



Martin Luther and the World Religions

EGIL GRISLIS

*The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Canada*

WHILE "WORLD RELIGIONS" IS A RELATIVELY MODERN TERM, INTEREST IN THEM is not. In this regard, Martin Luther dealt mainly with the Turks and the Jews; only very occasionally did he think of what he called "the heathen." Although Luther scholarship has recently become deeply aware of the effect of Luther's comments on the Jews,¹ the inquiry into Luther's views concerning the Turks and other world religions has been limited. In North America, surrounded by a culture of pluralism, Luther's views stand out with their powerful christocentricity, appearing to many to be generally irrelevant if not totally in error. This article attempts to recover some of Luther's positive insights about the religions, claiming that these views have relevance for dealing with world religions today.

¹Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten* (Munich: Max Huber, 1972); Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism: In the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Heinz Kremers, ed., *Die Juden und Martin Luther—Martin Luther und die Juden: Geschichte, Wirkungsgeschichte, Herausforderung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985); Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Martin Luther and the Jews," in *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present and Future*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroads, 1990) 127-150.

EGIL GRISLIS is a professor of religion at the University of Manitoba and regularly a visiting professor at the Faculty of Theology, University of Latvia, in Riga, Latvia.

Whereas theological systems tend either to exclude the possibility of salvation in other religions by defining salvation christocentrically or to relativize religion so that "salvation" is found equally in all, Luther retains the promise of salvation in Christ while, at least in extraordinary circumstances, leaving open God's option to save those whom God chooses to save.

I.

Luther thought of himself as a biblical scholar and was far more interested in exegesis than in building a theological system (although, of course, he had one!). As there had been saved people outside the covenant community of Israel, so also in the New Testament there are foreigners to whom Jesus assigned an exemplary status. According to the plausibility structures familiar to Jesus' contemporaries, a "good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37) was a contradiction in terms. The Roman centurion is even more interesting (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10). On one occasion, Luther paid special attention to the existential faith of the centurion, distinguishing it from a general embracing of a theological system:

The centurion said, "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed" [Matt. 8:8]. Certainly he believed in and obtained what was done for him in a specific, immediate concern, not according to a general faith....According to John 4[:50]: The official "believed the word that Jesus spoke to him," that is, "Go, your son will live." By means of this faith he saved his son's life. So indeed every person approaching God should believe that he will receive what he requests, or he will not receive it.²

Similarly, the Syrophenecian woman (Mark 7:24-30) received Luther's high commendation: "assuredly a beautiful and illustrious faith."³ Just how widely Luther intended his comments on Ps 75:6 is by no means perfectly clear:

You see, he [God] wants to teach us that none are to be condemned and made to despair of Christ's salvation. Nor ought anyone regard himself as the only one saved and judge others, for the Jews, the heretics, and the proud do this.⁴

Although such ambiguous statements do not add up to a clear conclusion, their presence cannot be ignored; they prepare the way for Luther's clearer statements that will be noted subsequently.

Toward that goal, however, one more preparatory observation is in order: while in the early church the concern with the so-called cosmic Christ was something of a minority position, it did not remain without influence. Its most noted formulation is by Justin Martyr (c. 100-c.165 A.D.):

Lest some should unreasonably object, in order to turn men away from what we teach, that we say that Christ was born a hundred and fifty years ago under Quirinius and taught what we say he taught still later, under Pontius Pilate, and should accuse us [as supposing] that all men born before that time were irresponsible, I will solve this difficulty in advance. We have been taught that Christ is the First-begotten of God, and have previously testified that he is the Reason of which every race of man partakes. Those who lived in accordance with Reason (Logos) are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them; among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananiah, Azariah, and Michael [The original names of the 'three holy

²D. *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. to date (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-)2:14:24-29 (hereafter *WA*); *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 1-30 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-); vols. 31-55 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957-86) 31:272 (hereafter *LW*).

³*WA* 44:104:19-20; *LW* 6:140.

⁴*WA* 3:513:32-35; *LW* 10:457.

children' (Dan. 1:7) are the ones commonly used in Greek], and Elijah, and many others, whose deeds and names I forbear to list, knowing that this would be lengthy. So also those who lived without Reason were ungracious and enemies to Christ, and murderers of those who lived by Reason. But those who lived by Reason, and those who so live now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed.⁵

While, according to Carl Braaten, modern echoes of this theory can be heard in Paul Tillich's "latent church" and Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christianity," by the fifth century Christianity had become the religion of the majority and references to the cosmic Christ virtually disappeared.⁶ Then all other religions were seen either as demonic or simply superstitious—or both. What Cyprian had proclaimed with great courage and against great odds—*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church no salvation)—now appeared reasonable, even easy. The Old Testament's scorn of "the heathen" was firmly incorporated in the theological outlook of the middle ages. Both the sadistic extermination of heretics and the violent organization of the so-called crusades gave concrete expression to this kind of outlook.⁷

Having inherited such a perspective, Martin Luther had to adjust it to his own situation and times. Two of Luther's early insights were singled out by Pope Leo X and condemned in his famous bull *Exsurge Domine*:

33. To burn heretics is against the will of the Spirit.
34. To go to war against the Turks is to resist God, who punishes our iniquities through them.⁸

However, once Luther's own position and the success of the reformation was somewhat secured, Luther agreed with Melancthon that the death sentence was appropriate for heretics.⁹ And once the armies of the Turks were just two days' march from Wittenberg and Turkish atrocities all too well known, Luther acknowledged the need to fight against the Turks, and judged their religion as a most vile Christian heresy.¹⁰

As for the remaining world religions: Luther never directly encountered the religions of India, China, and Japan; and America is only mentioned as a place from which syphilis had been brought to Europe.¹¹

⁵*First Apology*, chap. 46 (Library of Christian Classics 1 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953] 271-272); cf. *Second Apology*, chaps. 8 and 10. Although Luther knew Justin Martyr's argument, he did not hasten to endorse it; see WA 39/2:187-203; LW 34:303-321. Whether the argument remained without impact on Luther's thought may well merit future inquiry.

⁶Carl Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 96; Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 108, offers brief but suggestive comments.

⁷Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (fifth printing; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), succeeds in offering a thoroughly uncritical view overlooking the elements of violence in the Catholic past.

⁸Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964) 83.

⁹Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951) 59-64.

¹⁰Egil Grislis, "Luther and the Turks," *The Muslim World* 64/3-4 (1974) 180-193.

¹¹WA 53:169; LW 1:207, note 52; cf. Reinhard Schwarz, "Martin Luther on the European Discovery of America," *Word & World* 14/1 (1994) 82-86.

At the same time Luther was very well acquainted with the Latin and Greek classics and loved them dearly. Upon entering the monastery, Luther sold his law codex, but kept Plautus and Virgil.¹² In common with the humanists of his time, Luther habitually and extensively quoted from the classics. And such quotations were not mere surface embellishments. In fact, Luther was convinced that “Truth comes from the Holy Spirit, regardless of who says it, especially the true sayings of the poets, when they show us our sins.”¹³ Moreover, while Luther ordinarily regarded all pagan wisdom as the result of their use of natural reason, he believed that at times divine guidance providentially shaped even pagan lives and insights. Admittedly, often enough the pagans themselves merely credited their good luck. Yet there were exceptions, and Luther was prepared to note them: “The very wisest among them, like Cicero, say it is a divine inspiration; and they conclude that no one has ever become a great man through his own powers, but only by a special secret inbreathing or imparting of the gods.”¹⁴ In his *Table Talk* Luther even conceded that Cicero “and men like him” may be saved.¹⁵ H. G. Haile has called attention to a slightly ambiguous reference to Cicero:

He was a dear man, who read a lot, reflected a lot, and then was able to say a lot. He wrote with great sincerity, did not tease or play the Greek, as Plato and Aristotle do. I hope God will help Cicero and such men as he to the remission of their sins — and if he must remain out of grace, then at least be some levels higher than our cardinals, and the bishop of Mainz.

But Haile also noted that “on another occasion Luther went so far as to consign Cicero to his place in paradise (shades of Zwingli!).”¹⁶ Since Luther wrote so much — and did not produce a volume of systematic theology — a careful search can unearth further support for similar insights. In *A Letter to Hans von Reichenberg* Luther formulates the issue squarely: “Whether God can or will save people who die without faith?”¹⁷ Luther knows the deep concern of human compassion and hence the wish that a good God would save all people. Indeed, the salvation of all people would appear to be most reasonable! But Luther, the realist and the believer, refuses to give in to wishful thinking. He argues instead:

Faith does not insist on knowing the reason for God’s actions, but it still regards God as the greatest goodness and mercy. Faith holds to that against and beyond all reason, sense, and experience, when everything appears to be wrath and injustice. This is why faith is called *Argumentum non apparentium*, the sign of things not seen [Heb. 11:1], indeed, the opposite of what is seen.¹⁸

The dogmatic principle, then, is perfectly clear: “If God were to save anyone without

¹²Hellmut Diwald, *Luther: Eine Biographie* (Bergisch Gladbach: Gustav Lübbe, 1982) 26.

¹³WA 25:33:1-3; LW 29:38.

¹⁴WA 51:244:21-27; LW 13:200-201.

¹⁵WA, TR 372, number 626, quoted by Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1950) 93, note 96; H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980) 326, note 39; referring to WA, TR 3:697-698.

¹⁶Haile, *Luther*, 326, note 40; referring to WA, TR 5:413, numbers 29-31.

¹⁷WA 10/2:322:4-5; LW 43:51.

¹⁸WA 10/2:323:5-10; LW 43:52.

faith, he would be acting contrary to his own words and would give himself the lie; yes, he would deny himself." At the same time Luther acknowledges the situational dimension of the discussion. The truth, like a strong wine, can "drown" the children, while giving "a refreshing draught of life for old people."¹⁹ Consequently Luther is prepared to conjecture:

It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who would doubt God's ability to do that? No one, however, can prove that he does do this. For all that we read is that he has already raised people from the dead and thus granted them faith. But whether he gives faith or not, it is impossible for anyone to be saved without faith. Otherwise every sermon, the gospel, and faith would be vain, false, and deceptive, since the entire gospel makes faith necessary.²⁰

But Luther does not conjecture often. Ordinarily even the virtuous heathen are not among the saved. Luther wrote: "Many heathen have brought their children up charmingly, but all that is lost because of their unbelief."²¹ Therefore, if we are to sum up Luther's general views on the world religions, we have to note the presence of both inclusive and the exclusive motifs. Yet, the latter clearly predominate. Thus, while in principle Luther had decided the case that "the heathen" are not saved, now and then he had afterthoughts, and he was prepared to record them as well: after death God could bring the unbeliever to faith and therefore to salvation! For God's love there are no limits.

II.

Along with these tensions and contradictions in Luther's thought, however, there are also certain motifs that imply a consistent theological outlook and a concrete evangelical action. One such motif is Luther's twofold understanding of meekness: one form is purely selfish; the other, authentic meekness, is what we are to show to our adversaries:

The second kind of meekness is good through and through. It is shown to opponents and enemies and does them no harm. It does not avenge itself, it does not curse or blaspheme, it speaks no evil of them, and thinks no evil against them, even if they have taken away goods, honor, life, friends, and everything. In fact, where it can, this kind of meekness returns good for evil, speaks well, thinks the best of, and prays for those who do evil.

Of course, Luther did not invent this second kind of meekness; he learned it from the Bible. The texts, supplied by Luther himself, are the following: "Christ says in Matthew 5[:44], 'Do good to them that harm you. Pray for your persecutors and revilers.' And Paul in Romans 12[:14] says, 'Bless those who curse you: never curse them back, but rather do good to them.'"²² In Luther's early writings through 1520,

¹⁹WA 10/2:324:16-17; LW 43:53.

²⁰WA 10/2:325:3-11; LW 43:54.

²¹WA 6:255:16-17; LW 44:87.

²²WA 6:266:1-7, 15-19, 19-22; LW 44:101.

such statements appear often, sometimes formulated even more powerfully. For example, Luther elaborates the motif of love in *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520):

I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.

In other words, authentic Christian faith is expressed in genuine and dynamic caring. Without prejudice, it sets no conditions for loving. And this love continues to blossom even when it has been rudely rejected. This is how Luther explains such unconditional love:

Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly, and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss.

Clearly, Luther was a realist. He was not romanticizing that one's great love would necessarily engender love in response. And he most certainly warned against a manipulative use of this love:

For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligation. He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward.²³

Obviously, in living such unconditional love no predictions are possible as to its success. To expect success unfailingly would be naïve, and to deny it consistently would be unqualifiedly cynical. What Luther counsels is something like a creative patience in regard to the success of this love. After all, the essence of love is to give, not to get. Luther reflected:

A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.²⁴

At the same time, the neighbor is not saved unaware of what is happening. The neighbor needs to respond. In his *Sermon von dem Tauben und Stummen* (Sept. 7, 1522), Luther reflects on a situation where an ordinary response is not possible, since one who is deaf and mute does not hear the proclaimed gospel. However, the deaf and mute in this instance is unconditionally accepted by his neighbor.²⁵ Through such acceptance he is not automatically saved through his neighbor's faith;²⁶ nevertheless, he is positively affected, since his believing neighbor can request God the Father to bestow faith on the deaf and mute neighbor. We observe: "The poor man just lies there, he cannot either speak or hear. But those who have

²³WA 7:66:3-6, 7-10, 10-12; LW 31:367.

²⁴WA 7:69:12-15; LW 31:371.

²⁵WA 10/3:305, lines 9-30.

²⁶WA 10/3:306, lines 10-12, 19-21.

brought him to the Lord are able to speak and to hear.” And they now intercede for him.²⁷ This intercession, notes Luther, does not in and of itself accomplish the miracle of restoration.²⁸ An intercession does not produce results automatically; even Christ’s own request in Gethsemane was not granted.²⁹ Yet the possibility of divine response remains—and the deaf and mute man experiences it. Luther now generalizes and suggests that evangelization takes place by preaching, by leading a good life, and by interceding.³⁰ In this instance “it means that the believers carry the deaf person to God; similarly, so also the preachers deliver a sinner to God. Then God responds and effects the transformation.”³¹ Are there any limits to such an outreach? Can compassionate intercession, when God accepts it, also save the non-Christian? Here Luther is silent; more precisely, he does not reach out beyond the specific New Testament text and situation. But we might find here a clue for a creative outreach in all directions, not excluding the non-Christian.

Of course, in all realism we need to acknowledge that the non-believer is not always peacefully waiting to be embraced. Sometimes the non-believer is a rebel or a terrorist who initiates the contact—in order to kill or to maim. What kind of outreach is possible under such adverse circumstances? Here, too, Luther may be of help. In his own life Luther, soon after the Diet of Worms, experienced a shift from prophetic and pastoral activities to political responsibility and action. During his stay at the Wartburg Castle and in the stormy years of the peasant uprising, Luther found it necessary to look beyond the ordinary forms of evangelism, that is, preaching, the exemplary ethical life, and intercessory prayer. For what to Luther looked like outbursts of mindless violence, Luther sought remedy in appealing to the enforcement structures of the society of his own day. The Christian privilege of love, joined with responsibility, now demanded activity and a choice which was none other than the choice of the lesser evil.³²

Yet this was never to be a choice of convenience, only one of exception in absolute necessity. Hence the overarching concern for the love of neighbor remained intact. In other words, while as a Christian one loves even the unlovable, the Christian is not exempt from societal responsibilities that may require the use of force. This is consistent with Luther’s objection to the crusades and yet his subsequent demand that the authorities go to war against the aggressive Turks. In such a perspective there is no rigidly uniform response which the Christian may have in regard to the non-Christian.

III.

As believers seek to love even the unlovable and yet are ready for making use

²⁷WA 10/3:308, lines 12-20.

²⁸WA 10/3:309, lines 16-20.

²⁹WA 10/3:310, lines 1-3.

³⁰WA 10/3:311, lines 5-6.

³¹WA 10/3:311, lines 15-17.

³²WA 8:676-687; LW 45:57-74; WA 11:245-280; LW 44:81-129; WA 18:357-361; LW 46:49-55; WA 18:357:12-13; LW 46-49; WA 18:358:6-18; LW 46:50.

of ordered, legitimate force, what is to be said of God? Does God send to hell all the non-believers and false believers? Ordinarily Luther agreed that this was indeed the biblical message and therefore the situation. But, as we have noted, in celebrating the loving majesty of God under the law and gospel, Luther hesitated to prescribe an absolute blueprint for the activities of God. Traditional Luther scholarship has paid more attention to the ordinary rather than extraordinary activities of God in dealing with the heathen.

Thus Walter Holsten, perhaps reflecting the German situation facing National Socialism, insists that this age witnesses a “decisive combat between Christianity and non-Christian religion.”³³ In a concise overview, Holsten characterizes the two as follows: “Christian religion is to accept (*erleiden*) whatever God bestows; non-Christian religion is to influence God, indeed, to create ‘God.’” The contrast is not absolute, however, since non-Christian religions consist of a mixture of truth and falsehood.³⁴ And while Luther, according to Holsten, does acknowledge that a small fragment of truth, a *notio divinitatis*, is available in nature, he nevertheless regards all nature religions as sheer paganism: in pretending to honor God, paganism misses the mark completely, and worships a figment of its own imagination. Hence, in contrast to revealed religion, natural religion has to be characterized as an *ignorantia Dei*.³⁵

Treating non-Christian religions as an issue to be discussed rather than as a problem to be solved was already well established at the time of Karl Holl.³⁶ Accordingly, Holl refutes two erroneous claims attributed to Luther, that is, that there is no need for a Christian mission, because (1) the end of the world is near, and (2) already in the age of the apostles the gospel was proclaimed to the entire world.³⁷ In addition, Holl notes that Luther pointed even to the realm of the Turks as a nearby mission field. Holl regards it as unreasonable to think that Luther could or should have organized a missionary venture to the newly discovered Americas. Holl asks, “Where was Luther to obtain the ships to transport the missionaries?”³⁸ At the same time, Holl observes, Luther did record several wise insights in regard to missionary work. The missionary, according to Luther, needs to become acquainted with the religious and ethical ideas of the indigenous people. Then the gospel can be proclaimed in a way that can be locally understood. In this connection, Holl calls attention to Luther’s complaint that in Germany all kinds of lies are “known” about the Turks, because people have not discovered in their own writings what the Turks actually taught.³⁹ For this reason, in 1545, Luther sup-

³³Walter Holsten, *Christentum und nichtchristliche Religion nach der Auffassung Luthers* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932) 13.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶Karl Holl, “Luther und die Mission” (1924); reprinted in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. III, *Der Westen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1928) 234-243.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 234-235.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 237.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 239.

ported the publication of the *Qur'an*. Luther claimed on that occasion: "No person is so evil, that he does not have something good."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the evil of the heathen was immense, so Luther thought; he noted three basic errors: (1) The heathen seek to make use of God for their own selfish ends; (2) in order to accomplish this they utilize sacrifices, good works, asceticism, and even witchcraft; (3) they also erect a system of law, also as means to serve their own ends.⁴¹

Hermann Dörries offers a brief, abstract statement, following up on Gustaf Wingren's claim that all preaching is fundamentally mission work and that the actual accomplishment is to be traced to Jesus Christ himself,⁴² for it is Jesus Christ who carries out the mission.⁴³ The priesthood of all believers legitimizes every believer's active participation in mission without a special assignment.⁴⁴ In reference to the Turks, Dörries notes that Luther's condemnation of the crusades had been outspoken. Luther taught that, in the event of captivity, Christians should proclaim the gospel truth by their lifestyle.⁴⁵ Dörries further observes that Luther's outspoken theological critique of the Turks went together with Luther's open acknowledgment of the cultural superiority of the Turks.⁴⁶ In conclusion, Dörries underscores once more that all Christians are called by God to be missionaries. While abstract, this reminder is significant, for it makes clear that, according to Luther, Christian existence was not lived in isolation, unrelated to others.

Analysis of Luther's writings directed against the Turks has shown that Luther saw the denial of Jesus Christ as the decisive failure of the Turkish Muslims.⁴⁷ That conclusion might be expected, since mission work and the encounter with the Turks reflected a situation filled with tensions. But might there not be some more positive notes regarding the religions in Luther's broader theological vision, when he is less focused on this particular arena?

To some Luther scholars the question of non-Christian religions does appear significant. Paul Althaus returns to this issue (as distinct from a problem) throughout his definitive study.⁴⁸ As Althaus evaluated the situation, Luther placed the

⁴⁰Ibid., 240. Cf. Harry Clark, "The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15/1 (1984) 3-12.

⁴¹Holl, "Luther und die Mission," 241.

⁴²Hermann Dörries, "Luther und die Heidenpredigt," in *Wort und Stunde III, Beiträge zum Verständnis Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970) 332.

⁴³Ibid., 336.

⁴⁴Ibid., 338.

⁴⁵Ibid., 341-342.

⁴⁶Ibid., 342.

⁴⁷Helmut Lampater, *Luthers Stellung zum Türkenkrieg*, Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus, 9th series, vol. 4 (Munich: Albert Lempp, 1940); George W. Forell, "Luther and the War against the Turks" (1945), reprinted in George W. Forell, *Martin Luther: Theologian of the Church*, Word & World Supplement Series 2, ed. William R. Russell (St. Paul, MN: Word & World, Luther Seminary, 1994) 123-134; Egil Grisliis, "Luther and the Turks" (see note 10 above); and Rudolf Mau, "Luthers Stellung zu den Türken," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans, 2 vols. (Berlin: Evangelischer Verlag, 1983) 1:647-662; 2:956-966.

⁴⁸Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

non-Christian religions in the framework of reason and conscience. And since both reason and conscience are universal, so also is the general knowledge of God. Observing that for this Luther depends on Paul (Rom 1:20), Althaus elaborates:

The veneration of various gods in the idolatrous pagan religions presupposes that men carry within themselves a conceptual notion of god and of the divine being.⁴⁹

But “general knowledge” of God is not saving knowledge. Hence the limits on the insights of non-Christian religions are narrow indeed:

Luther asserts that scholastic theology and non-Christian religions such as Islam are limited in the same way. These can say very many things about the essence of the deity and even about its personal being. But the most important matter of all is God’s attitude toward us and what he wills to do with us; and that remains unknown to them. Such knowledge lies outside reason’s area of competence; in these matters only the word of God gives certainty.⁵⁰

Consequently, all those who have only a general knowledge of God seek to manipulate God, albeit unsuccessfully. In this, they are excluded from salvation. Althaus writes:

Luther places Judaism, Islam, the papacy, monasticism, the enthusiasts and the Swiss all in the same category as encouraging presumptuous human pride, idolatry and contradicting genuine fear of God (in the sense of Psalm 130:4). God does not want this sort of false worship; the religion of unconditional faith in God’s mercy is the sole possibility of truly worshipping God. Luther’s theocentric viewpoint thus draws a line of division through all the religions of the world.⁵¹

The situation is not mitigated by Luther’s acknowledgment that among the heathen there is “civic righteousness.”⁵² After all, civic righteousness is not salvific.⁵³ Even the work of the Holy Spirit, active among the heathen as he inspires wisdom and engenders courage, is of no help, since it does not lead to faith in Christ and salvation.⁵⁴ Parenthetically, it needs to be noted that Paul Althaus fully shares Luther’s conviction that salvation is possible only in Jesus Christ. Therefore even the so-called “religions of grace”⁵⁵—with which Luther was not acquainted but Althaus seems to be—are not salvific.

IV.

In traditional Luther scholarship, then, one may perceive a negative accent: world religions are *not* salvific. Among contemporary Lutheran theologians, how-

⁴⁹Ibid., 15.

⁵⁰Ibid., 23.

⁵¹Ibid., 128.

⁵²Ibid., 142.

⁵³Ibid., 144.

⁵⁴Ibid., 442.

⁵⁵Paul Althaus, *Um die Wahrheit des Evangeliums: Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1962) 9-22.

ever, the same insight is expressed positively: it is Jesus Christ who saves—and sometimes through a creative relationship to world religions.

Thus, according to Carl Braaten, Christianity has been confronted by pluralism from its very beginnings:

Christianity was attacked by the Jews as heresy, persecuted by the Romans as a seditious movement, ridiculed as a contemptible myth by the Hellenistic philosophers, and threatened by the popular cults and mystery religions.⁵⁶

To be sure, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter have offered their “theocentric view,” a so-called “Copernican revolution” that relativizes the religions, seeing them all as salvific—not exactly a new idea.⁵⁷ Braaten, appealing to Lutheran tradition, does endorse the view that general revelation exists outside Christianity,⁵⁸ although it is not salvific.⁵⁹ Yet Braaten has more to say. He favors “evangelical outreach and interreligious dialogue”⁶⁰ not only as a popular search for unknown goals; he expects positive results:

When the light of Christ shines upon the religions, no longer do they remain in darkness from our perspective but we see a meaning there.⁶¹

And this “meaning” is not a momentary insight and experience, but an eschatologically oriented and ongoing process through history and beyond history. Nevertheless, the approach remains christocentric:

The model I am proposing pictures Jesus Christ as the revelation of the eschatological fulfillment of the religions.⁶²

Braaten’s eschatological orientation, while liberating from historical particularity and therefore also from relativism, places the encounter with world religions under a question mark, since he does not state whether the others are saved at present.

Wolfhart Pannenberg appears to go a step further. Initially he records the positive gains from interreligious dialogue. Soon enough, however, he records his reservations:

In dialogue with people from other religious traditions as well as in his or her own theology the Christian may recognize the face of Christ in some of the persons who follow other ways of religion. The Christian may also recognize the work of God’s providence in their lives and in the developments of their tradition. This does not necessarily involve that those other persons be able to recognize that in their turn. If they did they might become baptized. As long as that does not occur, the situation of religious dialogue, as viewed from the Christian perspective, remains somewhat ambiguous. When a Hindu or Sikh prays to God, how can we know that in his intention it is the same God we

⁵⁶Braaten, *No Other Gospel*, 93.

⁵⁷John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

⁵⁸Braaten, *No Other Gospel*, 67-81.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 8, 97.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 80.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 71.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 80.

worship? Even in the case of a pious Muslim this is not clear, because his way of turning to God is informed by his belief in Muhammad, although in part we share the same "cumulative tradition." Is it nevertheless the same God? This is a question to be decided by God, not us. The same is true with regard to the religious life of the followers of those other ways.⁶³

While appreciating Pannenberg's suggestive reflections, it seems clear that his eschatologically oriented approach must also remain ambiguous, particularly in regard to the salvation of the others.⁶⁴ By contrast, Luther offers a clear distinction between ordinary and exceptional ways of salvation. Salvation comes only through Christ, yet this does not exclude, albeit on rare occasions, some extra ways and additional means. Moreover, precisely because salvation is in God's hands, Luther does not presume to state what God *has* to do. Such creative patience allows the believer to await the consummation. At the same time, Luther the activist reaches beyond dialogue and challenges Christians to unconditional love. (Admittedly, it is a realistic love as well, which can in necessity make use of societal structures in order to preserve life from chaos and destruction. But the central thrust of Luther's message surely is not an invitation to love rather than force.)

This ingredient of love as the fruit of faith may encourage, rather than disqualify, the Lutheran believer to understand other religions. After all, in schools of music the tone disadvantaged are unlikely candidates for success! Can matters of religion be dealt with by those with no positive relationship to any religion? Of course, they might do better than religionists with fanatical (however pious) self-righteousness. Still, all the necessary academic emphasis on objectivity, correlatability of various beliefs and symbolic practices, even a temporary bracketing of the truth question, do not necessarily diminish the believer's yearning for the revealed truth of God, wherever it might be found. Luther's contribution to this search is his uncompromising yet careful attention to the centrality of Jesus Christ, discoverable in the Bible: the ordinary does not rule out the exceptional! ⊕

⁶³Wolfgang Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) 103.

⁶⁴Braaten, *No Other Gospel*, 99. For different examples of a dialogical approach, see Paul Varo Martinson, *A Theology of World Religions: Interpreting God, Self, and World in Semitic, Indian, and Chinese Thought* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987); J. Paul Rajashekar, ed., *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, L.W.F. Report 23/24 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1988); Edward G. Kettner, Jr. "Christian Dialogue with the World's Religions: Is it Possible?" *Lutheran Theological Journal* (December 1994) 98-105; articles in the "Islam" issue of *Word & World* 16/2 (1996).