One God, Many Faiths: Reformed Theology Engages Religious Pluralism
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Introduction: Some Preliminary Matters

In good Reformed style, my address has three parts. First, I want to speak to the question of why we are here discussing Christianity's relationship to other religious traditions. What is the *context* that brings us together to discuss the issue of a theological response to religious plurality? Second, I wish to dedicate some particular comments to who we are. In what does Reformed *identity* consist? Third, I want to explore the contours of what a—and I wish to emphasize the indefinite article—Reformed, theological *response* to religious plurality might look like.

But preliminarily a note about terminology. It is customary to hear the terms "plurality" and "pluralism" used in contemporary discussions about the manifold religious traditions in our world. I take plurality to refer to the simple fact that there are many religious traditions in our world. Pluralism, in the weak sense in which the term tends to be used, is simply a synonym for plurality. However, in the strong sense in which pluralism is often used—say, by the philosopher of religion John Hick[1]—pluralism refers to a philosophical and theological judgment about the fact of religious manyness. To keep things as clear as I can in what follows, when I use pluralism I will do so in the strong sense of the term. For referrals to the fact of manyness (i.e., the weak sense of the term pluralism), I will employ the term plurality.[2]

Context: Why

So why are we here in the year 2012 discussing this issue? It is hard to imagine such a gathering on this topic taking place a century or two ago. Why have Christians in the Western world become concerned about religious plurality in our time? After all, there have been many religions in existence for centuries, even millennia: The Hindu religious tradition is some four to five millennia old; Judaism is three to four millennia old; the Confucian and Daoist religious traditions are at least two and a half millennia old; Buddhism is two and a half millennia old; Christianity is two millennia old; Islam is 1300 years old. So what is the difference between us and our Christian forebears in 1912 or 1812? I think it is this: We have become keenly aware of, sometimes uncomfortably conscious of, the fact of many religious traditions in the world. While such traditions have been available for our theological reflection for some time, we have not been particularly concerned about them until rather recently. In rather more academic-sounding parlance, then, we might say that while religious plurality is rather old *objectively* speaking, it is rather new *subjectively* speaking. The next logical question is therefore this: What brought about this change in awareness? In what follows, I shall review seven factors that have made late-twentieth century

[1] See for example John Hick, "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" in Richard J. Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 335-46.
[2] Caveat: In my title, I have employed the term "pluralism" in the weak sense of the term.

and early twenty-first century Westerners conscious of religious plurality.[3] Four have roots in premodernity or early modernity; three reflect realities in the 20th century.

The first factor I would call "the Columbus factor." Beginning in the 15th century, European seafaring nations began to explore the globe ("in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," as every schoolchild has learned). As European Christians began to explore the world beyond Europe, they found civilizations and cultures as well as something they would have identified as "religion"—beliefs, rituals, suprahuman realities, engagements with power, and the like. In time, the discovery of these new worlds in faraway continents was followed by commercial undertakings and missionary activity. But something decisive had occurred: European Christianity had begun to realize, experientially realize, that the world was much bigger than Europe and that religion was much more diverse than Christianity, even differing expressions of Christianity.

The second factor I would designate "the Reformation factor." Beginning in the 16th century, a seismic change occurred in Western Christianity. Even though there had been a very important split between two Christian traditions, Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic, in the 11th century (known as the Great Schism), Western Christianity had for centuries been known in one monolithic form: the Roman Catholic Church. This changed in the 16th century, beginning with Luther's revolutionary thinking about justification, scripture, liturgy, and the like. In time, Lutheran versions of Christianity were joined by Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist versions. The Reformation of the 16th century thus changed the nature of Western Christianity fundamentally. At the dawn of modernity, therefore, there was clearly greater intra-Christian plurality. Room had been created for yet more radical and novel ways of expressing humanity's religious quest—inter-religious plurality.

The third factor might be termed "the Enlightenment factor." Beginning in the 17th century, Western Christianity began to encounter new currents in thought about the nature of the world, the organization of human life in society, the existence of a divine being, and the like. These currents, which we today recognize as the first stirrings of modernity, changed Western Christianity in fundamental ways. In part fueled by the disagreements and even violence evident in the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath, some European thinkers began to conceive a new way of thinking about human life and society. The thinking went roughly as follows: In the domain of religion, when human beings listen to the dictates of gods—call such dictates revelation(s)—conflict and violence often result. Perhaps rather than letting revelation(s) flame human passions, we should allow the cool light of reason to dictate and organize human affairs. Once human reason had been recognized and installed as the arbiter of truth, its critical cannons were trained on Christianity, which was often found to be deficient. After all, Christianity confesses a basic belief in a being that no one can see or whose existence can be rationally demonstrated to everyone's indubitable satisfaction. Moreover, Christianity claims that its object, God, once became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. This incarnation, so the Christian claim goes, was put to death but rose bodily from death. Such claims defy the dictates of reason and science. Moreover, basic Christian beliefs, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the incarnation, do not make a great deal of logical sense. Christians do not themselves seem to understand them, and they are hard-pressed to explain them to others. In short, western Christianity in early modernity found itself on the hotseat and adopted a defensive strategy and contented itself with a privatized existence. In the privacy of its constitutionally protected space—at least in the United States— it was viewed with some suspicion by many in the public square. One might generally say that in modernity, western Christianity underwent a credibility crisis. The world that Luther and Calvin inhabited was thus markedly different than the world that Descartes and Locke, who both lived a century or so later, knew.

The fourth factor, what I will call "the scholarship factor," brings us into the 19th century. Western universities came to be in the Middle Ages. In the 19th century, courtesy of developments in Germany in particular, things began to change in university circles, especially as regards focus and

[3] For the following account of the factors that have made Westerners newly and deeply aware of religious plurality, I am drawing on Richard J. Plantinga, "Introduction: Religious Pluralism Old and New" in Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality*, 1-3.

curriculum. Several new disciplines or fields of inquiry came to be. In addition to the science of society (sociology), which reflected the increasing complexity of the urban situation in the industrial revolution, there was also a new field that studied preliterate cultures (anthropology). And about two-thirds of the way through the century, a new field of inquiry came to be whose object it was to carefully study the religious traditions of humanity. Known as *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and as "comparative religion" in Britain, we in North America today generally designate this field as "religious studies." Rather than investigating one's own beliefs and practices (i.e., theology), religious studies carefully investigates others' beliefs and practices. It is important to bear in mind that prior to the advent of religious studies, Westerners did not know very much about the world religions. Even as literate a figure as Ralph Waldo Emerson could in 1845 misclassify the Hindu sacred writing, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as a Buddhist text.[4] In addition to university courses, then, the 19th century increasingly saw research on others' religious traditions conducted—articles written, sacred texts translated, handbooks made available, and the like. The net effect of the scholarship factor resulted in a dawning awareness that humanity's religious history is large and complex, especially for societal leaders who were exposed, at a formative moment in their lives, to what universities had to offer.

The fifth factor might be referred to as "the Western crisis" factor. As the 20th century dawned, 19th century optimism quickly gave way to the sobering realities of conflict and war. In the summer of 1914, war broke out in Europe that ended up engulfing much of the world. The Great War raged on until 1918. At its conclusion and in its aftermath, European civilization found itself in a sustained period of reflection and analysis. How did this grizzly conflict come about? How could this putatively great civilization have prosecuted such a deliberate act of self-annihilation? The 1920s saw the rise of new political experiments in various parts of Europe, and by the 1930s it became clear that another installment of global conflict would be difficult to avoid. From 1939 to 1945, another war was indeed prosecuted (World War Two). At its conclusion, upwards of fifty million people lay dead. More questioning set in. Was Western civilization at its end? Were the mainline religious traditions of the West, especially Christianity, capable of making sense of the horror witnessed in the past decades? Or was Christianity perhaps nearing its own end? The Western crisis factor had the effect of challenging Christianity and deepening the credibility crisis begun in the Enlightenment.

The sixth factor has to do with changes in other parts of the globe. While Western civilization and Christianity underwent these struggles and even decline during the 20th century, parts of Asia and some Asian religious traditions experienced an uptick in fortunes. This I will call "the Asian renewal factor." Western colonialism was coming to an end in parts of Asia, as protests were launched against foreign occupation and domination. These protests were accompanied by the desire for autonomy and independence. In and through these events, indigenous national and religious identities were discovered or rediscovered. One thinks, for example, of Gandhi, who led his nation to independence from the British and who discovered his Hindu identity in the process. Another example: the resurgence of Islam over the course of the 20th century. The Middle Eastern world, with its oil reserves, found itself in a relatively powerful position *vis-à-vis* the West, particularly after OPEC's oil embargo in 1973. The uneasy dance between the Middle East and the West continued to be visible in succeeding events, including the Iranian hostage crisis (1979), the Gulf War (1990-91), the World Trade Center bombing (1993), the terrorist attacks in September of 2001, the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2001), and the like. Through these events, Westerners have become aware that there are millions of persons on this planet who hold a rather different set of beliefs than those that they themselves do.

The seventh and final factor can best be thought of as a canopy under which a series of phenomena can be found. This I will call "the globalization factor." Sometime during the course of the 20th century, it began to dawn on Westerners that metaphorically speaking, the world seemed to be getting smaller: Events in one part of the world, which might well have remained unknown in centuries past, became instantly known due to technology and global communications. For example, in far away Kuwait

[4] See Eric J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gītā: Western Images of the* Bhagavadgītā (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1985), 22.

in 1990, when Saddam Hussein's army invaded, the world knew of it instantly and took careful notice as gasoline prices spiked and war suddenly loomed as a real possibility. For Westerners, knowledge of far-flung events and places was coupled with the sense that what transpired far from home could have real effect close to home. In addition, due to global migration (immigration), Westerners in the 20th century found themselves living among persons who confessed not a Christian faith that originally hailed from Europe but rather a Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim faith that originally hailed from Asia. In other words, increasingly in the 20th century, the "world religions" were not realities located halfway around the world. Neither were they any longer mere objects for abstract reflection. Rather, the world religions were now concrete experiential realities, located at residences down the street, incarnated in persons across the table at a school board meeting, and perhaps made vividly present in the visage of the checkout clerk at the grocery store. Moreover, it frequently turned out, the persons who confessed these novel faiths were very decent, kind, moral human beings. How could this be? What should a Christian make of all of this?

These seven factors have thus seen to it that Westerners no longer live in blissful ignorance of religious plurality. Having become thus sensitized, as indicated above, Westerners—and Christians in particular—have begun to wonder about the status of non-Christian persons and traditions. Is only Christianity true? Does that mean that some two-thirds of the planet's population is simply consigned to harsh judgment and eternal torment? Or are all religions perhaps on an equal footing? Are there other options? I will explore these matters in due course. But first some words about who we, who undertake such theological reflection in the Reformed tradition, are.

Identity: Who

It is a question worth asking, even in an ecumenically-conscious time such as ours. What about particularity? Do such things still matter? They certainly do for those of us who are located in particular traditions. These traditions made us who we are. They moreover contribute to the larger fabric that is Christianity in the world.

So what does it mean to be Reformed? I wish to distinguish three dimensions in thinking about this matter. First, I will explore this matter from an *ecclesial* perspective. Second, I will investigate different possibilities for thinking about Reformed identity from a *theological* point of view. Third, I will briefly indicate what being Reformed might mean from a *cultural* standpoint.

First, then, let us turn to the ecclesial dimension. The concept of being Reformed of course arose in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. In that century, some Christians were of the judgment that the Roman Catholic Church was in need of change and was accordingly, in its present form, "unreformed." By contrast, Reformed churches were those in Switzerland (Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich beginning in the 1520s and John Calvin in Geneva beginning in the 1530s) seeking change that were neither Catholic nor Lutheran. The identity of these churches was eventually transmitted to other parts of Europe and later also to North America. These churches were distinguished by a Presbyterian from of polity. They emphasized the preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments (baptism, holy communion), and church discipline. They furthermore stressed, in their insistence that churches should be reformed according to the standard of the Word of God (i.e., scripture), that this reformation be ongoing. One of the 16th century slogans that Reformed Christianity has clung to is therefore this one: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (a reformed church will always be reformed—the sense is that Reformed churches are always reforming). Even though Scripture is the primary norm for ongoing reformation, Reformed churches are marked by an ongoing confessional tradition. In addition to accepting the ecumenical creeds of Patristic Christianity, Reformed churches of the Reformation era developed various confessions and catechisms—such as the Belgic Confession (1561); the Heidelberg Catechism (1563); the Canons of Dort (1618-19); and the Westminster Confession (1646). But that did not end matters. Reformed churches continued to author confessions. Consider these Reformed confessions, all of which date from the 20th century: "The Barmen Declaration" (Confessing Church, Germany, 1934); "Foundations and Perspectives of Confession" (Hervormde Kerk, Netherlands, 1949);

"The Confession of Jesus Christ and the Church's Responsibility for Peace" (Federation of Reformed Churches in Germany, 1981); "Belhar Confession" (Dutch Reformed Mission Church, South Africa, 1986); "Our World Belongs to God" (Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1987). It is instructive to compare Lutheranism in this regard, which expressed its belief in the Book of Concord of 1580[5]; it has not substantially added to it in an ongoing fashion.

Let us turn now to the theological dimension. It seems to me that there are two ways that one could proceed here. One could ask the "what" question and seek to specify unique content that accounts for Reformed theological identity. One could then specify some area of content or other, such as the sovereignty of God, a high view of scripture and its authority, predestination, creation, and the like. The problem with this strategy, it seems to me, is this: There are other Christian traditions with similar emphases. I think it should be noted at this juncture that there are not unique, Reformed views of absolutely everything. For example, there is no definitive or unique Reformed take on what is arguably the most fundamental Christian doctrine, namely, the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, it seems to me, being Reformed involves confessing historic Christian doctrine. These doctrines may be ordered a certain way; there may be certain emphases. But as I understand it, being Reformed—as regards content—involves confessing the basic, historic, orthodox doctrines of the Christian faith.

So if content and the "what" question is not the best way to proceed, what then? I would suggest that we explore the "how" question, the question of how a Reformed theologian thinks about approach. Here I would suggest that the slogan adopted by our forebears be adapted: *theologia reformata semper reformanda* (reformed theology will always be reformed—the sense is that Reformed theology is always reforming). Theology is a human and profoundly fallible venture; it must be constantly ventured and constantly reformed according to its prime source and norm: scripture. There is thus a kind of Augustinian restlessness in the Reformed way of thinking about the theological task. The slogan indicates as much: There is a past on which to draw in which something has been settled (Reformed theology)—but this past must constantly engage the present (always reforming). So there is a relationship between stability and instability at the heart of being Reformed. Given this commitment to the ongoing task of theology, the Reformed theologian draws on scripture, tradition, and reason and experience and seeks to speak a word about God that is faithful to scripture and tradition (the primary and secondary sources of theological inquiry) and that is faithful to reason and experience (the tertiary source of theological inquiry); in other words, Reformed theology seeks to be both orthodox (true to scripture and the Christian tradition) and coherent (true to human reason and experience). It is relatively easy to be one or the other; it is relatively more difficult to be both.[6] Only when theology is orthodox and coherent, furthermore, can it truly be relevant in helping believers live the Christian life in the world.

In this connection, it is instructive, I submit, that the two major re-orientations of modern Protestant theology were undertaken by Reformed theologians: Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Karl Barth (1886-1968), both of whom had this deep instinct for ongoing relevance.[7] As Barth noted, it is not first and foremost a question of what the prophets and the apostles have said but of what we must say on their basis.[8] In sum, then, Reformed theology has an ongoing task. It seeks to speak a word about God in our time on the basis of scripture, tradition, and human reason and experience. It seeks to do so in an orthodox, coherent fashion.

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[5] On the teachings of Lutheranism in its formative stage, see *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand *et al*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

[6] Further on the workings of systematic theology, from a Reformed point of view, see Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 1.

[7] See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Evanston: Harper & Row, 1963), 2 vols; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), 4 vols.

[8] See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 16.

How does this understanding of what it means to be Reformed ecclesially and theologically come to cultural expression? The Reformed person is not content to attend a certain church and order his or her beliefs in a certain way. He or she also is convinced that Reformed Christianity has a cultural dimension. Consequently, the Reformed tradition has also sought to reform society according to the Word of God: One thinks of Calvin's Geneva, Puritan America, and Abraham Kuyper's Netherlands. One also thinks of a plethora of academic institutions founded by Reformed believers in the last half millennium (e.g., the Genevan Academy [1559], Harvard University [1636], Princeton University [1746], Calvin College [1876], the Free University of Amsterdam [1880]). The cultural expression of Reformed Christianity is often referred to as "the transforming vision," an idea popularized by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*.[9] This vision runs some risks, including possible lack of empirical verification and the appearance of triumphalism. Without sufficient grounding in ecclesiology and theology, moreover, this vision runs the risk of secularization, as Dutch theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw insightfully and suggestively observed in the mid-20th century.[10]

Response: What

So here we are, Reformed believers living in the 21st century, keenly aware of religious plurality and sometimes troubled by it. Moreover, as Peter Berger notes, in our time we are subject to "the heretical imperative."[11]That is, in a pluralistic world we choose—indeed, we must choose— what we believe and what we do not believe. Where do we—we Reformed Christians—go for answers?

The intuitive Reformed reply to that question is, of course, scripture. [12] What does scripture say about the matter of religious plurality? Scripture is, obviously, not a manual of systematic theology with a convenient index. But if one examines scripture carefully, one notices a number of things.[13] First of all, both the Old and New Testaments unfold in pluralistic environments. For ancient Israel, the context concerned the religious backdrop of the Ancient Near East, with its assortments of divinities and religious traditions. For the fledgling Christian church, there was the reality of the Graeco-Roman world, complete with philosophies, religions, heresies, and the like. Second, one sees in scripture two large and sometimes contrary-sounding themes. The first I will call "universality": The God who created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1) created all that is and is the source of everything that exists. This God, moreover, is a personal being who desires relationship with human beings, all of whom bear the divine image. Even when things went wrong in creation, the biblical God authored a plan of salvation that ultimately was offered to all (Acts 2, 1 Tim 2:4). God so loved the creation , says John 3:16—which is virtual shorthand for the entire biblical narrative—that he sent his only son. In this crucial passage, we also see an expression of the contrasting theme of "particularity." God chose one people to be the instrument of the salvific plan bestowed on creation. This people was to be an example to the rest of the world and holy in its conduct. This people was promised a messiah. In the New Testament, we learn that the messiah has come. The God who created the world has chosen to take up fleshly residence in a particular Jewish baby boy: Jesus of Nazareth. In this particular incarnation, salvation would be offered to the world, first to the Jew and then also to the Gentile. It took the early Christian church time to sort out its relationship to its Jewish past (see Acts 10, where Peter's vision of unclean animals helped him do so). Just as the chosen

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[9] See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), especially chapter 6.
[10] See Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David. E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 51.
[11] See Peter Berger, "God in a World of Gods," *First Things* 35 (1993), 27.
[12] For an interesting recent book on scripture, originating from within the Reformed tradition broadly conceived, see N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
[13] The following comments on the religious plurality and scripture draws centrally on Richard J. Plantinga, "The Bible and Religious Pluralism" in Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality*, 11-25. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

people of Israel was the instrument of the wholeness and healing brought to the world in the old dispensation, the church is that instrument in the new dispensation. Moreover, claims the New Testament, this Jesus is *the* way to the Father (Jn 14:6); salvation can be found through no one else (Acts 4:12).

These were the themes that the early "Christians" (Christians were first so-called at Antioch—Acts 11:26) took with them as they sized up the pluralistic world in which they found themselves. Having just sorted out their similarity to and difference from Judaism, they next had to figure out their relationship to the Graeco-Roman world by which they were surrounded. They came to some startlingly different conclusions. Some favored rather more exclusivistic construals of Christianity's relationship to other traditions (i.e., Tertullian), some rather more inclusivistic views (i.e., Justin Martyr), and some combinations of the two (i.e., Augustine).These positions would echo down through the Christian centuries and be repeated or newly formulated many times. It is therefore worth our pausing to try to clarify what these positions are. It has in fact become customary in Christian theology to refer to three main positions (logically, there are more than three) when it comes to thinking about Christianity's relationship to other religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This typology[14] has significant drawbacks. I will deal with them later. But for now let us review the positions for the sake of contemporary literacy, convenience, and instruction.

Exclusivism is the view that God is exclusively known in the Christian church or tradition. Salvation is exclusively made available in the Christian church or tradition. Other ways to God are excluded. Exclusivists point to certain key biblical texts as warrant for their position: John 14:6 (access to the Father is mediated by Christ alone) and Acts 4:12 (there is no other name than Christ by which salvation is available). They also point to a variety of theologians and statements in the Christian tradition for support, including the Athanasian Creed (which states that whoever desires salvation should confess the universal, Christian faith and whoever does not will perish eternally), Augustine in portions of the *City of God*, the (Catholic) doctrine that there is no salvation outside the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*), the writings of John Calvin, some of the writings of Karl Barth, the writings of Hendrik Kraemer, and so on.[15] In short, exclusivism is the mainline understanding of much of the church's thinking throughout much of its history.

Inclusivism is the view that God is the God of all the world and that therefore all human beings—who are created in God's image and therefore worthy of dignity and respect—are included in God's plan for the cosmos. Inclusivists hold that revelation and knowledge of God is available outside of the Christian church or tradition (albeit partial revelation or knowledge of God in comparison with the relatively full revelation and knowledge of God found in Christianity). They also see possibilities for salvation beyond Christianity (although such would be provided by the work of Christ). For biblical support for their position, inclusivists point to texts such as Genesis 1 (God created the whole world), John 3:16 (God loves the whole world and sent his son to redeem it), and 1 Timothy 2:4 (God wills the salvation of all). In the Christian tradition, several thinkers can be characterized as inclusivists: Justin Martyr, many modern liberal Protestants (such as Joachim Wach), C.S. Lewis, Karl Rahner, and Pope John Paul II. Elements of the inclusivistic position can also be seen in theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Newbigin.

Pluralism is the view that there are a variety of paths to the one transcendent Being or Reality. All these paths are on an equal footing; they all provide for revelation, knowledge of God, and salvation. Pluralists tend not to cite biblical texts as support for their position, and this for two reasons. First of all, there really are no biblical texts that bolster a pluralist position. Second, pluralists tend not to have a very high view of biblical authority, so finding biblical basis for their position is not a high priority.

Given biblical revelation and the distillation of theological positions contained in the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism typology, what should a Reformed theologian conclude? To review what I argued

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[14] The typology is itself a creation of the pluralist industry, designed to make pluralism look appealing and exclusivism appear untenable. See Tim S. Perry, *Radical Difference: A Defence of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions*, Editions SR, 27 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 12-7.

[15] On these texts, see Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality*, *passim*.

in the foregoing, it seems that we need to articulate a position on other religions that is orthodox (faithful to scripture and the Christian tradition) and that is coherent (faithful to human reason and experience) as we in an ongoing way seek to address an issue of contemporary relevance. That said, I think we can rule one position out from the outset. I believe that pluralism (in the strong sense, as a philosophical and theological judgment about the fact of religious manyness) is incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. It is at odds with several central, orthodox, Christian commitments, including a high view of scripture and its authority, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the person of Christ, the idea of Christian mission, and the like. You can be a pluralist in today's world without risk to your safety (neither the state nor the church will seek to imprison you) but you cannot be an orthodox Christian in good standing in any credible church and hold this position, it seems to me.

So we are left with exclusivism and inclusivism. Instructively, many theologians in the Christian tradition sound both strains in their theology, as I noted earlier, including Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Newbigin. That should tell us something, namely this: Deciding this matter is a complex affair. That is one reason why I find this typology problematic. It tends to reduce everything to the question of salvation (i.e., the question of who is excluded from and who is included in the ark of salvation).[16] Moreover, the typology is not flexible enough to address all of the complexities involved, as I will briefly argue below.

So what to do? I would offer a Reformed, theological response to religious plurality that emphasizes the following. In a pluralistic world, the Christian should confess his or her faith that the triune God's plan of salvation for the world has been centered on Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). This is the norm that we know in faith to be true. Christ is the sole means of salvation. In this sense, exclusivism seems justified. But even if this is the clear and revealed norm concerning salvation, we are inclined to ask limit questions: May God work elsewhere? Are non-Christians saved? Even if Christ is the sole *means* of salvation, might the *scope* of salvation be broader than traditionally thought?

The answer to the first question must surely be "yes": human beings have no right to limit the sovereign God's working. The answer to the second question—are non-Christians saved?—suggests three possible responses. The first would be to answer in the affirmative—yes, there is salvation outside of the norm proclaimed in Christianity. The second would be to answer negatively—no, it is not possible that there is salvation outside of Christianity. Both of these responses, it seems to me, make a common mistake. They put the believer in the place of God, making judgments that are not theirs to make. Scripture is not systematic, unambiguous, or crystal clear on this matter. As C.S Lewis has written: "Is it not frightfully unfair that this new [redeemed] life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by Him."[17] I therefore suggest a third possibility: Rather than declare salvation outside of Christianity to be a reality without qualification or deny it as even a possibility, it seems to me that Christians can hope for it.[18] Is it not reasonable so to *hope* if one declares one's *faith* in a just God who is *love* (1 Jn 4:8)? It is interesting that the New Testament often connects faith and hope, including the famous passage in Hebrews 11 that defines faith, and in the famous homily on love in 1 Corinthians 13. Hope, moreover, is not fantasy—which is to say utterly groundless and completely fanciful. Hope has grounds for its position, namely, the being of the God identified in the Old Testament as Yahweh (I am, I will be) and in the New Testament as love (1 Jn 4:8). This God is merciful and just, says the biblical narrative, and loves the world (Jn 3:16). This God even desires the salvation of all (1 Tim 2:4). Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar asks an intriguing question in the title of his book *Dare*

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[16] Further on the meaning of salvation, see Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, chapter 12.

[17] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 65.

[18] On the concept and theology of hope, see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James Leitch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).

We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"? It is clear in Balthasar's book that he answers the question posed in the title affirmatively.[19] What is the norm with respect to salvation? What is the means of salvation? The answer to both questions is Christ. Connecting now to the third question posed earlier, what is the scope of salvation—especially in connection with that mass of humanity that lived before the advent of Christianity or never heard the Christian gospel? Would their damnation be just? I hope that the scope of salvation is rather wide. I hope that the same grace that saves Christians might be dispensed elsewhere. I not only think that Christians *can* hope these things, I believe that Christians *should* hope these things.

In a sense, that New Testament text that stands as virtual shorthand for the entire biblical narrative would have us think along these lines. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16a, NRSV). God—the central agent and revelatory concern of the entire theocentric biblical narrative—who is love—had so much love (the Greek verb in Jn 3:16 is *agapao*, cognate with the Greek noun *agape* used in 1 Jn 4:8) that the object of the verb "love" in the text is "the world" (*kosmos*), all of created reality and not some mere part of it. And if God loves the world, Christians are, it seems to me, obliged to follow suit and love all of their fellow image-bearers and treat them with maximal Christian civility. John 3:16 thus serves to remind us again of those two principles operative in scripture: the creational principle of universality (the world) and the incarnational principle of particularity (the Son).

So how does one conduct oneself in a pluralistic world? Aside from the ethical suggestions just offered about treatment of our fellow human beings who profess a different faith, one should, it seems to me, point to the triune God specially revealed in Christ. One thus tells the Christian story in humble witness of what God has done in creating the world, revealing the divine life to humanity, seeking relationship with humanity, and offering salvation to all who will listen. The Christian story can be told in deed, as Mother Teresa eloquently did on the streets of Calcutta as she poured herself out for the wretched of the earth. The Christian story can also be told in words, and this includes the work of theology, of *logos* about *theos*, of speech about God, of faith in search of understanding.

So where does that leave us with respect to the typology? Should one be exclusivist or inclusivist? I have already indicated more than once that one can find both themes represented in the theology of some great theologians. So here is another basic problem with the typology: it is insufficiently flexible. In short, show me the issue and I will tell you where I stand. For example, I believe that there is something that the Reformed tradition calls general revelation.[20] I do therefore believe that there is revelation and "knowledge" of God outside Christianity (although such "knowledge" may admit of degrees or even be of different kinds). In this sense, inclusivism seems justified. I also believe that truth can be found outside of Christianity, both in the sense that non-Christian persons can come to true conclusions about the world and its workings and that general revelation gives human beings some access to the idea that creation has a transcendent ground and source. Non-Christians can therefore clearly come to the conclusion that life is meaningful. On the question of salvation, I think exclusivism is correct insofar as it insists on Christ as the sole means of salvation. But I have indicated that Christ as sole *means* of salvation need not entail an entirely narrow *scope* of salvation. Indeed, I argued in the foregoing that Christians have grounds for hoping for a wider scope of salvation than the rather narrow one traditionally conceived.[21]

A final word. In pluralistic world in which there appear to be many expressions of faith in the one transcendent ground and source of created reality (i.e., God), we need not be despairing. In its formative Patristic period, Christianity confronted the Graeco-Roman world. In this period, it did some of its most creative and important theological thinking. In the Middle Ages, Christianity had to deal with Islam. In the modern period, Christianity encountered the Enlightenment. In the postmodern era, Christianity has a

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[19] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved?": With a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

[20] See Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, chapter 3.

[21] For a contemporary and much debated volume about the scope of salvation, see Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), especially 20f.

variety of challenges to face, among them the challenge of encountering the large and impressive religious traditions of Asia.[22] Rather than despairing about relativity and Christian decline, this latest encounter could invigorate Christianity as it hangs on in the West and continues its remarkable growth in Rest (of the world), especially in the global south.[23]

[22] See Berger, "God in a World of Gods," 26.
[23] See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).