

Introduction to Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology





The Presence of Other Faiths Among Us

- ◆ "Other faiths used to belong to other lands. At home rival religious claims could safely be ignored. Or, if not ignored, patronized. The superiority of one's own faith was so evident that the alternatives could somehow be brought within its purview without posing any real theological or social threat. Today things are different. Different faiths are practiced cheek by jowl in most parts of the world."



Theology and Religious Diversity

- ◆ Religious situation and context have dramatically changed: nowadays there is a lot of communication between religions
- ◆ The plurality of religions is not a new phenomenon to Christian faith – just think of the OT people of God among nations – but what is new is the pervasive ideology of pluralism
 - According to pluralistic views, no religion has the right to superimpose its views on others



Theology and Religious Diversity

- ◆ Other religions among us
 - Not only “out there” but also “here”
- ◆ The religious “East” has come to “West”!
- ◆ Christian theology cannot be done in isolation from other faiths



A New Awareness of Plurality

- ◆ Many Reasons:
 - Communication, travelling
 - Loss of institutional commitment
 - “Shrinking global village” etc.
- ◆ Yet, religions have always existed side by side
 - cf. OT Judaism, or early Christianity
- ◆ So, what is **new** about our situation?
 - the **pervasiveness, intensity** of plurality
- ◆ **“Postmodern sensitivity” (Knitter)**



The Challenge of *Pluralism*

◆ Plurality

- = the existence of many religions next to each other

◆ Pluralism

- = an ideology according to which there is a "rough parity" between religions
- ◆ Note: "pluralism" is an ambiguous concept and should probably be in plural, **pluralisms!**




The Challenge of *Pluralism*

- ◆ Two Interrelated Reasons for the rise of Pluralism
- ◆ (1) **“From outside”**:
 - other religions and “secular” pluralistic mindset
- ◆ (2) **“From within”**:
 - Post-Enlightenment Paradigm Change in Christian Theology



What is Theology of Religions

- ◆ “Theology of religions is that discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions.”
- ◆ “Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and what is the relationship of Christianity to other religions.”



In Search of a Paradigm

- ◆ a) Knitter (1985): four models
- ◆ Conservative Evangelical
- ◆ Mainline
- ◆ Catholic
- ◆ Theocentric.



b) Most typical:

◆ *Exclusive:*

- salvation only in Christ, available in the church; one has to respond to the Gospel to be saved

◆ *Inclusive:*


- salvation only in Christ, but its benefits go beyond the church and hearing the Gospel

◆ *Pluralist:*

- all religions are more or less equal paths to salvation, they all point to the same G/god

◆ *Realitycentric:*

- all religions point to the same Ultimate Reality



b) A modified “most typical”:

- ◆ ***Exclusive*** (*ecclesiocentric*): salvation only Christ, available in the church; one has to respond to the Gospel to be saved
- ◆ ***Inclusive*** (*Christocentric*): salvation only in Christ, but its benefits go beyond the church and hearing the Gospel
- ◆ ***Pluralist*** (*Theocentric*): all religions are more or less equal paths to salvation, they all point to the same G/god
- ◆ ***Realitycentric*** (Hick): all religions point to the same Ultimate Reality



C) Knitter: *Introducing Theologies...*

- ◆ **Replacement Model:**
 - Christianity, the “only way,” replaces other faiths (either totally or partially)
- ◆ **Fulfillment Model:**
 - Christianity is the “true” religion but it does not reject, but rather “confirms” good elements in others
- ◆ **Mutuality Model:**
 - a “rough parity” between all religions; all ways lead to the same end goal
- ◆ **Acceptance Model:**
 - there are real differences among religions and they are legitimate (different ends in different religions!)



d) Corduan (*Tapestry of Faiths*)

- ◆ *Complete Continuity*: religions form a “seamless web”
- ◆ *Complete Discontinuity*: an impenetrable wall between Christianity and religions
- ◆ *Continuity on the basis of superiority and inferiority*: Christianity has “more” (or complete)
- ◆ *Discontinuity on the whole with some commonalities*: even though Christianity is unique, there are important commonalities



Comparative Theology

- ◆ What is it? Why is it needed?
- ◆ Relation to
 - Theology of Religions
 - Comparative Religions (and related fields)
- ◆ Two kinds of scholars
 - **Scholars of religions:** F.X. Clooney, J.L. Fredricks
 - **Theologians:** K. Ward, J. Thatamanil

Theological Parameters

- ◆ God's desire to save all
 - Jn 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4
- ◆ Salvation only in Christ
 - Acts 4:12; Jn 14:6





Key Players

- ◆ John Hick: The “mother” of popular pluralism
- ◆ **Catholics:**
 - K. Rahner and H. Kung
 - P. Knitter and R. Panikkar
- ◆ **Protestants**
 - K. Barth and H. Kraemer
 - L. Newbigin and W. Pannenberg
 - M.M. Thomas and S. Samartha
- ◆ **Evangelicals**
 - N. Anderson and Clark Pinnock
 - H. Netland and V. Ramachandra
- ◆ **Pentecostals:** A. Yong



My own project

- ◆ A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World (Eerdmans, 2012-17):
 - *Christ and Reconciliation*
 - *Trinity and Revelation*
 - *Humanity and Creation*
 - *Spirit and Salvation*
 - *Community and Hope*



Important Processes and Documents

- ◆ Vatican II and other Catholic sources
- ◆ Edinburgh 2010 (edinburgh2010.org)
- ◆ World Council of Churches (www.oikoumene.org)
 - “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”
 - “Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding”
- ◆ Mainline Protestant Churches
 - [Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue](http://www.pcusa.org/interfaith/study/principles.htm)
(www.pcusa.org/interfaith/study/principles.htm)
- ◆ etc.



Key Concepts and Themes Under Discussion

- ◆ Hospitality
- ◆ Dialogue
- ◆ Tolerance
- ◆ Persuasion



What do American Christians think?

- ◆ The results of an August 2008 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life showed that a majority of American Christians (52%) believe that some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.
 - George Conger, "Muslim Priest and Buddhist Bishop-Elect Are Raising Questions About Syncretism," Christianity Today, March 27, 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/marchweb-only/112-53.0.html>



What do Americans Christians think?

- ◆ Even a significant minority (47%) of evangelical Christians in the U.S. believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, the Pew Forum found.
- ◆ Of these evangelicals who say there are multiple paths to salvation, 35 percent believe that Islam and 33 percent believe that Hinduism can lead to eternal life, while 26 percent believe that atheists can achieve eternal life.
 - George Conger, "Muslim Priest and Buddhist Bishop-Elect Are Raising Questions About Syncretism," Christianity Today, March 27, 2009, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/marchweb-only/112-53.0.html>



What about Pastors vs Members?

- ◆ LifeWay Research released new data showing that 84% of Protestant pastors *disagree* that eternal life can be obtained through religions other than Christianity.
- ◆ So, based on this data, Protestant pastors are overwhelmingly not pluralist/universalist.



What about Pastors vs Members?

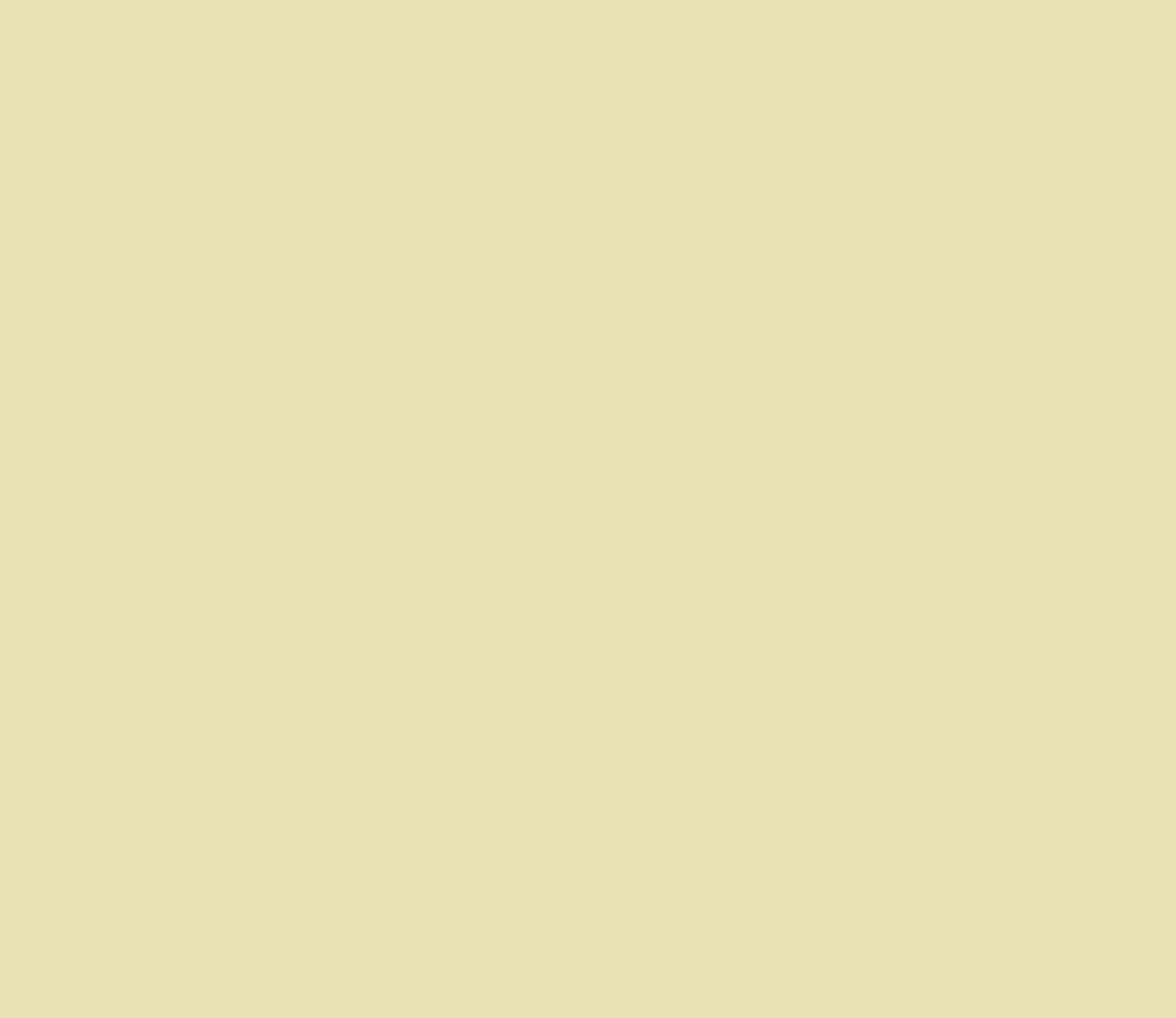
- ◆ However, the same cannot be said of their church members.
- ◆ When presented with the same statement, just 48 percent of adults who attend a Protestant church once a month or more disagree strongly and 9 percent disagree somewhat. A total of 26 percent agree.
- ◆ In other words, protestant church attendees are substantially more pluralist/universalist than their pastors.



Discussion

Religious Diversity and Religious Pluralisms:

- ◆ Opportunities for theology?
- ◆ Challenges to theology?
- ◆ Pastoral work and practical theology?
- ◆ Finnish - and European - context?

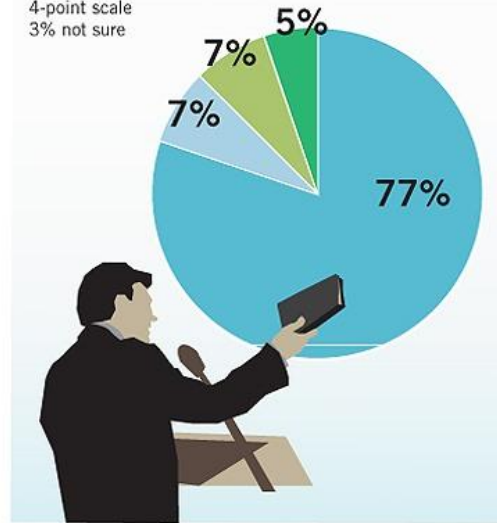




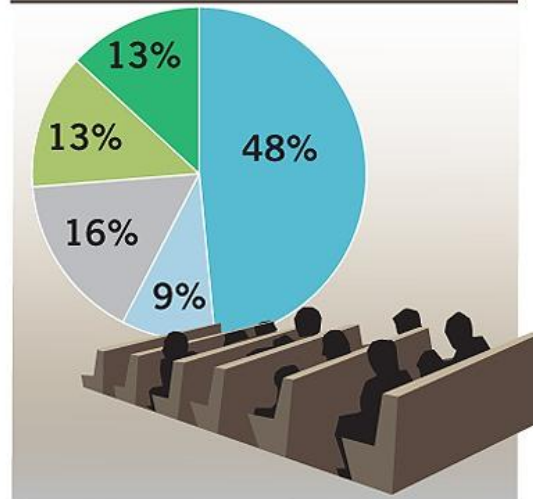
“If a person is sincerely seeking God, he/she can obtain eternal life through religions other than Christianity.”

Among Protestant pastors

4-point scale
3% not sure



Among adults who attend a Protestant church



Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree