious experiences shared by Christianity and Buddhism is valid or not. But suffice it to say here that his theory of the ordered integration cannot but be subjective, though he has tried to present it as objective as possible. And it is not clear at all how such a reality of integration naturally occurs.⁷⁰

Concerning Shusaku Endo's pluralism, Dr. Yasuo comments that Endo's pluralism has been developed entirely by himself in Japan's syncretistic religious situation without Endo having studied Hick or Knitter.⁷¹ Endo likens the process of accommodation to a Western suit of clothes which is altered into a more comfortable Japanese robe. He is a well-known and influential Roman Catholic novelist who grew up in a Roman Catholic family but claims to have experienced regeneration at the age of ten or eleven. He expresses his pluralism in a distinctive manner as a novelist who has never studied theology.

You may wonder why I have been attracted by Christianity despite the fact that there are many religions The answer is simple: I happened to be in the world of Christianity, but not that of any other religion. I think there are many routes from the four directions to climb up Mt. Fuji. Similarly, if someone lives sincerely, say, in a religion of Buddhism, and if another person lives sincerely in Christianity, they will come to the same truth after all. They all reach the same place through

⁷⁰Uchida, "Religious Pluralism," 44-45.

⁷¹Yasuo, *Theology of Religion*, 325.

different routes.⁷²

According to Dr. Uchida, Endo's pluralism is very similar to that of Hick's in that the same religious reality exists behind all major religions, though Endo does not mention any religions other than Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Like Hick, his views of the Scriptures and Christology are mainly based on biblical criticism, which denies the supernatural nature of Christ and the Scriptures. Hence, Jesus is not God the Creator and the Scriptures are not the inspired Words of God. Thus, we do not need to describe his pluralism here in detail because most of it, strangely, is similar to Western pluralism.

Debates over Pluralism in Korea and the Evangelical Responses

In Korea, pluralistic theology, by and large, is not welcomed because, as Hick recognized, "a strongly evangelical form of Christianity flourishes" in Korea.⁷³ As early as the 1980s, a few pluralists began to introduce a theology of religious pluralism; and, in the early 1990s, it became a controversial issue, mainly in the Methodist churches. However, it ended up creating some theological confusion among Christians, especially among students and younger Christians. Among the Methodist theologians, two professors, Dr. Sun-Hwan Byun and Dr. Jung-Soo Hong, boldly advocated pluralism, arguing that it is relevant and appropriate in the global age to take the concept of the exclusivist truth as being too arrogant and narrow-minded. Evangelical Methodists responded by strongly reaffirming the traditional exclusivist model. Because of the ensuing theological controversy, some have worried that the Methodist churches would suffer an unfortunate division. However, the controversy has not caused a division yet, although the gap between the two positions has further widened. Dr. Jung-Soo Hong justified his pluralistic theology on the basis of a post-modernistic perspective; but this did not exempt him from church discipline, resulting in his resignation from the Methodist Seminary. Dr. Hong did not exert much influence on the Korean

⁷²Endo's two important books are respectively *What is God to Me?* (Tokyo: Kyobunsha, 1983)(遠周作, [私にとって神とは]) and *My Jesus* (Tokyo: Shodensha, 1976) [はたしの イエス].

⁷³John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 117.

churches due to the brevity of his teaching career and the limited quantity of his writings on religious pluralism.

With regard to Dr. Sun-Hwan Byun, evangelicals in the Methodist denomination excommunicated him from the denomination, concluding that his theology was a kind of syncretistic relativism which denied the absoluteness of Christianity. In order to defend his position, Dr. Byun submitted a statement in which he explained that his Christian faith and theology are not much different from the traditional Christian theology and faith. Furthermore, "he sought to overcome the exclusivistic mind and attitudes of the Christians toward non-Christians"; and he is firmly convinced that the traditional Korean religions are salvific and non-Christians are anonymous Christians." However, his statement has failed to bridge the chasm because his theology has served only to widen the gap between the supporters and opponents of pluralism within the Methodist churches.⁷⁴

As far as Dr. Byun's pluralism is concerned, he has been influenced largely by Samartha, Pannikar, Knitter, Hick, and Yagi. He is especially indebted to Yagi's Christology which makes a distinction between the kerygmatic Christ and the historical Jesus. Like Yagi's dialogue with Buddhists, Byun also has been engaged in a series of dialogues with Buddhists in Korea by contributing articles to Buddhist magazines and by accepting Buddhists' invitations to deliver special addresses for them. If he has any difference with Yagi, it is that he prefers the concept of "the cosmic Christ" to the kerygmatic Christ, which means that every culture has its own cosmic Christ before the proclamation of the kerygmatic Christ in Korea or in any other mission field. Dr. Byun's concept of the cosmic Christ reflects "the unknown Christ" of Pannikar; however, it is so vague that many theologians raise questions concerning the concept.

Here we need to mention the academic background for Dr. Byun's pluralism, since there are some similarities between him and Yagi, because both realized the value of Asian religions during their theological studies in the West. Even as Yagi came to recognize the significance of Buddhism through meeting with a German missionary who translated Buddhist literature into Japanese, so Dr. Byun claims to have acknowledged the value of Buddhism through writing papers

⁷⁴Mun-Kyu Lee, "The Theology of Religious Pluralism and the Responses of the Korean Churches," *Ministry and Theology* (), " ;" [] (June 1997): 267-69.

about Buddhism for his classes. He experienced some limitations in his knowledge of classical languages, such as Hebrew, Greek, and Latin when he began his theological studies in the West, where these languages are crucial. Consequently, he focused on the study of Asian religions and presented papers discussing and introducing them, especially Buddhism, in his classes. His doctoral dissertation seeks to integrate Christianity and Buddhism, basically following Yagi's theology.

Here we need to also mention a Methodist woman professor of theology, Dr. Hyun- Kyung Chung, at Ewha Woman's University, who has emerged as a well-known female theologian because of her controversial keynote address, entitled "Come Holy Spirit--Renew the Whole Creation," presented at the WCC's Canberra Assembly held February 7-20, 1991. Dr. Chung's address has drawn severe criticism from evangelicals in Korea, who argue that her view does not represent the Third World theology, nor even Christian women in Asia. She syncretized the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit, for example, with the "spirits" of Korean culture and religion, which the churches have condemned as evil spirits. A Western missiologist offered the following comments on her presentation:

She orchestrated a "happening" that dramatically interwove her theology of the Holy Spirit with the issue of creation, indigenous peoples, other faiths and non-Western cultures, all presented through an Asian feminist experience that danced and felt its way to discerning how the Holy Spirit may be recognized in Korea, the land of spirits full of *Han*.⁷⁵

In the WCC assembly, the Greek Orthodox and Evangelical participants expressed their deep concern over Dr. Chung's keynote address as follows: "We must guard against a tendency to substitute a private spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits for the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son."⁷⁶

Not only have the Methodist churches experienced theological controversy over pluralism, but also some Presbyterian professors of

⁷⁵David Kerr, "From Christology to Pneumatology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 15, no. 3 (July 1991): 102. *Han* is a typical Korean word expressing feeling of anger, resentment, bitterness, grief, and broken-heartedness for those who have died unjustly throughout Korean history.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 102-3.

theology, who are generally more conservative than the Methodists, have been engaged in debates over the subject. For example, a student and young men's group at the Youngnak Church, the largest Presbyterian church in the world, initiated a seminar in 1991 on the topic, "What is the theology of religious pluralism?" They invited Dr. Kyung-Jae Kim, a professor of pluralistic theology at the liberal Hanshin University, and this author, the anti-pluralist missiologist who is a professor at the Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology. The former insisted on the necessity of pluralistic theology in the contemporary religious context largely on the basis of Hick's and Knitter's assumptions, while the latter argued for the evangelical's exclusivist position. It goes without saying that Dr. Kim was severely criticized at the seminar because the audience was not accustomed to that kind of new theology, even though they are relatively more familiar with new theologies and ideas than most people in conservative churches because the Youngnak Church is an active member of the Korea National Council of Churches. The seminar failed to find any meeting point or common ground between the two professors, but it was a good opportunity to exchange views and know more about each other.

Dr. Kim also received severe criticism from another Presbyterian professor, Dr. Jung-Eun Kim of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which takes a moderate theological position among the Presbyterian theological schools in Korea. The latter argued that "Dr. Kyung-Jae Kim's assumption that other religions have their own christ has absolutely no scriptural support and validation . . . and we have to raise the question as to whether he can demonstrate his position as a pastor and theologian from the biblical perspective." Dr. Jung-Eun Kim asserted that theological pluralism is an anti-Christian and heretical thought which is harmful and dangerous for the churches.⁷⁷

As we survey the debates in the Korean churches, we observe that evangelical theologians and professors have expressed strong negative responses to religious pluralism from the very beginning.

⁷⁷Jung Eun Kim, "Misunderstanding and Understanding of the Theology of Religious Pluralism: With Special Reference to Prof. Kyung Jae Kim's 'The Undesirable Responses of the Churches to Religious Pluralism,'" *The Christian Thought*, 36, no. 5 (May 1992): 137. (, " , 36 5).

While the Methodist churches were engaged in heated debates over it, some evangelical groups began in 1991 to discuss it seriously and to write many articles and books. For example, the Korean Evangelical Theological Society arranged a theological conference on the topic, "The Uniqueness and Theology of Religious Pluralism," in Seoul in October 1991 in which most evangelical theological professors expressed strong negative responses to it. Their arguments can be summarized as follows. First, pluralistic theology sacrifices the Christology of the Scriptures, which is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity. Dr. Ji-Chul Kim, a New Testament professor at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, affirmed that the theology of the cross repudiates any kind of attempt to reduce the understanding of God to a general experience of god or gods.⁷⁸ Other participants declared that both the Cross of Christ and the Pauline Epistles condemn other religions. Second, most participants firmly hold to the traditional exclusivistic position by affirming the uniqueness of Christ and the unique salvific revelation through the Bible. Third, the consensus of the conference was that evangelicals cannot accept any inclusivistic dialogue or a syncretistic approach to other religions.

A woman professor in the Methodist church, Dr. Dong-Joo Lee, severely criticized the claims of some liberal theologians that Christians can participate in ancestral worship by insisting that this view lacks any Scriptural support or validation.⁷⁹ This conference demonstrated that evangelicals think that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism negatively impact the Christian churches in Korea in the following ways. Buddhism wrongly influences the Christian churches by teaching the concept of autonomous salvation which absolutely contradicts Christianity's heteronomous salvation. Confucianism also engenders undesirable attitudes of authoritarianism and formalism, and Shamanism influences Christians to reduce the other-worldly dimension of their faith to concerns of this world and to try to manipulate God in order to obtain worldly blessings.

However, in Korea, none of the evangelical theologians and professors have written any books criticizing pluralism except this

⁷⁸Ji-Chul Kim, "Paul's Theology of the Cross and Religious Pluralism," in *Bible and Theology*, vol. 11, ed., The Korean Evangelical Theological Society (Seoul: Kyomunsa, 1992), 92ff. (, " 가 ," [] 11 , 1992).

⁷⁹Dong-Joo Lee, "Confucianism and the Evangelization of the Ancestral Worship Culture," in *Bible and Theology*, vol. 11, 151ff.

writer, who published a book entitled *Religious Pluralism and Missions Strategy to Other Religions* in Korean in 1994.⁸⁰ He repudiates pluralism on the grounds that it is a syncretistic approach and a surrender of biblical Christianity to Asian religions and cultures.

Before the arrival of Western pluralistic theology in Korea, similar ideas had also been suggested in Korea. Rev. Young-Mo Yu, who has been influenced by a famous Japanese theologian, Uchimura Kanzo, advocated a kind of religious pluralism, saying that no religion can claim absolute truth and superiority for its tenets. He said that "we do not know which religion has more truth than the other. . . . We should not make comparisons of religions. Even Buddhism should not be compared to other religions."⁸¹ Furthermore, he argues that Confucianism has received revelation, and its moral teaching of self-discipline is to be identified with prayer in Christianity. "Confucius and Mencius are respectively the Himself (man of virtue)⁸², so Jesus is also the Himself." For Yu, the Old Testament can be replaced by canons of other religions; and faith itself, no matter what it may be, eventually leads man to return to God the Father.⁸³ However, he implicitly indicates that God the Father is the same Ultimate Reality which every religion is attempting to reach.

CONCLUSION

In missiology, it is often said that "daughter churches" are more conservative than "mother churches." This phenomenon has proven to be true in Asia. Asian Christians are not happy with the Western pluralists who condemn the exclusivist model as being arrogant and prefer relativism. Unfortunately, they seem to neglect the reality that Asian religions tend to absolutize their religious tenets to the degree of excluding and persecuting minority religions. It should be noted that Asian evangelical criticisms of pluralism largely come from their former experience and practice of other religions as well as from their

⁸⁰Ho-Jin Jun, *Religious Pluralism and Missions Strategy to Other Religions* (Seoul: Seongkwangsha, 1994) ([]).

⁸¹Il-Sup Shim, "Rev. Young-Mo Yu's Religious Pluralism and Indigenous Faith," in *Christian Thought*, 37, no. 12 (December 1993): 100. (, " , ").

⁸²The Man of virtue represents an idealistic or perfect man, a fundamental concept of Confucianism taught in the *Annals* by Confucius.

⁸³Il-Sup Shim, "Yu's Religious Pluralism," 100-1.

strong conviction that the Scripture is the absolute norm and authority for faith and theology. Theologians express this as the *norma normans non normata* for faith and theology, meaning that the Scripture is the regulative norm, but that they are not regulated by others. In this regard, Asian evangelicals have never doubted the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scripture upon which Christianity is founded. Accordingly, they consider that denying the authenticity of the Scripture is tantamount to denying their Christian identity. The Scripture is the classic, normative text which constitutes the heart of the Christian faith and theology. Most evangelical theologians in Asia express their deep concern over the anti-biblical interpretation of Western pluralists, arguing that it destroys the theological foundation of Christianity. A Roman Catholic theologian rightly points out the problems of the Western pluralists' view of the Scripture:

The problems with the pluralist interpretation of scripture include not only conclusions reached about the normativity of Christ, but also presuppositions about the interpretation of texts in general. The pluralist approach, as seen in Hick, Young, Knitter, and the contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, assumes the priority of the world experiences and phenomena over the realm of language and texts, like the Bible. Priority of experience means that the texts which give linguistic form, shape and intelligibility to experience are secondary to a primal experience of life and the world. . . . The result of this prioritizing of experience is that pluralists tend to deemphasize the place of sacred texts in the encounter among religions, and treat religious language more as divisive rather than as solidifying of human community.⁸⁴

It should be noted that the adherents of other religions never express any kinds of doubts or suspicions as to the veracity of their canons, their sacred writings. It is unimaginable for them to do so because any doubt about their religion or god is considered the most horrible blasphemy they may commit. This attitude is clearly manifested in many Asian religions, especially in Islam. If other

⁸⁴Edward G. Scheid, *Scripture and Theology of the Religions: On the Theological Interpretation of Sacred Scripture in Christian Attitudes Toward World Religions* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Duquesne University, 1992), 195.

EVANGELICAL CHALLENGES-61

religionists deal with their canons in the way that the critics of the Bible do, their religions would quickly collapse because they have no firm foundation.

Secondly, exclusivism in Asia does not mean arrogance or narrow-mindedness; because Asian Christians, as a minority, cannot maintain an arrogant or proud attitude in the midst of increasing suffering and persecution because of their beliefs.