

Responding to Relativism, Humanism, and Religious Pluralism in the Secular University

Ed Christian
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

The ideologies of relativism, humanism, and religious pluralism are basic to the intellectual mindset of both teachers and students on the secular university campus, even though many are unfamiliar with the words. The ideology of humanism goes back to the late 15th century, with the dawning of the Italian Renaissance, but many of its ideas, of course, are derived from the Greek philosophers. Relativism and religious pluralism have their roots in the work of Descartes, Hume, Locke, and Mill, but they did not achieve the level of social paradigm, one might argue, until this generation, making them particularly “last day” delusions.

It is tempting to trace relativism, humanism, and religious pluralism back to the temptations in the Garden of Eden. “Thou shalt not surely die” offered Eve the “free” choice peculiar to relativism—a range of choices, any of which might be right for the one who proclaims, “I have to do what’s *right* for *me*.” “You shall be as gods” is the very heart of humanism, which proudly asserts that “*Man* is the measure of *all* things.”¹ By offering Eve the option of disobedience disguised as her own wisdom—as an acceptable and even preferable route to eternal bliss—the serpent introduced a key tenet of religious pluralism. “You shall be as gods, knowing good from evil,” is as well the same half-truth whispered by the Gnostics and by the various manifestations of New Age and nouveau-mystical gurudom.

Of course, while there may be elite campuses, even among state universities, where large numbers of students are conversant in the philosophy of these ideas—and certainly they are pervasive among the professoriate—in most public institutions few students are even familiar with the words relativism, humanism,

¹ Protagoras, in Diogenes Laertius’s *Protagoras*, IX.li, emphasis added.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and religious pluralism. Nevertheless, the basic assumptions of these ideologies have permeated student thinking because they have permeated the culture and the educational system, and nearly all students are essentially products of their culture. Their ideas are nearly all derivative and unexamined, yet held with as much passion as they can possibly muster for the philosophical dictum, “Whatever.”

The Logic of Relativism

I have a student in one of my Developmental Writing classes named Bud. Bud is a genuinely nice guy, courteous and sensitive and hardworking. His adopted parents run a dairy farm in New Jersey, and in high school Bud would come home from football practice to face hours of chores. This contributed to the lack of writing skills which landed him in my class, but despite this lack he is always eager to contribute to the class discussion.

Recently the class members were discussing an article they were to think and write about, an article about a theoretical geophysicist at Los Alamos who has developed a very complex simulation program for the supercomputer there, a simulation program which allows him to specify a variety of geological conditions throughout the earth, then observe the effect through simulated time. This scientist, a Christian, found that a worldwide flood induced by a massive under-sea magma swell 6,000 years ago was the best explanation for Earth’s present surface features.²

Bud raised his hand. “I believe absolutely in evolution,” he said, “and I think this scientist guy is nuts.”

“On what authority to you believe absolutely in evolution?” I asked.

“Well,” he said when he’d finally deciphered the question, “my teachers in high school said so.”

“And are high school science teachers with only a dozen college science classes under their belts more authoritative in your eyes than this man, who has two Ph.D.s from top universities and is the acknowledged world leader in his field?”

“But he’s a Christian,” Bud said.

“So am I,” I responded. “Is that a problem? Does that make him a liar? Isn’t his thesis based on valid use of the scientific method?”

“Well, I believe in God, too,” Bud said, backpedaling. “I just don’t think He interferes with us. And I believe that there’s some kind of afterlife, that our souls live on forever, but I don’t believe God punishes us.”

“On what authority do you believe in God?” I asked. “Have you ever seen Him, touched Him, heard Him?”

“Well, my grandmother told me,” Bud admitted, “except that she believed God has power over us.”

² Chandler Burr, “The Geophysics of God,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 June 1997, 55-58.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

“Good for her,” I said, “but was your grandmother an adequate authority? Did she ever see or touch or hear Him? And if she did, on what authority did you decide that part of what she told you was right and part wrong?”

“Well,” he said, “it’s just that some of what she said made sense, and part of it didn’t.”

I was unable, in this Socratic dialogue of sorts, to elicit from Bud any recognition that belief should be grounded on authority, that some authorities might be more believable than others, that some beliefs might be more fairly believable than others.

“I believe in God,” I told the class, “including the creation in seven days and the worldwide flood and Noah’s ark, because the Bible says they happened. I’ve accepted the Bible as an unerring authority on these things because it has proven to be authoritative in areas closer to our day where we have corroborative evidence from other sources. I believe it to be correct because time after time, when historians or archaeologists say it is wrong, more evidence turns up that proves that the Bible is right and they are wrong. I believe it is an authoritative source of truth because when I do what it says, I get the effect it says I’ll get. Isn’t that good science? You do the experiment the way the book says, and it works, so it must be true.

“I don’t think I myself could honestly believe something simply because I wanted to believe it was true. I want to believe only what I have carefully examined and found to be accurate and authoritative.”

“Well, you’re entitled to believe what you want,” Bud said, claiming the last word, “but I think I’m entitled to believe what I want, and I think my beliefs are as good as yours.”

“Folk Relativism” and Wishful Thinking

I do not mean to suggest that the Bible is true and authoritative *because* archaeology and history prove it to be true. Rather, it is the Bible that proves them to be true. I also do not mean to suggest that the Bible is true and authoritative *because* it has a desirable effect on my emotions, actions, or physical needs. It is what it is and what it claims to be. However, the evidence for the Bible’s accuracy and emotional utility can be a powerful incentive to belief. To say to college students, “There is absolutely no evidence that the Bible is what it claims to be, but I choose to accept it as the absolute truth,” would be to state in bald terms what many already believe about their own unexamined ruminations on the cosmic realm, and would be to rank the Bible with the mystical mutterings of New Age spirit channelers.

Bud’s assertion was what we might call “folk relativism.” It reminds us of the state of affairs among the Israelites during the time of the judges, when “every man did what was right *in his own eyes*” (Judg 17:3). This sort of fuzzy, unexamined, illogical thinking is rampant on the secular university campus. Professors, especially in such fields as education, sociology, psychology, and Eng-

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

lish, present the ideology of relativism as the sure foundation for tolerance and peace in our society—and the freedom to do whatever feels good to the professor. Students who are otherwise intelligent and well read will spout this nonsense as Gospel truth. (And of course to them it *is* gospel. It's the good news of *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the good news that what is *right* is equivalent to what one *wishes* to be right. The illogicality and impossibility of relativism is breathtaking. No two beliefs are mutually exclusive or contradictory. If you believe God is hiding down the storm drain and I believe God is in my thumb, we're both believing what is right—for us. Each man is an island. There is an interesting relationship between relativism and solipsism—we are not only self-existent but the sole source of our own wisdom and knowledge.

However, even though a vast number of college students have swallowed the ideology of relativism without examining it, it hasn't necessarily atrophied their brain cells. I find they will often respond very well to the sort of appeal to the intellect I used on Bud. My own comments to Bud, given above, verged perhaps on the insulting. I find that most students hate the Socratic dialogue and resent having it used on them. What works much better, I've found, is the personal confession of faith. When I tell the class about the idiotic things I used to believe, they can grin and soak it up and take notes without having to publicly admit they believe the same thing. I find students are desperately eager to learn, to believe what is true, what makes sense. If I can support my arguments to their satisfaction, I needn't make an altar call. They will change their beliefs without telling me, then I'll discover months later that they've accepted what I've said and can now share it with others. This is one reason why the calm, honest voice of belief in the authoritative Word of God and the God it reveals is so powerful. The Word of God is the pole star drifting students need to find their way home.

Here's an example. In my 8 a.m. Developmental Writing class, the entire class, including Bud, seemed outraged by the article we were discussing. They refused to believe their teachers had misled them. They refused to believe scientists would deliberately exclude certain possibilities because they couldn't measure them. They had never heard any good arguments for creation or Noah's flood. In the 9 a.m. class the attitude was just the opposite. They loved the article and were happy to have a scientific reason to believe in the flood, and they testified to their faith.

What made the difference? It may have been that Bud began the 8 a.m. class with a statement of disbelief, whereas Michelle began the 9 a.m. class with a statement of belief. The 8 a.m. students may have been afraid to admit their faith. The 9 a.m. students may have been afraid to say anything against the Christian reading of Genesis. However, in both classes I presented the case for creation and the flood and testified to my own strong belief in them and how it had developed.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

When I graded the students' papers I was shocked. The students from both classes were equally likely to claim to be Christians who believed in creation and the flood, even though I'd made it very clear that what they believed made no difference at all in the grade they would get. In both classes some students stuck to evolution and had no need for God, and some claimed to hold views which are mutually exclusive. However, many students wrote that they used to believe in evolution because that was all they had ever heard, but the article and my comments had convinced them to believe what the Bible said.

For many students, relativism is a superficial belief. Many are hungry for a reason to believe the Bible, and they readily understand that it is illogical to believe that one can accurately judge which parts of the Bible are true and which false. Christian professors who profess the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but will find an appreciative audience in the secular university.

The Problem with "Clear and Distinct Ideas"

As I said in my introduction, one might trace both relativism and religious pluralism back to René Descartes' 17th century attempts to reach beyond his doubts and prove logically that God exists. Inventing a rationale for relativism and religious pluralism was not, of course, his intention, but merely a byproduct of his logic, which led him to believe that his own reason was a trustworthy guide, apart from any external authority.

Descartes' studies in philosophy led him to an extreme skepticism, even though he was longing for faith. But could he doubt everything? No. He decided he could certainly *not* doubt he was *doubting*. This led him to several more logical deductions. First, whatever it was that was *doubting* must *exist*. That meant him! "*Cogito ergo sum*," he cried with relief: "I *think*, therefore I *am*!" Second came a logical leap which reminds us of the logical problems of relativism and religious pluralism: since he now had a clear, distinct conception of his own existence, he deduced that all other ideas that were "clear and distinct" must therefore also be true. Third, eager to prove God's existence, he deduced that because he had a clear and distinct idea of something greater than anything else, that something, which he chose to call God, must also exist. (Thus we move from "I think, therefore I am," to "I think, therefore *God* is!" Finally, Descartes deduced that it was God who devised this world in which clear and distinct ideas exist, and God is a *puissance incompréhensible*, an "incomprehensible power" above all other powers, and because such a being must be entirely true and perfect, therefore clear and distinct ideas must also be *always* true and inerrant.³

In 1521 Martin Luther turned medieval theology on its head with these ringing words:

³ I am following closely after David Laird Dungan in *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 159-61.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Unless I am convinced of error by the *testimony of Scripture* or *clear reason*, I remain convinced by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Popes or councils because they have often erred and contradicted themselves. *My conscience is taken captive by God's Word*. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to *act against our conscience* is neither safe nor open to us.⁴

We generally think of these words as meaning that Luther refused to trust the traditions and doctrines of the medieval church and instead proclaimed that the Bible is the only source of doctrine, *sola scriptura*. This was a noble aim.

David Dungan points out, though, that Luther was saying that it was by his “reason” and his “conscience” that he would interpret the Word, even though he believed that his conscience had been “taken captive by God’s Word.”⁵ That conscience, in fact, led him away from the Word in several important ways, because he *felt* that his interpretation was adequate. It led him, for example, to doubt the authority of the books of James, Hebrews, and II Peter, and to assent to the persecution of Anabaptists, despite their clear scriptural teaching, and to reject the gospel call to service in favor of his understanding of “the freedom which is in Christ Jesus,” which seemed to free us from obedient service. By this, Luther also freed Protestants to be their own Bible interpreters, and while this has led to wonderful new light, it has also led to the splintering of the church’s temporal unity.

From Luther’s “scripture interpreted by reason and conscience” to Descartes’s “truth recognized by the clearness and distinctness of our idea of it” was a great leap, but predictable. The chasm between them was and still is easily bridged by the idea so well expressed in the title to Morris Venden’s book, *God Says . . . But I Think*. (I sometimes think this phrase is the motto of many Sabbath School classes.)

Descartes’s “discovery” that all “clear and distinct ideas” must be true and must be from God has led predictably to a society in which anyone’s ideas, no matter how unclear or indistinct, are claimed to be as good as anyone else’s, and in which all religions can be proclaimed true routes to God, despite the contradictions between them.

Relativism is Fun!

My own sense is that while many college students are drawn by relativism’s powerful call for tolerance of ethnic and social differences, what most strongly entices them is the idea of tolerance of their own sins. Few students are unaware that violence, drunkenness, sexual immorality of any sort, lying, or stealing are wrong, yet a large percentage are obsessed with at least one of these. Relativism

⁴ Dungan, 157.

⁵ Dungan, 157.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

tells them “You have to do what’s right for you.” It leads them to say, “I won’t say anything against what you are doing if you won’t say anything against what I am doing.” It absolves them from guilt, or seems to for a while. It lets them continue in their ways without censoring them. It stills the conscience. To some extent it is the cousin of existentialism and situation ethics.

Despite the seeming benefits of relativism, many students, even those with no religious background, sense the nagging of their consciences as the Holy Spirit tries to get through to them. Some of them also hear the voices of their parents, of course.

I have found that while many students are hostile to personal testimonies of God’s leading and to the clear teaching of Scripture, some of these students can be brought, if not to God, at least toward God. It is important to not call them fools, but it is also important to stick closely to the Word and present it in a clear and logical way as a valid source of authority, rather than agreeing with their ideas. Go as far as you can with them, agree strongly on the importance of ethnic and cultural tolerance, but show them a better and more consistent and less contradictory way.

Other students may be living a wild life, yet have been raised in a Christian home, and these often respond with rejoicing to the clear call of the Gospel. I do not hesitate to present Paul’s list, in Galatians 5:19–21, of those who “will not inherit the Kingdom of God,” even though it is a hard teaching indeed for students told by pastors that once they are born again, nothing they do can cost them eternal life. However, I soften the blow by telling them the ages at which I gave up the various sins they struggle with—ages far beyond their own few years. I tell them that some are ready now for this teaching, while others aren’t, but in the name of faithfulness I have to present the clear teaching of the Word.

Relativism is inimical to faithfully following Christ. Share this word and students will respond.

Humanism: Man the Measure of All Things

Humanism is at the heart of higher education. The primary purpose of the secular scholarly enterprise is to study the works of man or do the work of man in research and discovery, and this is humanism. The “nominalist” philosophers rejected Plato’s ideas of the good, the eternal, of the spiritual “Platonic forms,” saying they were not actual things but only names (*nomen*). Instead, they said the only real things were physical things. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) wrote, “Human nature includes everything within itself and attains all things by the power of its sense, intellect, and will. *The human person is a god*, yet not absolutely, because he is human; *a human god*, then.”⁶ Thomas More, in his book *Utopia* (1516), claimed that humans could use reason to achieve happiness for all. A century later, Francis Bacon taught that through a rational study of science

⁶ Dungan, 154–55.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and mathematics, through examining actual objects rather than blindly accepting the teachings of ancient philosophy or the Bible, humans could control their world and achieve happiness.

Some Christians argue that we should recognize a distinction between “Christian humanism” and “secular humanism.” They say that Christian humanism admits that all things are under God, yet sees man as the measure of all things because none can measure God or use Him as a measure. Secular humanism, on the other hand, in deliberately excluding God from all equations, sets up mankind as the image worthy of worship.

However, while this may serve to distinguish between the personal feelings of Christian and secular scholars, it is generally more difficult to distinguish between their work. It is sometimes possible to read, say, a work of history or literary criticism and think, “I can tell by this author’s sensitivity to and sympathy for the things of Christ that he or she must be a Christian.” More often, though, Christian scholars hide their allegiance. They may claim to be Christians, but neither their students nor their readers can perceive this. They are hiding their lights under bushels in the name of objectivity or science and in order to gain tenure or promotion or the respect of the world, and Jesus warns against this.

Thus, there is an inherent tension between even Christian humanism and the things of God. The secular humanist admits to no God in heaven and therefore worships man. The Christian humanist worships God but has man as an additional object worthy of worship, a metaphorical “graven image.”

The great majority of theologians have accepted the presuppositions of the historical-critical method of scholarship, whether or not they accept these presuppositions in their own beliefs. These presuppositions include the rejection of supernatural intervention in our affairs, the rejection of the miraculous, the rejection of creation and the flood and the resurrection of Christ in the flesh, and the rejection of the idea of God as the ultimate author of Scripture, which allows *sola scriptura* biblical study through comparing verse with verse throughout the Bible. At the heart of the historical-critical method is the hermeneutic of *doubt and suspicion*. Everything is doubted; everything is “interrogated,” to use the current buzz word, drawn from the vocabulary of totalitarian torture.

Students who study the Bible in the secular university, whether in a philosophy of religion class or a Bible as literature class or a religious studies class, will find that the historical-critical approach is pervasive. There are a few teachers who reject it, such as myself. However, most students who study the Bible in the university classroom will be taught to doubt it. Students are supposed to be mature enough to weigh options and make up their minds, but in fact the arguments of an articulate expert can be very persuasive, even if those arguments are wrong.

The tension between biblical Christianity and humanism of any type is profound. Galatians 5:22 tells us, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, pa-

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

tience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.”⁷ While we sometimes find these exhibited by professors, they are rarely taught and rarely objects of scholarly inquiry. In Philippians 4:8 Paul writes, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” One might argue that the honorable is often studied in history class, that what is right is often studied in philosophy or sociology, that what is lovely is the general subject of art history, that what is pure is the subject of mathematics, and that the excellent and praiseworthy is studied in the literature classroom, and perhaps there is merit in this argument. However, what are students to make of those things which do not fit into these categories?

Humanists focus primarily on the things of humanity. They praise and elevate the human. They also devote most of their waking hours to studying that which is human, leaving little time for the things of God. Students who do not learn their subjects will not succeed. Students who reject the subject matter in their fields will not become the next generation of academics. Would we be right to urge students in the secular university to distance themselves from the study of mankind? Probably not.

However, in responding to humanism, we must continually give students options. We must be role models as people of high intellectual attainment who nevertheless place God first. Christian students should be constantly questioning themselves, asking themselves how what they are studying fits the categories of what is biblically acceptable. They should be helped to realize that this world is not their home, nor will their worldly career be their heavenly career. They should be helped to recognize the presuppositions of the humanistic ideal. They should be trained to see their education as a prelude to a life of service.

Relativism and religious pluralism are not intrinsic to the idea of the university, but humanism is. They may pass, but humanism won't. Furthermore, it is difficult to reject it and still attain a university education worth having. However, we can help students avoid the seductions of humanism. We can help them learn to be in the world, yet not of it.

Religious Pluralism: Are There Many Paths to God?

Only in the past generation has religious pluralism become a hot topic in theological circles, and the influence on students seems to be even more recent. Within academe, one comes across the ideology of religious pluralism especially in philosophy of religion, religious studies, and anthropology classes, wherever professors present non-Christian religious beliefs. It has a corollary in New Age circles, going back perhaps to the hippy movement of the late 60s and early 70s, and is now a commonplace in books on “spirituality.” Students influenced by

⁷ All quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted, and all emphasis has been added.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

this ideology are perhaps more likely to have learned it from the latter source than the former, though both are influential.

We should perhaps trace the psychological need for the development of religious pluralism back to the influence of Plato and neoplatonic ideas of the immortal soul on Christian belief, which in turn led to belief in the eternal punishment of the wicked. If one person has turned away from God, saying, "I can't believe in a God who would let a person burn in Hell for trillions of years because the person sinned during one short lifetime," a million have, and can we blame them? It would be inexplicably cruel of God to decree such a thing, and Christians who teach the horrors of eternal torment may find that they themselves may receive their heavenly reward, "yet so as through fire," as 1 Corinthians 3:15 says, by the skin of their teeth.

In essence, religious pluralism teaches that *all* religions are true, *all* religions are from the true God, whoever or whatever that might be, and *all* religions lead to salvation for those who believe in them. Logically, of course, this is utter nonsense. If Christians, Jews, and Muslims teach death, judgment, and paradise or destruction, while Hindus and Buddhists teach reincarnation, how can such contradictory ideas both be true? If Christians, Jews, and Muslims teach monotheism, and Hindus and Buddhists teach polytheism, can all be right? Of course not. And if Jews say Jesus was only a man and an imposter, Muslims say Jesus was only a prophet, and Christians say Jesus was God Incarnate, can they all offer paths to salvation? Only if our ideas of what is true, right, and salvific are completely subjective wish fulfillments with no objective correlative in actual historical events and truths. If that is not the case, then one of these is more true than the others, and if salvation is in any sense open to all through the beliefs they were raised in, it is because the true God respects faithfulness wherever He finds it.

But the Dalai Lama Says. Last year I had a student named Adam in my Old Testament Literature class who was much influenced by religious pluralism. He was an intelligent, gentle, searching young man who found the Bible's claim to exclusivity hard to stomach. During the last week of the course he drove several hours to hear a lecture by the Dalai Lama. He returned for the final class period enthralled by the experience. He eagerly shared the Dalai Lama's message that all religions are equally true and that we should give up our differences and work as one for humanity while seeking God in whatever way seems meaningful to us.

Unfortunately, the day's topic was Daniel 7–12, and the students had been thinking about the time of trouble and the little horn. One student suggested that perhaps the Dalai Lama was the Antichrist, or at least had similar tendencies, and several others, noting the Dalai Lama's weak logic behind his stirring words, chimed in.

Adam responded in his final paper with fury and bitterness, utterly rejecting Christianity. In turn, I wrote him a long letter, apologizing and explaining the

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

Christian position. Fortunately, this story has a happy ending. Adam stopped by my office a few weeks later and thanked me for my letter. What's more, he signed up for my apocalyptic fiction class, and during the next semester, as he read books about the second coming, he gave his heart to Christ and was transformed, becoming a staunch advocate of the Bible as the sole spiritual authority. A gentle sharing of biblical truth wins souls and changes hearts.

Wicca Means Witchcraft. A couple months ago, as I was reading the survey sheets filled out by students in my Bible as Story class, I discovered that one student, Lindsay, identified herself as a believer in Wicca. This is a form of witchcraft which adherents see as a benign worship of nature and the Mother Goddess, using spellcasting not for evil but for such good causes as influencing the weather or crop fertility. She was the second witch I'd had in a Bible class, actually. The first one wore, on chains around his neck, a pentangle with a goat's head in the middle and a cross with a naked woman hanging from it and asked for Halloween off as a religious holiday (I gave it to him, in the name of religious freedom).

I sent Lindsay an e-mail message, welcoming her to the class, warning her that a lot of what I would say would offend her, but promising that her beliefs would have no bearing on her grade, so long as she passed the exams.

A few weeks ago I received an e-mail from Lindsay's mother. Checking up on her daughter's computer contacts, as perhaps a good mother should, she had found my e-mail on her computer in Lindsay's saved mail file and had read it, and she felt she needed to respond. "Lindsay is *not* a witch, whatever she might tell you," she wrote. "She's a Christian. She was baptized as a Lutheran, and she attended confirmation classes. She does read books about witchcraft, but I've always let her do that. That's just Lindsay."

I suspect that this woman, despite attending a Lutheran church on occasion, was completely unaware of what the Bible says about the toleration of witches and witchcraft and why God decreed that witches must be killed. Certainly she was ignorant of the difference between infant baptism and being a true Christian. When religious pluralism is accepted by Christians, it is generally either because they don't know what the Bible says, or they don't accept the Bible as authoritative. So much of what we believe and how we respond depends on whether or not we believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

For example, the major proponent of religious pluralism is the English philosopher John Hick. At the beginning of his career, Hick was a conservative though neo-orthodox theologian. However, as his ideas of religious pluralism developed, he came to judge Scripture by them, rather than judging them by Scripture. In order to maintain these ideas, of which he was proud, he eventually came to deny that Jesus had ever thought or taught that He was God the Son. The logical corollary to this, of course, is that the New Testament writers were

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

either wrong or deceptive, though probably the former. After all, many have died for mistaken beliefs, but few to maintain their own lies.⁸

It is not really necessary here to delve deeper into religious pluralism. Clearly it is inimical to belief in biblical Christianity. Furthermore, few teachers have heard of it, and few students know the philosophy behind it. It is better to expose the contradictions and present a better alternative. Those who want to know more would do well to read Ronald H. Nash's book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*

Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism

Beyond doubt, even non-Christian students are sincere in their concern for the salvation of those who have never had the opportunity to hear and respond to the call of Christ, even though for most that concern does not extend to the point of becoming full time evangelists. Some embrace religious pluralism because they dislike Christianity, or because they have seized upon an alternate religion and want it too to lead to salvation. However, many accept religious pluralism because they consider themselves Christians, but can't believe God would condemn those who have never heard.

If these students are to accept the Gospel and become Gospel workers, then we must respond satisfactorily to their concerns. There are two general approaches: exclusivism and inclusivism.

Exclusivism has been the usual Christian explanation, and it is the most clearly and strictly biblical. In Acts 4:12 Peter says to the Sanhedrin, about Christ, "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is *no other name* under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (NIV). Paul and Silas tell the Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31, NIV). In Romans 10:9 Paul writes that this is his message: "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (NIV). Jesus says, in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. *No one* comes to the Father *except through me*" (NIV). Of course all of these witnesses have other things to say about the path to salvation, as well, but these four texts seem to be *sine qua non*, whatever the rest of the New Testament may say.⁹

However, exclusivism is also the belief that has led so many to reject Christianity as unworthy of the character of God, and if that is all we have to share with our students, many will turn away in disgust, turn toward some other faith which, though in conflict with the Bible, offers salvation to all, even if not

⁸ Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 72-73. Nash's book is a major response to John Hick's pluralism and Clark Pinnock's inclusivism, but it is important to bear in mind that he writes as a Calvinist, and this informs his response throughout, even though it is revealed only near the end.

⁹ See Nash for his support of exclusivism over inclusivism and his analyses of these and other texts.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

all accept it. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20, Jesus gave His followers the assignment of sharing the Gospel with the entire world. Must the unreached world be damned because we have failed? John writes, “Anyone who does what is good is from God” (3 John 1:11). Admittedly, John is writing about Christians, but if a pagan does what is good, is it not also from God? And if by God’s grace a pagan does what is good, can God not also see fit to offer that faithful pagan salvation?

What, too, of the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31–46? There those who “inherit the kingdom” are those who feed, clothe, house, and visit those in need. There is no mention of belief in Christ. I have had many students who proudly proclaim they are “saved” and cannot be lost, even though they do nothing for those in need. These verses cause them intense discomfort. Perhaps from the context of the entire New Testament, we should assume that both the sheep and the goats in this story are believers in Christ. However, in the story itself it is “the nations” who are divided, not believers, and into only two groups: those who help and those who don’t, not those who believe in Christ and those who don’t.¹⁰ We might recall, as well, that “the nations” in the Bible refers generally to those who are not Abraham’s seed, to the Gentiles.

How Wide Is God’s Mercy?

The most influential and controversial work on inclusivism is Clark Pinnock’s 1992 book *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*.¹¹ The book has taken the theological world by storm and led to many contentious sessions at Evangelical Theological Society conferences. Rather than deal with the strengths and weaknesses of Pinnock’s arguments (Nash has pointed out all the weaknesses and various strengths which he considers weaknesses), I’d like to use some of his ideas in suggesting some of the biblical hints that God’s mercy is less narrow than exclusivists claim. If there is indeed breadth to it, then this breadth of mercy can be used in guiding back to Christ students who have turned to religious pluralism.

Inclusivists agree, with Acts 4:12, that “there is no other name under heaven given to men [but Christ’s] by which we must be saved.” They agree with Jesus when he says, in John 14:6, “No one comes to the Father except

¹⁰ I’m continually astonished by theologians who carefully distinguish between good works done in grateful response to salvation and good works done to achieve salvation, as if God were going to exclude all Catholics from heaven because their motives for faithfulness were skewed. I agree that good works don’t earn us salvation, but in this passage Jesus says nothing about motive. He speaks only of action. I fear those who carefully avoid a life of service lest God accuse them of “works righteousness” will be among the goats, not the sheep. On the other hand (the right hand, where one finds the sheep), those who devote themselves to loving service to those in need reveal that they are among the sheep, and I believe and hope that when the Shepherd calls in the Resurrection, they will hear His voice and recognize the Shepherd they have followed without ever having heard His name or seen His face (John 10:14–16).

¹¹ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

through me.” They say these verses do not exclude the possibility of salvation for those who have never had the opportunity to accept Christ, but only confirm that if such people are saved, it will be through Christ’s blood, shed for them.

How could such people appropriate Christ’s blood without ever hearing of Him? Inclusivists point to the “roster of faith” in Hebrews 11, men and women who had no distinct, specific knowledge of Jesus Christ, Son of God Incarnate and Savior, yet *by faith* were *faithful* to God, as best they understood His call (and despite episodes of unfaithfulness), and because of their faith, revealed by their faithfulness, were accounted righteous (Gal 3:6). Dispensationalists may argue that before Christ people were saved by obedience, but now they are saved by faith alone, but this controverts Acts 4:12. If the faithful following of God by those in the Old Testament who never had the opportunity to accept Christ led to their salvation, is it possible that the same holds true today? It is not certain, but there are grounds for hope in God’s mercy and providence.¹²

Paul tells us, in Romans 1:18–21,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because *that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* For since the creation of the world *His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,* so that they are without excuse. For even though *they knew God,* they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Nash is right to point out that this passage, like most of the chapter, is given to explain why God is just in punishing wicked unbelievers, not to map out alternate routes to salvation.¹³ Nevertheless, does it hint that there might be some who have acted upon the evidence available to them because “they knew God,” some who have walked in as much light as they have had, some who have been

¹² A. H. Strong writes, in his *Systematic Theology*, “The patriarchs, though they had no knowledge of a personal Christ, were saved by believing in God as far as God had revealed himself to them; and whoever among the heathen are saved, must in like manner be saved by casting themselves upon God’s plan of mercy, dimly shadowed forth in nature and providence. But such faith, even among the patriarchs and heathen, is implicitly a faith in Christ, and would become explicit and conscious trust and submission, whenever Christ were made known to them . . . Since Christ is the Word of God and the Truth of God, he may be received even by those who have not heard of his manifestation in the flesh. . . . We have, therefore, the hope that even among the heathen there may be some, like Socrates, who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the truth of nature and conscience, have found the way of life and salvation.” (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 842–843.

¹³ Nash, 119-120.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

led by the Holy Spirit to care for those in need without hearing Christ's name? Can we hope, based on this, that such people might be saved by Christ's blood because the righteous King knows that when they see Him face to face they will recognize Him, much as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, even of himself, "then I will know *fully* just as I also have been fully known"?

Paul also writes, in Romans 2:14–16,

For when Gentiles who *do not* have the Law do *instinctively* the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that *they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness* and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Nash is right again to note that this text does not say that such people will be saved.¹⁴ However, having the Law written upon the heart is the great promise God makes to His people in Jeremiah 31:33, repeated in Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16. God's promise to those who have His law written upon their hearts is this: "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." While this promise is made to the "house of Israel," one could argue that any who have God's Laws written on their hearts *are* of the "house of Israel," even if they are Gentiles, according to Romans 9:6–8 and 30–31.

Jesus says, in John 6:45, "It is written in the prophets, "And they shall *all* be taught *by God*." Therefore *everyone* who has *heard* and *learned* from the *Father* comes to *Me*." The context of both Christ's own words and His quote from Isaiah 54 are eschatological, but Christ is also explaining why most Jews who hear His words do not become disciples. Only those drawn by the Father accept Him. Only those willing to hear and learn when drawn. But all who *do* hear and learn *will* come to Christ. But when? Jesus says several times in the chapter, "and I will raise him up *in the last days*." Can we hope, on the basis of this text, that "the God of the whole earth" (Isa 54:5) will have taught those willing to hear and learn among "the nations," even if they have not heard of Christ, and that they will "come" to Christ when He, the Shepherd who knows His sheep, calls them after He has raised them up "in the last days"? Yes, we can hope, and we can give hope. In giving this hope, we will persuade many doubters that God *can* be trusted.

Another text which seems to support inclusivism is Acts 10:34–35. Speaking to the God-fearing centurion Cornelius, Peter says, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but *in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him*." There is no

¹⁴ Nash, 121–122.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

mention here of faith in Christ as a requirement, as such faith might not be an option for some of these “righteous pagans.” While in this case Cornelius has learned about the true God from the Jews and has heard of Jesus (v. 38), he has not become a Jew or accepted Christ, but has only feared God and done what is right (v. 2). This is his condition when God uses miraculous means to bring to him the Gospel which the apostles have not yet seen fit to share with Gentiles. Also, Peter says, referring to his vision, “God has shown me that I should not call *any man unholy or unclean*” (v. 28).

He is speaking here specifically of Gentiles who have not accepted Christ yet but have come, with the Holy Spirit’s leading, to fear God and do what is right. He says these people, even though they have not yet accepted Christ and been baptized, are *not unholy or unclean*. If they are not unholy or unclean, then they are clean and holy. Those are the only options. Clean and holy was also the position of faithful and forgiven Israelites, according to the Law. What is more, it is before Cornelius has accepted Christ and received the Holy Spirit and been baptized that “an angel of God” comes to him in vision and says, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (v. 4). Dare we hope from this that, say, the “prayers and alms” of the devout Muslim who has not yet met Christ also ascend “as a memorial before God”? Of course, a clean and holy Gentile such as Cornelius recognizes and accepts his Savior when the Gospel is clearly presented, and our call is always to present that Gospel and lift people to Christ, not to tell people they’re okay where they are. But what if such people never hear?

There are many more texts that hint at how God might save those who have never heard of Christ.¹⁵ However, the verses above give us sufficient grounds to hope.

It is important to bear in mind that the Bible is given to offer one route to salvation, not alternate routes. It is given to bring all sinners to the true God and Savior by way of His true revelation of Himself in His Word, not to give us permission to seek God in our own way (or in our own likeness) or in other supposedly sacred writings, even though there might be some truth in them here and there. Furthermore, the Gospel Commission is for us to *make disciples of Christ*, not to explain alternate ways by which the world might be saved through Christ. Accordingly, we should not expect a clear Bible statement about the possibility of salvation for those who have never heard of Christ. Thus, the argument from silence is not really persuasive, whether it is used by exclusivists or inclusivists.

¹⁵ See, for example, I Tim 2:3–6, 4:10; Col 1:16–17; John 1:9, 3:16; I John 4:9, 14; I Cor 5:19; II Pet 3:9; Rom 11:32; Gen 3:15, 9:9–17, 12:3, 14:17–24, 20:1–18; Ps 47:8–9, 82:8, 87:4, 99:2, 102:15, 22; Acts 14:16–17; Exod 18:1–12, 19:5–6; Isa 19:6, 25, 25:6–8; I Pet 2:9; James 1:18, 5:11; Matt 2:1–12, 8:11, 11:21–24, 12:41–42; Amos 9:7; Mal 1:11; Jer 18:7–8; Luke 14:13, 15:11–32, 18:9–14.

CHRISTIAN: RELATIVISM, HUMANISM, AND PLURALISM

What I tell my students is that the Bible reveals the sure route to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and our call is to share that Gospel with the world. Only those who are born again as children of God and remain in Christ can have the *assurance* of salvation. However, I tell them, I know there are people around the world who have never heard of Jesus, yet reflect Him in their faces and their acts, and this leads me to believe they are living by faith, as revealed by their faithfulness.¹⁶ The Bible does not give me permission to speak with assurance of their salvation, but it gives me reason to hope and pray for their salvation. Meanwhile, again, our duty is to offer Christ to everyone possible.

After hearing this explanation in the context of my Bible classes—each of which is equivalent to about a hundred hours of Bible studies, what with the homework—many agnostic students influenced by religious pluralism have accepted Christ, and many more devout or nominal Christians have been led to surrender and rebirth and devotion to sharing the Good News with those around them. Even for students I don't know who God brings to my office with questions about this topic, this answer often satisfies them and opens their hearts to God's working.

A Call to Arms

Despite the influence of relativism, humanism, and religious pluralism, students on the secular university campus who tire of false freedom and empty lives and seek an answer in Christ are drawn by faith, not by doubt; by salvation, not by suspicion. If we, in a misguided attempt to face liberal Christianity without embarrassment, subscribe to a theology of indeterminacy and ethical relativity, we will be doing the work of the accuser, not of our Advocate. We will be driving people from Christ, not drawing them.

We don't have to compromise to reach students in the secular university, whatever their religious background; we have to stop compromising. We have to stop compromising in what we ask of others. Much more important, for the sake of the Gospel, we have to stop compromising in what we ask of ourselves. People in their teens and twenties are seldom drawn by platitudes, by pretended piety, by phoniness. They want to believe in something that matters, in something with meaning, however challenging.

¹⁶ "Wherever there is an impulse of love and sympathy, wherever the heart reaches out to bless and uplift others, there is revealed the working of God's Holy Spirit. In the depths of heathenism, men who have had no knowledge of the written law of God, who have never even heard the name of Christ, have been kind to His servants, protecting them at the risk of their own lives. Their acts show the working of a divine power. The Holy Spirit has implanted the grace of Christ in the heart of the savage, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his education. The "Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God." Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, [1900] 1941), 385. A popular book filled with examples of this is Don Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts*, rev. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Christ has proven that the most powerful of calls is not the call to a modified, relative, relatively painless and pointless faith, but the call to complete, all out, total, radical commitment, radical surrender, radical integrity, radical love, radical joy, radical transformation, radical holiness, radical discipleship. All for Christ; all through Christ; all by Christ; all in Christ.

When this describes us, it won't matter if we wear the right clothes, know the right slang, or sing the right songs in church. When the army of youth who are going to change this world and bring it to Christ sees this in us and hears us ask for it in them, they will come.

Ed Christian teaches Old Testament, New Testament, and Bible as Story at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, a state university with 8,000 students. He earned his doctorate at the University of Nebraska and wrote his dissertation while a Fulbright Scholar at Oxford University. American Cassette Ministries has released a three-tape album of his reading of 165 great hymn lyrics as poetry and a six-tape series on hot issues in Adventism. He writes frequently for church publications and speaks worldwide. His most recent book is published by Macmillan in England and St. Martin's in the U.S. He is the editor of both JATS and the ATS Newsletter. christia@kutztown.edu