

# The Preference Wager: A Defense of Particular Religious Preference in an Age of Religious Pluralism

*“Some dogma, we are told, was credible in the twelfth century, but is not credible in the twentieth. You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays...What a man can believe depends upon his philosophy, not upon the clock or the century.”*

– G.K. Chesterton<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

*In the descriptive sense, “religious pluralism” merely refers to the fact that there is plurality of religions. In the prescriptive philosophical sense, “religious pluralism” refers to a distinctive way of thinking about the diversity of religions. A pluralistic approach to the plurality of religions often argues that religions are morally and epistemically equal. As defined by Lesslie Newbigin, the ideology of religious pluralism is “the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood but of different perceptions of the one truth.” Accepting the ideology of religious pluralism renders absurd any religious apologetic claim to a preference for a particular religion. By religious preference I mean warrantably preferring a specific religion as true, even in the face of a plurality of different religions. The purpose of this thesis is to address the question of whether it is legitimate to make an apologetic attempt to argue for a specific religious preference and selects Christianity as a case study. The proposal is that George Lindbeck’s Cultural Linguistic approach allows for a feasible religious preference and apologetics may have a role to play in justifying the preferentiality of a particular religion.*

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Moody Publishers, 2013), 60.

# Introduction:

The last century has presented an increased intensity of encounter with the religious other. As of 2010, a demographic study on the global religious landscape estimated that the world consists of 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, 500 million Buddhists, 14 million Jews, 400 million people practicing various folk or traditional religions, and 58 million people belonging to the Baha'i faith, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Tenrikyo, Wicca and Zoroastrianism.<sup>2</sup> In this diverse landscape, engagement and interchange of worldviews has been amplified by globalization, technical advancements of modernization, and sweeping demographic changes from immigration.<sup>3</sup>

The boundaries of where one religion<sup>4</sup> begins and another ends are often indistinct and difficult to determine. The historical relations were intermingled as religions budded from one another and overlapped geographically directly and indirectly. Ideas and practices diffused as religions met and continue to meet. Even within a single religion (such as Christianity) vast differences can be found between denominations, throughout time, between cultures, within a single city and between individual believers. Religions are as diverse and integrally related as languages and dialects.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Global Religious Landscape." *Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism : The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>4</sup> " A working definition is supplied by Clifford Geertz: (1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

As a first order experience, religions seem to share much with regards to ritual practices, morality, social communities and religious/mystical experiences. However at the level of second order reflection, religions make propositional assertions that seem contradictory and challenging to reconcile. Among a diverse plurality of religions, the idea of one true church, one true faith or one true religion seems almost untenable and is ethnocentric, arrogant, or uninformed. Confronted with the reality of religious pluralism (i.e. the mere fact of the number of quite different religions in our world), one wonders whether it is reasonable to hold the truth of one religion with precedence over all others and by doing so, make a claim of universal religious preference.<sup>5</sup> By religious preference, I mean warrantably<sup>6</sup> preferring a specific confession of a traditional religion as true, even in the face of a plurality of different religions. The purpose of this thesis is to address the question of whether it is legitimate to make an apologetic<sup>7</sup> attempt to argue for a particular religious preference and selects Christianity as a case study.

This question is relevant because the way in which a person perceives their relationship with other religions determines the way in which they authentically encounter other religions. The approach to the plurality of religions influences engagement with other ideas and shapes

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<sup>5</sup> "Preference," in one sense of the word, can be personal and subjective. For example, a person may have a preference for chocolate ice cream over vanilla. However, notion of "preference" can also be used in a public and objective sense. For example, one regiment of medical treatment may be preferable to another because it results in a higher frequency of cures, less remission, fewer bad side effects etc. In this thesis, religious preference is argued to be more analogous to the latter than the former. (See Section 1: pages 1-3)

<sup>6</sup>See Alvin Plantinga's explanation of "warrant."

<sup>7</sup> The word "apologetics" comes from the Greek word *ἀπολογία*, which means "speaking in defense." The goal of Apologetics is to defend the plausibility of a position. For example, within the Christian tradition, apologetics clarifies the Christian position in light of misunderstandings and misrepresentations, defends the soundness of the faith and vindicates its reasonableness by delving into philosophical theology, epistemology and demonstrating the coherence of the Christian thought. Apologetics is a discipline that aspires to offer a rational basis and a creative presentation of belief.

the character and goal of apologetic discourse. What should apologetics look like within a religiously plural setting? Careful thought with regard to this issue is especially significant today when the religious other is not an abstract idea but our next door neighbor and part of the community in which we live.

The past is littered with examples of counterproductive or disastrous reactions to religious diversity. One can reflect upon the Christian crusades, Islamic terrorism, ghetto communities in India living in isolated indifference to one another and the intellectual reductionism of religions to “one common essence.” Additionally, the question of how to understand and respond to the plurality of religions is of special significance to those of religious traditions that have historically made explicit claims of preference. Some believers demand that traditionally orthodox doctrines need to be reinterpreted in light of religious pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Does religious preference need to be abandoned as a thing of the past?

Over three hundred years ago John Bunyan wrote on his Christian faith with respect to other religions that “everyone doth think his own religion rightest, both Jews, and Moors, and Pagans; and how if all our Faith and Christ, and Scriptures should be but a thinks-so-too?”<sup>9</sup> The challenge to understand religious truth in the midst of a plurality of religions is not new. Within the Christian tradition, one can trace the shifting discussion from the early church fathers<sup>10</sup> to

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Paul Knitter explains away Jesus’ claims of uniqueness and exclusiveness by treating the gospel records as confessional, the incarnation as the mythical symbol of the nondualistic nature of all men, and the resurrection as a spiritual and psychological event merely within the minds of the disciples. He attempts to justify the extensive changes by proposing that the “new *kairos*” demands a “new Christology” if Christianity is to remain socially relevant. (Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series.No. 7 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 171-73, 84-88, 97-200.)

<sup>9</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1863), 97.

<sup>10</sup> For instance Saint Augustine (354-430 AD) writes concerning the philosophy of Hellenic paganism, “If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as

the 1893 Parliament of World Religions which occasioned the birth of formal interreligious dialogue and to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which formally declared the relation of the Catholic Church to Non-Christian Religions in the *Nostra Aetate* (1965).<sup>11</sup> In the 1980's, the discussion of religious pluralism intensified and the conversation continues in the twenty-first century. Contemporary philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga writes,

*"To put [the problem of pluralism] in an internal and personal way, I find myself with religious beliefs, and religious beliefs that I realize aren't shared by nearly everyone else. What sort of impact should this awareness have on the beliefs I hold and the strength with which I hold them? How should I thinking about the great religious diversity the world in fact displays? Can I sensibly remain an adherent of just one of these religions, rejecting others?"*<sup>12</sup>

Historically, there have been roughly three standard approaches to the plurality of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>13</sup>

Exclusivism generally holds that one, true religion has access to God's revelation and salvation. Other religions can be propositionally right, in so far as they agree with the exclusively true religion and are rejected as false wherever there is disagreement.<sup>14</sup> A literary

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unjust possessors and converted to our use." (On Christian Doctrine Augustine and On Christian Doctrine, "Trans. Dw Robertson, Jr," *The Library of* (1958): 75.)

<sup>11</sup> *Nostra Aetate* was an authoritative document emerging from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Three thousand bishops from all over the world met and illuminated the understanding of Catholic doctrine. With respect to other religions, *Nostra Aetate* affirmed the presence of goodness and truth in other religious traditions, the value of interreligious dialogue and the possibility of salvation of non-Christians, while also affirming Catholic doctrine as "the fullness of the truth." (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 111-15.)

<sup>12</sup> Alvin C. Plantinga, "Pluralism : A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," (1995), 188.

<sup>13</sup> The typology of these reactions to plurality--exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism--was coined by Alan Race in 1982. Though prominent, it has been criticized for a number of reasons. The categories function as a heuristic and represent positions on a spectrum rather than viewpoints of individuals. These classifications also tend to conflate answers to different questions of revelation and salvation and the word *exclusivism* bears negative social connotations. (Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 171-73; Robert B Stewart, *Can Only One Religion Be True?: Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue* (Fortress Press, 2013), 4.)

<sup>14</sup> Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 166-68.

example of Christian exclusivism is Rev. Thwackum, the schoolmaster in *Tom Jones*, who says, "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England."<sup>15</sup>

Another example of an exclusivist may be an Islamic exclusivist who holds that Islam is the only authentic religion, there is no God but Allah and Non-Muslims (*Kafir*) are destined to hell.<sup>16</sup>

Inclusivism is similar to exclusivism except it is inclined to be more generous in acknowledging the revelation of God, religious truth, and salvation outside of the one, true religion.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, an inclusivist Hindu may maintain that Hinduism is true. On the other hand, an inclusivist Hindu accepts, accommodates, and reinterprets other religions in terms of Hinduism: worshipping Christ becomes the anonymous worship of a Hindu deity.

In contrast to inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is "an egalitarian and democratized perspective that maintains a rough parity among religions concerning religious truth."<sup>18</sup> The phrase "religious pluralism" has a number of meanings. In the descriptive sense, "religious pluralism" merely refers to the fact that there is plurality of religions. In the prescriptive, philosophical sense, "religious pluralism" refers to a distinctive way of thinking about the diversity of religions. For example, a pluralistic approach to multiplicity of religions may argue that all major religions are morally and epistemically equal. The *ideology of religious pluralism* (as defined by Lesslie Newbigin) is "the belief that the difference between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Fielding, "Tom Jones. 1749," *Book XIII* (1966): 133.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Khalid Zaheer, "Religious Tolerance: An Islamic Perspective," ([http://khalidzaheer.com/essays/kzaheer/following%20islam/religious\\_tolerance\\_an\\_islamic\\_perspective.html](http://khalidzaheer.com/essays/kzaheer/following%20islam/religious_tolerance_an_islamic_perspective.html)).

<sup>17</sup> Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism : The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, 51-52.

<sup>18</sup> Paul F Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Orbis Books, 1987), viii.

religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible. Religious belief is a private matter. Each of us is entitled to have--as we say--a faith of our own."<sup>19</sup> Religious belief fashions differently from individual to individual, and is a private "choice" for the religious consumer in the market of ideas.

A conversation partner in this thesis is John Hick--one of the leading thinkers advocating religious pluralism.<sup>20</sup> Hick was an influential English philosopher of religion and theologian. Though initially a conservative, exclusivist evangelical, Hick experienced a Copernican revolution of thought and became a self-proclaimed religious pluralist. Hick attempts to understand the plurality of religions from a point of reference outside of any one religious tradition and accommodates the doctrines of Christianity to his metatheory of religions.<sup>21</sup> According to Hick, each religious experience is a culturally and historically conditioned interpretation of the same ineffable divine reality that Hick calls "The Real."<sup>22</sup> Invoking imagery of the Copernican revolution, he calls for "a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is God who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him."<sup>23</sup>

Another person contributing significantly to the discussion will be Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin was a respected British missionary, apologist and theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who falls loosely under the category of Christian inclusivism. He was a missionary in India for forty

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<sup>19</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Adams, *Christ and the Other: In Dialogue with Hick and Newbigin* (Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism : The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, 159-77.

<sup>22</sup> Hick borrows a Kantian distinction in proposing that The Real is analogous to the *noumena* thing-in-itself and that each *personae/impersonae* manifestation is analogous to the *phenomena* experienced-as. Hick also considers each religion to possess the same soteriological power to transform its saints from Self-Centeredness to Reality-Centeredness.

<sup>23</sup> John Hick, "The Copernican Revolution in Theology," *Hick, John: God and the universe of faiths: essays in the philosophy of religion* (1993): 130-31.

years, pastor in the United Reformed Church in the UK, a bishop of the church of South India, a general secretary of the International Missionary Council, and an associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches.<sup>24</sup> His immersion in both the East and the West gave him unique insight into Western culture and the phenomena of religious pluralism. Lesslie Newbigin represents a way of interpreting plurality from a point of reference within a tradition. In contrast to Hick, Newbigin believes that the relation between Christianity and other religions “is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> Newbigin describes the Bible as a universal history, Christ as the New Fact, and the Gospel as public, secular truth.<sup>26</sup> In claiming finality for Christ, he claims that commitment to Him is the way in which we can become truly aligned to the ultimate end for which all things were made.<sup>27</sup>

A third voice prominent in this thesis is that of George Lindbeck. Lindbeck is a Lutheran theologian, medievalist expert and professor at Yale University who has engaged extensively in intrareligious, ecumenical dialogue. He is a leading advocate of post-liberalism and most aligned with inclusivist convictions.<sup>28</sup> His Cultural Linguistic approach to religious doctrine, which views religions as a kind of cultural/linguistic framework, is discussed at length in the upcoming chapters.

Recently, the historical trend has been towards a more pluralistic understanding of the relation between Christianity and other religions. The spectrum has shifted from exclusivism to

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<sup>24</sup> "Lesslie Newbigin," <http://www.eerdmans.com/Authors/?AuthorId=18402>.

<sup>25</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-34.

<sup>27</sup> *The Finality of Christ* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1969), 115.

<sup>28</sup> "George Lindbeck," Theopedia, [http://www.theopedia.com/George\\_Lindbeck](http://www.theopedia.com/George_Lindbeck).



inclusivism to pluralism and some, such as Hick,<sup>29</sup> declare that pluralism is the inevitable conclusion.<sup>30</sup> Many people find the ideology of religious pluralism to be attractive. To judge one religion superior to the others is regarded by many as arrogant, elitist, oppressive, or ignorant. As Lesslie Newbigin writes, "for those who have shared in the multifaith, multicultural, multiracial world of today, it seems preposterous to maintain that in all the infinite pluralities and relativity of human affairs there should be an absolute against which everything else is to be measured."<sup>31</sup> What are the cultural and historical factors that make the ideology of religious pluralism appealing at *this* point in history to *this* culture?

The culture in which this type of thinking has been encouraged is one typified by Individualism, distrust of authority, and the "supermarket mentality". It is haunted by guilt from Western imperialism and is shaped by its shared story found in the metanarrative of evolution. These attitudes pervade our view of religion and make religious pluralism seem more intuitive while arguments for religious preference feel less convincing. It is notable that a majority of the prominent pluralistic literature emerged in the 1970s and 1980's. Under the shadow of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and Communism there was a general distrust of authority, encouragement of countercultural individualism and longing for world peace and harmony.<sup>32</sup> Though ashamed of the imperialism and Western dominance evident in the

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<sup>29</sup> John Hick, "The Myth of Christian Uniqueness : Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions," in *Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 23.

<sup>30</sup> In Introduction to Theology of Religions, Veli-Matti sketches the historical developments in Christian thought and challenges the model of progress evolution toward pluralistic Theology of Religions. Many of the early church fathers possessed a limited openness toward other religions and the consolidation of the exclusive attitude didn't happen until the 5<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Augustine. (Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 64-68.)

<sup>31</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Irene Taviss Thomson, "Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s Vs. The 1980s," *Sociological Forum* 7, no. 3 (1992): 512.

Vietnam War, the 1970s and 1980s are remembered and praised for movements in decolonization, political correctness to protect minority groups, opposition to apartheid, and the advancement of women's rights and gay rights. America was proud of its capitalistic consumer culture and breakthroughs in genetics increased confidence in the story of evolution. The convergence of proud individualism, rebellion against authority, remorse for oppression, marketable availability of religions, belief in evolution, and yearning for global unity and peace produced fertile soil for the blossoming of pluralism. Today the land is still arable for a fruitful crop.

## Section One: Defense of Religious Preference

To begin, it is important to clarify what is meant by “religious preference.” The notion of preference can be personal and subjective. I have a preference for chocolate ice cream over vanilla. Preferring chocolate ice cream to vanilla is not making a universal declaration that chocolate ice cream is inherently superior to vanilla but merely that when given the choice between the two, I choose chocolate. Sometimes, however, the notion of “preference,” can be used in a public and objective sense. For example, one regiment of medical treatment may be preferable to another because it results in a higher frequency of cures, less remission, fewer bad side effects etc. To take an extreme case, it is publically and objectively preferable to treat fever with modern medicine than with bloodletting leeches.<sup>33</sup>

In this thesis, religious preference is understood in the public and objective sense. By religious preference, I mean warrantedly preferring a specific confession of a traditional religion as true, even in the face of a plurality of different religions. I do not mean preferring a specific religion as one prefers ice cream (“I prefer chocolate ice cream over vanilla”). Rather, the preferred religion is the one which *merits my preference* and affirmation in the existential commitment of faith: “We identify ourselves with [a particular set of religious practices], even

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<sup>33</sup> Historically, it was believed that poor health resulted from an imbalance of the four humors, blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile. Draining blood by means of leeches and other methods was a standard medical procedure that attempted to restore the balance of the humors. Allegedly, in the winter of 1799, George Washington developed fever and respiratory distress and died not from illness but from excessive blood lost in bloodletting. (MD Gerry Greenstone, “The History of Bloodletting,” *BCMMedicalJournal* 52, no. No. 1, <http://www.bcmj.org/premise/history-bloodletting>.)

perhaps define our own identity in terms of these beliefs and practices. They are what we live for and, perhaps, even die for.”<sup>34</sup>

Let us explore what is, and what is not involved in making this claim for religious preference. It may be helpful to consider holding a religion with preference as analogous to holding a scientific model with preference in the public, objective sense.

In the scientific community, it is said that the Wave-Particle Duality Model is “true” and that atoms act as both waves and particles. While this model may be the best picture one has for atomic theory, it is by no means an exhaustively true picture. The Wave-Particle Duality model is not a complete claim of what an atom ontologically is; instead it provides an illustration of a formula that enables us to speak truly about what has been observed in the world. Though an atom cannot be fully reduced to just a particle and a wave, this model is preferable to J.J. Thompson’s Plum Pudding Model in which an atom is depicted as positively charged pudding with negative charges floating in it like raisins. To say that one scientific theory is preferable to another is not to reduce the theory to a subjective fancy; it means that the Duality Model merits our preference over the Plum Pudding Model. Atoms have behaved like both waves and particles for all people for all times for all places, regardless of the fact that the vast majority of the human species has not realized it. To say that a theory is preferable is to say that, from what is known, the theory is able to explain the relevant data, express most truly what is observed, and empower scientists to make predictions and manipulate the natural

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<sup>34</sup> Merold Westphal, "Existentialism and Religion " in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 323.

world. The theory and its formulas become the probe<sup>35</sup> by which the scientist examines and has access to the natural world and the language in which they describe it.<sup>36</sup> Jeannine Fletcher draws a parallel:

*Thus, just as communities of scientists see the world in a particular way based on the paradigms they use, so too, religious communities see the world in a particular way based on the sacred texts that function as paradigms for them. Believers see the world imaginatively through scriptural lenses, allowing the structure of their narratives themselves to organize the sensory stimuli of the world. Within the pages of the sacred text are found the categories that shape religious person's experiences of the world.*<sup>37</sup>

Analogously, a religion that is preferable, in the public and objective sense, enables us to speak, see, and act truly; it is a lens and a language<sup>38</sup> for the believer. The tradition expresses most truly what is, explains what is observed in the world, and empowers a person to live in a way aligned with that reality. It is pragmatically true in the sense that it is in accordance with what is ontologically true. However, religious preference is not a claim to possess absolute truth, but to be placed on a path that by following which we are led toward the truth.<sup>39</sup> As Keith Ward lectures, "sensible [religious] beliefs are those that are not disconfirmed by experience,

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<sup>35</sup> Newbigin references an illustration used by Michael Polanyi. As surgeon uses a probe to investigate a cavity that cannot be investigated directly so words so languages, concepts and stories are tools of culture for probing reality. The surgeon indwells and relies on the probe as an extension of himself and though tacitly aware of the pressure of the probe in his hand he is focally aware of what the probe shows of the patient's body. Analogously, the Christian community indwells and relies on the Christian story like a probe, tacitly aware of it as shaping the way we understand but focally attending to the world. (As cited in Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 33-38.)

<sup>36</sup> As philosophers of science Phillip Kitcher and Gillian Barker explain this pragmatic approach to scientific models and progress, "the sciences march forward by finding or creating pockets of order, providing an expanding set of models that enable people to predict and intervene in ways that matter to them...Progress would then consist in achieving increasingly extensive or powerful models with respect to the tasks of predicting and intervening that people take to be important, subject to the proviso that decisions about which tasks were important were informed by good judgment" (Gillian Barker and Philip Kitcher, *Philosophy of Science: A New Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 102.)

<sup>37</sup> Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 68, no. 3 (2007): 541.

<sup>38</sup> To say that religion is analogous to a language is not to identify it with a particular language. Christians who are English, Chinese, Indian, Greek, and Russian etc. may speak in different tongues but, at the same time, share the same religious language of Christianity.

<sup>39</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 12.

that help us to make sense of the 'buzzing blooming confusion' of sense-experience, as William James called it, and that are useful to the conduct of life."<sup>40</sup>

The more ambitious task would be to rank religions. Ranking a list of religions is made complex by the problem of culturally contingent criteria. The question, "Which is the best religion?" is quickly followed by "Best religion for what?" Buddhism may be superior to Christianity in its development of contemplation and meditation whereas Christianity may be superior to Buddhism in historicity. The difficulty in ranking a list is that the order is determined by the criteria and criteria is chosen from within a culture heavily influenced by a predominate religion. From the onset, it seems the outcome is predetermined by the starting point. An inability to rank all religions does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of religious preference. Religious preference suggests that one religion is privileged to come before others. In this context, "before" is not used to reference to a top to bottom ranking, rather "before" is used in the sense of a lens held before a pair of eyes.

To return to the original question: What might religious preference look like? To hold a religion with preference allows its story to be the language that both probes the divine, and provides a set of lenses, not to look at, but to look through.<sup>41</sup>

Is religious preference implausible? The answer to this question may depend upon the *plausibility structure* from which one operates. According to sociologist Peter Berger, plausibility structures are the "patterns of beliefs and practice accepted within a society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not." What is considered

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<sup>40</sup> Keith Ward, "The Empiricist Turn", lecture held at Gresham College, held on 14 February 2008. Lecture transcript found at [www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-empiricist-turn/](http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-empiricist-turn/). (Keith Ward, *The Empiricist Turn*, (Gresham College, 2008).)

<sup>41</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 38.

reasonable is conditioned by the tradition from which it originates. The notion of preference sketched above should seem implausible to those inhabiting a plausibility structure that thinks in terms of dualisms between fact and value, believing and knowing, and public and private.<sup>42</sup> Though often left unquestioned, the axioms of this plausibility structure are not beyond criticism.

The falling apart between the objective pole and subjective pole of knowing has produced the phenomena of being pluralists with respect to “values” (ex: ‘the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’) and not pluralist with respect to “facts” (ex: human life is the accidental result of the biological struggle for existence). As Stephen Jay Gould writes concerning his ‘Non-Overlapping Magisteria’ model of science and religion: “The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact), and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value.”<sup>43</sup>

A religion may be “true for you but not for me” but evolution is true for everyone. To assert private values as public truth is considered arrogant, but it is not arrogant for a scientist to assert that evolution is a fact. A religious belief is measured by sincerity but it would be ridiculous to judge belief in evolution by the sincerity of the scientist. A person *knows* evolution and *believes* in a religion. Religious preference challenges pervading dualisms by bringing together the subjective and objective poles of knowing. Religious commitment is subjective in

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<sup>42</sup> Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 248.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural history* 106, no. 2 (1997): 4.

the sense that it is a personal commitment, but it is also a commitment which has an objective reference point<sup>44</sup> and claim of universal intent.<sup>45</sup>

Newbigin traces the historical development of the dichotomy between private “values” and public “facts.” He recounts the influence of the systematic skepticism program typified by Descartes’ methodological doubt, Kant’s critique of classical metaphysics, and Nietzsche’s deconstruction of truth claims. This mentality was coupled with a universal application of the methodology of science that attempted to understand the cosmos as a reductionist machine and excluded purpose/final cause as a category of explanation.<sup>46</sup> The dualism that emerged between private “values” and public “facts” is problematic. There are not two avenues to understanding, one marked “objective knowledge” and the other marked “subjective faith,” because there is no knowing without believing, and believing is inherent to knowing.<sup>47</sup> It is not possible to reduce values to the subjective arena any more than it is possible to regard the arena of facts as free from subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> Modernity’s empty promise of an Archimedean point outside the system and the possibility of knowing without risk are reincarnated in pluralist ideologies that attempt to step outside all religious traditions and evaluate them from an illusory place of neutrality. Pluralism thereby proclaims itself to be exclusively true, and risks as

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<sup>44</sup> Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 252.

<sup>45</sup> Newbigin refers to Michael Polanyi’s notion of “universal intent.” To commit to something with universal intent is to acknowledge it as a public and universally true fact of reality that all people ought to accept. (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 35, 48, 77.)

<sup>45</sup> Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 248.

<sup>46</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 14-26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-38.

<sup>48</sup> Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions : Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 252.



much in its commitment as does any single religion. Plantinga writes concerning risk involved in commitment:

*“But couldn’t I be wrong? Of course I could! But I don’t avoid that risk by withholding all religious (philosophical or moral) beliefs: I can go wrong that way as well as any other, treating all religions or all philosophical thoughts or all moral views as on par. Again there is no safe haven here, no way to avoid risk.”<sup>49</sup>*

Claims of religious preference face two major rebuttals. The first objection is on moral grounds, and the second is on epistemic grounds.<sup>50</sup>

Concerning the first, at the root of a number of different moral complaints against religious preference is the conviction that religious preference is arrogant and elitist. Such an argument would claim that truth is larger and richer than could possibly be contained by one person, or one religious tradition. When there are so many brilliant and moral people who believe differently, it is arrogant for a Christian to think they possess privileged access to the truth.<sup>51</sup> As Chesterton writes:

*The one real objection to the Christian religion is simply that it is one religion. The world is a big place, full of very different kinds of people. Christianity (it may reasonably be said) is one thing confined to one kind of people; it began in Palestine, it has practically stopped with Europe. I was duly impressed with this argument in my youth...I found it was their daily taunt against Christianity that it was the light of one people and had left all others to die in the dark. But I also found that it was their special boast for themselves that science and progress [and pluralism] were the discovery of one people, and that all other peoples had died in the dark.<sup>52</sup>*

Reflect for a moment: how does the speaker for pluralism have the privileged access to the truth necessary to know that truth is so much greater than any particular affirmation or any

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<sup>49</sup> Plantinga, "Pluralism : A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," 200.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>51</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Brackets added. (Gilbert K Chesterton, *The Essential Gilbert K. Chesterton Vol. I: Non-Fiction* (Wilder Publications, 2008), 59.)

single religious tradition?<sup>53</sup> Are there not many brilliant and moral people who believe differently than the pluralist? Like the person holding a specific religion as preferable, the pluralist is still in the position of believing what many others do not, and nonetheless chooses to prefer pluralism. Hick writes in *Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims* that natural pride is behind doctrines implying superior access to the truth,<sup>54</sup> yet in other works, such as *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick proceeds to imply that he possesses a superior access to truth and proposes the meta-theory of religions which he holds as preferable and with universal intent.<sup>55</sup>

Hick may go too far by assigning the word “ineffable” to God (and by doing so contradict himself,) but at the very least he acknowledges the gravity of God’s mystery. Religious pluralists are right to stand in awe of God’s mystery but does the mystery of God explicitly imply that one cannot claim religious preference? I agree that pictures of God should not be confused as necessarily being the real thing but this conviction does not exclude the possibility of propositional truth concerning God. It does not follow from the ontology of God as beyond complete human comprehension that there can be no accurate human comprehension of God; (is God not powerful enough to reveal to humanity some truths concerning the divine life?)

Scientists do not mistake the model of an atom for the reality of the atom itself, yet a scientist still maintains that there are true propositions accompanying that model. Mystery is inherent to the subatomic world but this does not prevent scientists from humbly holding theories with preference. It would be laughable if a scientist assumed all theories are equally valid merely on

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<sup>53</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," *Rouner, Leroy S.: Religious pluralism. Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of ND Press, 1984, S. 193-213 (1984): 197.*

<sup>55</sup> *An Interpretation of Religion : Human Responses to the Transcendent.*

the basis that our cognitive faculties are limited. The language of a scientific theory is a tool that enables us to speak truly though, not exhaustively, about nature and align our actions according to her laws. Analogously, the Christian language is a gift because it makes it possible to speak truly though, not exhaustively, about a transcendent God and align our actions according to his will.

Hick raises another moral objection to religious preference. In the *Nonabsoluteness of Christianity* he writes, "Historically, the assumption of Christian superiority has been destructive and used to motivate and validate imperialism."<sup>56</sup> There is a fear that political imperialism and destruction can arise from religious preference. It is true that in the past, absolute claims of Christianity have been used for coercion and oppression; yet, in Christianity, the form that absolute truth took in Jesus Christ "was not that of dominance and imperial power but that of one without power; whose power was made manifest in weakness and suffering" on the cross.<sup>57</sup> Was St. Francis of Assisi imperialist in his affirmation of Roman Catholicism? It is bold to claim that imperialism necessarily follows from religious preference.

Furthermore, there is a sense in which religious pluralism can be guilty of a subtle form of cultural imperialism. In reducing religions to a "common essence," pluralists, such as Hick, look at religions through Western eyes and see a "pure" lowest common denominator. Abstract concepts such as "love" and "salvation" are divorced from the particular religious narratives that give them meaning, and are redefined by twenty-first century Western categories of thought in order to be incorporated into one, dominating metatheory of religions. Paul Knitter's praxis orientated program for pluralism faces a similar situation. If the abstract

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<sup>56</sup> "The Myth of Christian Uniqueness : Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions," 17-20.

<sup>57</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 163.

notion of “justice” is the core of all religions, the questions follow: Whose justice? Whose peace program? The norm by which all else is measured becomes the understanding of justice and a prescription for peace of the Zeitgeist which the pluralist happens to inhabit.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, in his attempt to accommodate all religions, none are accommodated. The religions are accepted only within the pluralistic system, rather than on their own terms and self-understanding.<sup>59</sup> How many Christians would recognize their own faith as it is reconstrued by Hicks account of myth and personae, Panikkar's Cosmotheandricism, or Knitters reformed Christology? Though fear of imperialism may initially inspire pluralism, pluralism itself may be yet another form of the ideological dominance of one over many.

Even if religious preference is not any more arrogant or ideologically imperialistic than pluralism, religious preference seems epistemically arbitrary. A confident affirmation of religious preference is met by the response, “Why should I believe this rather than that?”

Newbiggin replies:

*“Why start with Jesus? Why not start somewhere else? We have to answer that no rational thought is possible except by starting with something which is already given in some human tradition of rational thought and discourse. Our immediate answer may well be, Why not?...Every statement of ultimate belief is liable to be met by this criticism and of course, if it is indeed an ultimate belief, then it cannot be validated by something more ultimate.”<sup>60</sup>*

Hick calls attention to the fact that belief is generally geographically determined. “In some ninety-nine percent of cases, the religion which an individual professes and to which he or she adheres, depends up on accidents of birth. Someone born to Buddhist parents in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>59</sup> Gavin D'Costa, "Pluralist Arguments: Prominent Tendencies and Methods," (2010), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 243.

Thailand is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia to be a Muslim, someone born to Christian parents in Mexico to be a Christian and so on.”<sup>61</sup> What follows from this sociological fact? As Plantinga points out, “if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar or medieval France, he probably wouldn’t have been a pluralist.”<sup>62</sup> If geographical coincidence casts doubt on religious preference, shouldn’t it also imply that belief in pluralism is *a priori* unjustified as an accident of birth?

In respected works such as *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, it is said that modern historical and cultural consciousness requires us to abandon Christ's claim to uniqueness and recognize that all is culturally conditioned.<sup>63</sup> Newbiggin reminds us that “To a person living in another culture, it is not obvious that the modern historical consciousness of the twenty-first century Western intellectuals provides a vantage point that can displace the one provided by the Christian story or furnish a basis for human unity.”<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that modern historical and cultural consciousness is culturally conditioned, yet it is permitted to make universal claims to be preferable. Why is religious preference denied such freedom?

The scandal of particularity<sup>65</sup> is the belief that God communicated his purpose in history to some people, (not to all) through some events (not through all) and this memory is preserved and embodied in the Christian tradition and community. In a chapter entitled, *The Logic of Election*,<sup>66</sup> Newbiggin contends that the scandal of particularity is inescapable because a rationality that supposedly leads to a true understanding of reality will necessarily be socially

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<sup>61</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion : Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Plantinga, "Pluralism : A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," 206.

<sup>63</sup> Hick, "The Myth of Christian Uniqueness : Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions," 5. As cited in Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 156.

<sup>64</sup> *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-89.

embodied by a particular community with universal intent. The particularity of the Christian church as one community among many human communities does not invalidate its universal claims any more than the particularity of the polis invalidates Aristotle and his philosophy.<sup>67</sup>

An Indian parable about an elephant illustrates a notion fundamental to this discussion. To summarize the allegory: a King brings an elephant before some blind wisemen. One blind man feels the smooth tusks and proclaims that an elephant is like a spear while another wiseman grasps the tail and concludes that an elephant is a rope. A man leans against the side of the beast and concludes that it is a wall. Holding the legs, the third blind man rebukes the other wisemen and informs them that an elephant is a tree.<sup>68</sup> In the parable, the blind wisemen represent different religions attempting to make absolute claims based on a relative and limited experience of the same God. Each religion possesses a perspective on truth, but not truth in its entirety. Newbigin makes some insightful observations:

*“In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant... the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king... who is not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth which all the world’s religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativize all claims of the religions and philosophies.”<sup>69</sup>*

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> William James Linton, *Poetry of America: Selections from One Hundred American Poets from 1776 to 1876* (G. Bell, 1878), 150-52.

<sup>69</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9.

Preference is inescapable if one is to take religion seriously. If religious preference is dismissed because its claims are arrogant, ideologically imperialistic, culturally conditioned, epistemically arbitrary personal beliefs that may be “true for you but not for everyone”, then pluralism should be dismissed because its claims are arrogant, imperialistic, culturally conditioned, epistemically arbitrary personal beliefs that may be “true for you but not for everyone.” Religious pluralism is its own preferred view of religion. Ultimately, religious preference is neither a moral nor epistemic failure, and something like it is wholly unavoidable given our human condition.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Plantinga, "Pluralism : A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," 175.

## Section Two: Foundations for Religious Preference

Religion is a matter of both the heart and the head.<sup>71</sup> As a first order experience, it is behavioral and as a second order reflection, it is cognitive. In a behavioral sense, a religion is participation in unique community with specialized rituals, duties, morality, and culture. In the cognitive sense, each religion is unique in its story of world and described order of reality. Upon second order reflection, each tradition provides its own particular answers to universal questions of life, death, morality, and meaning.<sup>72</sup> In what sense can the second order reflections of religions be meaningfully compared? Three models of religion--Cognitive Propositionalism, Experiential Expressive, and Cultural Linguistic<sup>73</sup>--offer different answers to this question and provide different foundations for religious preference.<sup>74</sup> Strong and weak versions<sup>75</sup> of religious preference arise from each respective model.

As the name suggests, the model of Cognitive Propositionalism places an emphasis on the cognitive aspects of religion. As such, truth is a matter of ontological correspondence, and

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<sup>71</sup> Ninian Smart classifies seven dimensions of religion: the ritual, mythological/narrative, experiential, doctrinal, ethical, and social. (Stewart, *Can Only One Religion Be True?: Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue*, 19.)

<sup>72</sup> It could be argued that, to an extent, religions regard different types of questions as the ones of concern. A Christian may reflect on mysteries of grace while a Hindu contemplates questions about Karma.

<sup>73</sup> Cognitive Propositionalism, Experiential Expressive and Cultural Linguistic models are coined by George Lindbeck. See: (George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).)

<sup>74</sup> Robert Perkins points out that the "orientations that the adherents of [Cognitive Propositionalism, Experiential Expressive and Cultural Linguistic] frameworks adopt toward religious pluralism usually result directly from these accounts. (Robert L Perkins, *The Book on Adler*, vol. 24 (Mercer University Press, 2008), 200.)

<sup>75</sup> As a working definition: a "strong" version of religious preference is that my religion is preferred in that it holds cognitive meaning—its truth claims are taken over the claims of other competing views. The "weak" version is that my religion is preferred in that it best expresses the experiences of my life and my religious community relative to other religions.



various religions postulate contradictory propositions about reality that are either true or false.<sup>76</sup> The Cognitive Propositional model is notably influenced by a rationalism that descended from Greek philosophy through the Cartesian program and Newtonian science.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, Cognitive Propositionalism advocates for a strong religious preference. According to this model, the preferable religion is that whose central propositions correspond (isomorph) to the ontological reality. For example, in a debate with Paul Knitter, the Evangelical Harold Netland took a Cognitive Propositional approach and proposed that a religion be considered true “if and only if its defining beliefs are true,”<sup>78</sup> and a propositional belief is true “if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case.”<sup>79</sup> Other religions are true in so far as they agree with the preferable religion and false where there is conflict or contradiction. Though the preferable religion may be enriched with subordinate truths supplied by the inferior religious traditions, the temptation is to reduce interreligious exchange to proselytizing.<sup>80</sup> Though it may be able to be adapted to a postmodern perspective, as a product of modernity, Cognitive Propositionalism offers a foundation for religious preference that may error on the side of being too strong.

In a sense, the Experiential Expressive model is a sister of Cognitive Propositionalism because it, too, is the offspring of modernity.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to Cognitive Propositionalism, Experiential Expressivism places emphasis on the behavioral, rather than on the cognitive aspects of religions. The Experiential Expressive model understands religions to be symbolic

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<sup>76</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 47.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>78</sup> Stewart, *Can Only One Religion Be True?: Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Harold Netland quotes William Alston to define “true.” *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

expressions of a common experience that transcends language and is manifested differently in different cultures.<sup>82</sup> The assumption of Experiential Expressivism can be seen in the background of Hicks' thought. Hick argues that the source of all religions is the ineffable "Real" that is *experienced* culturally and historically as the "*personae/impersona*" and is *expressed* in religious language that is at best a mythical symbol.<sup>83</sup> Given the nature of the Experiential Expressive model, it is more difficult to make an argument for religious preference. At most, Experiential Expressivism shows promise for a weak religious preference. In this model, one religion could be considered preferable in the sense that it is the best expression, or superior depiction of reality. Nevertheless, as George Lindbeck notes, "there is no intrinsic reason why there should not be many equal but distinct instances of the highest symbolic expression."<sup>84</sup> Arguing that one religion is the best expression may be as difficult as claiming that one painting is the most beautiful. Different religions are appraised as complementary symbols that share a relationship of parity and mutual enrichment. Unfortunately, the Experiential Expressive model comes at the price of compromising with a weak religious preference.

An alternative perspective is suggested by the Cultural-Linguistic model. As explained by Lindbeck, "A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural/linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought... It is not an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these) or symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings or sentiment (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner

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<sup>82</sup> Gavin D'costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Orbis Books, 1990), 67.

<sup>83</sup> Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism : The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, 159-77.

<sup>84</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 50.

attitudes, feelings and sentiments.”<sup>85</sup> The metaphor of language is useful for balancing the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of religion.<sup>86</sup> Propositional beliefs are of substantial value because they comprise the vocabulary and grammar of the language.<sup>87</sup> Experiential dimensions of religion are essential because they are the means by which the language is internalized and spoken.<sup>88</sup> The Cultural Linguistic model is an inverse of the Experiential Expressive one.<sup>89</sup> Experiential Expressivism operates from “inner to outer”; that is to say, an inner experience is inadequately expressed with outward symbols and religions. Experience produces religion. Conversely, the Cultural Linguistic approach works from “outer to inner”—the outward religious tradition makes the particular inner experiences possible. Religion produces experience.<sup>90</sup> “There are thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems.”<sup>91</sup> For example, the language and symbols of mathematics makes possible a description of quantity that could

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>86</sup> The metaphor of language faces a number of criticisms:

First, how could a religion be a single language if people of the same religion speak in a variety of tongues (such as English, German, and Spanish etc.)? Second, religions are not merely verbal but involve practices such as baptism, animal sacrifice, and ritual. Third, can it be argued that the Christian and the atheist chemists really speak of chemistry in different languages? Surely, the Christian scientist equipped with the Christian language does not seem to have more insight into chemistry than the Hindu or atheistic one.

The Cultural Linguistic model supplements the metaphor of language with the metaphor of culture. With regard to the first objection concerning diversity of languages, consider that there are Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Russian Americans etc. all of whom participate in American Culture. Likewise, Christians who are Chinese, Indian, and Russian etc. may speak in different tongues but at the same time participate in the same culture of Christianity. As for the second objection, it is expected that a religion, functioning as a culture, should contain many nonverbal practices which are integrally related to its language. Consider the third criticism in light of the culture metaphor. Chinese, Indian and Russian chemists comprehend and share each other’s chemical equations even though they each understand and experience what chemistry and science is through the nuanced lens of their respective cultures. The Christian and the Hindu and the atheist may do chemistry equally well but their understanding and experience of what chemistry and science is, is shaped by the culture of their faith.

<sup>87</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>90</sup> The statement “religion produces experience” may be misleading. The Cultural Linguistic model acknowledges that there is a dialectical relationship between experience and religion but regards the religion as primary. Ibid., 33.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 34.

not be if we were limited to the language of music or poetry. The relationship between the Cultural Linguistic and Cognitive Propositional model is less antithetical than that between Experiential Expressive and Cultural Linguistic. Though antifoundational, the Cultural Linguistic scheme advocates a “careful realism” that does not exclude propositions or correspondence to an ontological reality but refuses to consider propositions in isolation from their social and linguistic context.<sup>92</sup>

Does the Cultural Linguistic approach allow the possibility of religious preference? If religious traditions are languages, how could one language be preferable to another?<sup>93</sup> The religious preference suggested by the Cultural Linguistic model is both strong and weak because it is a preference that is based on categorical accuracy. In other words, the preferable religion is that which enables us to speak, see, and act truly; it is the correct type of lens and the relevant type of language.<sup>94</sup> Other religions are deemed neither true nor false but categorically improper in a way analogous to using the language of music to do calculus.<sup>95</sup> At first glance, such a notion may seem insulting to other religions. Yet, after taking a second look, it’s clear that the Cultural Linguistic model is more accommodating than supposed. Under Cognitive Propositionalism, the non-preferential religions are false; according to Experiential Expressivism, non-preferential religions are inferior depictions; but within the Cultural Linguistic model, other religions are their own cultural linguistic systems within which God-willed

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Crane, "Postliberals, Truth, Ad Hoc Apologetics, and (Something Like) General Revelation," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 1 (2003): 32-33.

<sup>93</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Intuitively, it is easier to see that when doing calculations, one disciplinary language, such as math, is preferable to another such as music. Though arguably possible, it is harder to see how one language such as Ancient Greek could be preferable to English. Perhaps it could be, for example, that the ideas of Plato are more faithfully represented by Ancient Greek than English and, in that sense, Ancient Greek could be preferable to English.

<sup>95</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 51.

potentialities can be actualized and explored.<sup>96</sup> Even if the preferable religion is categorically proper and can meaningfully reference God, it should possess an attitude of humility because it could be false in what it affirms about him.<sup>97</sup> In this model, religious preference is strong because it is based on categorical accuracy and weak in so far as it neither guarantees nor excludes the possibility of propositional truth or error.

A helpful metaphor is supplied by Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* to illustrate the notion of categorical accuracy.<sup>98</sup> Imagine that a religion is like a map for a journey. The “preferable” map is the map of the place you actually are at.<sup>99</sup> If you are in Jerusalem, then the map which you hold before you is the map of Jerusalem and is therefore categorically accurate. Maps of New York or the Pacific Ocean are neither true nor false, but categorically improper. Most likely, the map you hold is not an exhaustively true picture of the landscape with precise proportions drawn to scale. The quality and type of map may vary from a cartographer’s masterpiece to a sketch. However, the map becomes true as it leads the traveler rightly. In so far as the map is a propositional statement of how to get from one place to another, it becomes false as it is misread or misused. The preference of the map is weak (like the preference of a religion) in that it is “capable of being rightly utilized in guiding thought, passions and action in a way that corresponds to ultimate reality, and of thus being ontologically (and propositionally)

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>99</sup> Suppose that religions are, in some ways, like maps for a journey. Maps can diverge from one another in a number of ways. Two maps can illustrate different aspects of same place (such as a road map and a topographical map) or can represent different places (such as a map of New York and Jerusalem). Analogously, it could be that various religions are “maps” of different aspects and different places. There are multiple ways in which the map metaphor allows for preference in the objective sense. Some maps are more relevant for a specific purpose than others. If driving a road map is preferable to a weather map. Some maps are preferable because they are of better quality and are more reliable. Sometimes a reliable map becomes more or less trustworthy according to the way in which it is read by the traveler. Ideally, the preferential map would be a reliable map of the relevant aspects and location and is applied rightly.

true, but is not always and perhaps not even usually so employed.”<sup>100, 101</sup> How true a map is depends on where it intends to lead one.<sup>102</sup>

Even though you may hold the map of Jerusalem, a person faithfully following the map of New York may be more similar to you than the person misusing their map of Jerusalem. In the same way, a Christian monk and a Buddhist monk may share more than two Christians of the same faith. Even if other religions are as categorically different as mathematics and poetry, religious adherents are united by a love for their respective tongue. They enlighten and enrich one another in the way that a mathematical formula employed in a poetic text takes on a vastly different, though still significant meaning.<sup>103</sup>

The Cultural Linguistic model stands as a promising foundation for religious preference that balances a tension between strong and weak preference. On the one hand, religious preference is a strong claim to make because it suggests that the religion is categorical accurate. On the other hand the religious preference is weak in so far as categorical accuracy

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<sup>100</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 52.

<sup>101</sup> The map metaphor may raise two questions that challenge universal intent:

First, isn't it possible to hold more than one map with preference? Yes, there may be more than one preferable map but all these maps would be the categorically accurate maps of Jerusalem. The variety of Jerusalem maps may be analogous to the diversity between denominations of the preferable religion.

Second, if the preferable map depends upon where in the world a person is, then a map may be preferable for one person and not for another. Preference loses its universal intent. This is a point where the simile breaks down because religions claim to be maps of the same space. Perhaps instead of speaking of maps of Jerusalem and New York it would be more precise to compare a map of the universe from a science textbook to a map from the fictional series "Star Wars."

<sup>102</sup> As Gillian Barker and Phillip Kitcher write: "There is no reason to suppose that the diversity of models here implies any problem about which of them is closer to the truth...Many maps represent the Earth's surface, in part or in whole, but no map represents every aspect of the part of the Earth's surface that it represents; all maps leave out a great deal of information. What they include depends on their particular function. Subway maps, road maps, and navigational charts include very different kinds of information to suit the uses to which they are put...The map user's representation of the surroundings directs her actions, and success comes when the representations she achieves are connected to the surroundings in the right way...Symbols, words, the elements of thoughts, are linked to—refer to—entities that are typically independent of us and of our thinking, and our representations are accurate or correct when the things to which we refer fit together in ways we represent them as doing." (Barker and Kitcher, *Philosophy of Science: A New Introduction*, 99-102.)

<sup>103</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 49.

neither guarantees nor excludes the possibility of propositional truth or error. A distinctively Christian preference allows the Christian tradition to shape the entirety of life and makes possible thoughts, sentiments, and experiences that (if rightly utilized) are capable of corresponding to ultimate, universal reality. Christian doctrines become rules of language which make it possible to speak truthfully about God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, see the true center of history in the story of the world and act in accordance to God's will as the sign, agent, and foretaste of God's Kingdom.<sup>104</sup> Christianity challenges other accepted plausibility structures and gives rise to a new plausibility structure which is indwelt and embodied by a community of believers. Holding Christianity with a Cultural Linguistic type of preference, Newbigin writes, "As a Christian I seek so to live within the biblical tradition, using its language as my language, its model as the models through which I make sense of experience, its story as the clue to my story, that I help to strengthen and carry forward this tradition of rationality."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> "Center of history," "story of the world," and "sign, agent, foretaste" are phrases coined by Newbigin that I juxtaposed with Lindbeck.

<sup>105</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 65.

## Section Three: Christian Case Study: Cultural Linguistic Approach Applied

The concern of this section is a distinctively Christian preference proceeding from the Cultural Linguistic approach. To consider a case study: how might a person understand and respond to the multiplicity of religions while making an argument for Christian preference?

Such a question enters into the realm of theology of religions. In the field of comparative theology, Francis Clooney is a leading scholar in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions of Hinduism.<sup>106</sup> He is a Jesuit Roman Catholic priest, professor at Harvard Divinity School whose work is in accord with the Lindbeck's Cultural Linguistic model.<sup>107</sup> In his essay, "Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism", Clooney is representative of Lindbeck when he writes, "The *whole* of the world is the locus of the story of God's universal saving action, *and yet...the Bible is the privileged, particular language of this salvation and understanding.*"<sup>108</sup>

According to Clooney, the Bible defines the world in which the texts of other religions are written and the framework through which they are interpreted. The adherents of other religious traditions are within the Biblical world and their texts are part of the context of the

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<sup>106</sup> "Francis Xavier Clooney," President and Fellows of Harvard College, <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/people/faculty/francis-x-clooney-sj>.

<sup>107</sup> Christopher Denny, "Interreligious Reading and Self-Definition for Raimon Panikkar and Francis Clooney," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 3 (2009): 423.

<sup>108</sup> Emphasis in original. Francis X Clooney, "Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1990): 67.



Bible that must be “read” into the Christian horizon.<sup>109</sup> All reality, including other religions, is redescribed in light of a biblical interpretive framework.<sup>110</sup> With regard to Hindu scripture he writes:

*“What becomes of religious other: We can welcome this new arrival and can do so without prejudice to our Christian beliefs, without having to choose between reading this song and our accustomed, faithful reading of the Bible. For we can read this song in the context of the Bible, as new context for it, and without forgetting that it will always be the Bible which gives shape to the Christian's world. But if readers read with openness, they will find that their reading of the Bible is transformed, and that [Tiruväymoiji 10 3] is a new, important addition to the set of texts which are the Bible's context Nämmajvär's song begins to echo gently in all our reading, as its images and powerful, plaintive cries intrude ever so quietly—or dramatically.”<sup>111</sup>*

While Lindbeck and Clooney are both inclusivist advocates of the Cultural Linguistic model, it is important to avoid conflation of the two theologians. Lindbeck emphasizes the independence of religious traditions and significance of intrareligious dialogue; Clooney gives prominence to the interdependence<sup>112</sup> of religious traditions and imperative of interreligious dialogue.<sup>113</sup> According to Clooney, the aim of interreligious comparison is “to subject the [Christian] tradition to the slow, subtle molding of the theological artifacts of the other

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<sup>109</sup> Clooney elaborates in *Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism*: “[I]f we remember that the Bible defines the world in which these other texts are written, heard, and read, then we must read these religions ...and their texts as part of its context [T]his biblical starting point dismisses the idea that there is anything “outside” Christianity. If the Bible constitutes the world, this is a world which has no outside, no place beyond it. . . . [T]he non-Christian is already within the Christian, biblical world; the Christian has to “read” the non-Christian within the Christian horizon.” (ibid., 68.)

<sup>110</sup> The Christian community is a living hermeneutic of the gospel and there is a dialectical relationship between the tradition and new experience of the community. As a living tradition, the community concurrently interprets the Christian tradition in light of new experience and understands new experiences in light of the Biblical message. (Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 63-65.)

<sup>111</sup> Francis X Clooney, “When the Religions Become Context,” *Theology Today* 47, no. 1 (1990): 35.

<sup>112</sup> Though maintaining a theological interdependence between religions, Clooney also acknowledges independence.

<sup>113</sup> David Cheetham and Ulrich Winkler, *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, vol. 40 (Rodopi, 2011), 167.

religion”<sup>114</sup> He cautiously maintains the tension between adhering to the universal claim of Christianity and seeking the transformative power of truth beyond the boundary of the Christian community.

The Cultural Linguistic approach propounded by Clooney and Lindbeck preserves the otherness<sup>115</sup> of each religion’s unique categories of thought and language and does not submit religious self-understanding to pluralistic reduction. Lindbeck goes so far as to say that religions may in fact “be incommensurable in such a way that no equivalents can be found in one language or religion for the crucial terms of the other.”<sup>116</sup> He further comments, “Buddhist compassion, Christian love, French revolution *fraternité* are not the same fundamental human awareness but radically different ways of orientating one toward the self, neighbor, and cosmos.”<sup>117</sup> The symbols of one religion are not easily translatable into another because the symbols are embedded within the narrative life of the community. There is no one to one correspondence in which, for example, Kali (the Hindu feminine embodiment of the divine) could be substituted with the Virgin Mary.<sup>118</sup> Thomas Merton would concur: “You can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare. It is like trying to compare mathematics and tennis.”<sup>119</sup>

A difficulty emerges from the Cultural Linguistic approach to Christian preference. It is a formidable task to justify that the one religious “language,” say Christianity, is the language in

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<sup>114</sup> Robert C Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (SUNY Press, 1996), 263.

<sup>115</sup> Lindbeck argues that in a search for similarities between religions, one must not be blinded to the particular. Two languages are not alike merely because they have overlapping sounds or referents. And to say that all religions are love is as banal as saying that all languages are spoken. (Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 41-42.)

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," 544.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New Directions Publishing, 1968), 30.

which, "everything can be properly construed and out outside of which nothing can be equally well understood."<sup>120</sup> An additional level of complexity is added by the notion of incommensurability. Apologetics<sup>121</sup> is a discipline that aspires to offer a rational basis for a belief and defend its plausibility. The incommensurability preserving otherness does not seem amenable to apologetic arguments for preference. Consequently, the choice of which religion is preferential seems to be a purely fidiest matter of arbitrary whim or blind faith.

This is the problem: If religions cannot be conceptually translated without being divorced from the "language game"<sup>122</sup> that gives them meaning, then religious traditions seem fated to remain isolated ghettos and genuine apologetic discourse absurd. Does incommensurability feasibly allow for the practice of apologetics? To begin with, it is important to note that Lindbeck does not conclude from the notion of incommensurability that a person is unable to communicate interreligiously or understand a position different from one's own. Instead Lindbeck uses incommensurability to argue for the rejection of a formulated Archimedean point<sup>123</sup> of neutral, universal principles and standards.<sup>124</sup> Drawing from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Lindbeck argues that if one wishes to understand fully the language of a community, one must be immersed in the culture of its community, life and

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<sup>120</sup> Quoting Lindbeck in George Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (1997): 430.

<sup>121</sup> The word "apologetics" is derived from the Greek word *ἀπολογία*, which means "speaking in defense." The goal of Apologetics is to defend the plausibility of a position. For example, within the Christian tradition, Apologetics clarifies the Christian position in light of misunderstandings and misrepresentations, defends the soundness of the faith and vindicates its reasonableness by delving into philosophical theology, epistemology and demonstrating the coherence of the Christian thought. Apologetics is a discipline that aspires to offer a rational basis and a creative presentation of belief.

<sup>122</sup> Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," 536.

<sup>123</sup> Newbiggin also doubts whether the modern historical consciousness of the twenty-first century Western intellectual can provide an Archimedean starting point and reveal dualisms between fact and value; knower and object known; and public and private that pervade its plausibility structure.

<sup>124</sup> David G. Kamitsuka, "The Justification of Religious Belief in the Pluralistic Public Realm: Another Look at Postliberal Apologetics," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 4 (1996): 600-01.

practices.<sup>125</sup> This perspective does not exclude the possibility of partially grasping another tradition. Even if religious concepts cannot be “translated without remainder;” there is a portion, (albeit limited) that is successfully translated.<sup>126</sup> Alternatively, a person may be religiously “bilingual.”<sup>127</sup> Just as an American may speak German without being a citizen of Germany; Francis Clooney was versed in Hindu tradition, yet still a committed Christian. In contemplating incommensurability with regards to the Cultural Linguistic model, one can draw from the metaphor of language: there is no universal language, yet the Chinese woman and Indian man immersed within their respective cultures may still communicate if they both speak English. Drawing from the metaphor of culture: there is no universally shared culture yet, the Chinese and Indian chemists comprehend and share each other’s chemical equations even though they each understand and experience what chemistry and science is, through the nuanced lens of their respective cultures.

Recall that incommensurability is not a problem unique to religion. Different scientific paradigms are arguably incommensurable (especially with regard to problems entailed and standards applied)<sup>128</sup> but this does not necessarily make impossible apologetics between different schools of thought. If Galileo were to debate with Ptolemy, they would both be beginning from different assumptions about the universe, methods of conducting experiments, and overall worldviews; yet, they could still compare how their models make sense of the data they might have in common by virtue of both being astronomers. A Christian and a Hindu from incommensurable worldviews could still converse apologetically since both would be

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<sup>125</sup> Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," 538.

<sup>126</sup> William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *The Journal of religion* (1986): 284.

<sup>127</sup> Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," 427.

<sup>128</sup> As argued by Thomas Kuhn (Fletcher, "As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue," 40-41.)

comparing their models (texts, histories, thinkers, personal testimonies) of how they made sense of the data of the shared experience in virtue of both being religious human beings.

Assuming the possibility of religious preference and apologetics under the Cultural Linguistic approach, the challenge for the apologist is to say that this religion is the one to be preferred. A form of apologetics less compatible with the Cultural Linguistic scheme is one which domesticates the religion within an extraneous plausibility structure and articulates the faith in the language of a foreign context. Such a systematic apologetic attempts to justify a religion in terms of contemporary questions and frameworks and appeal to universal principles and structures.<sup>129</sup>

An apologetic harmonious with the Cultural Linguistic model is one which reverses the direction of domestication and interprets the contemporary perspective within the religious narrative and language. In accordance with antifoundationalism, the Cultural Linguistic scheme accepts that "all reasoning and knowing takes place within particular epistemic contexts, in relation to specific traditions, systems of belief, meaning values, particular social practices and the complex networks of assumptions embedded within the linguistic habits of any particular culture."<sup>130</sup> For this reason, the Cultural Linguistic apologetic relinquishes the notion of universally shared human experience or reason and does not attempt to justify an ultimate religious commitment by appealing to some theory of knowledge or experience more ultimate.<sup>131</sup> Writing from within the Christian tradition, Newbigin explicates:

*"The Christian believer is using the same faculty of reason as his unbelieving neighbor and he is using it in dealing with the same realities, which are those with which every*

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<sup>129</sup> Crane, "Postliberals, Truth, Ad Hoc Apologetics, and (Something Like) General Revelation," 29.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 37.

*human being has to deal. But he is seeing them in a new light, in a new perspective. They fall for him in a different pattern. He cannot justify the new pattern in terms of the old; he can only say to his unbelieving neighbor, stand here with me and see if you don't see the same pattern as I do.*"<sup>132</sup>

Under the Cultural Linguistic model the favorable apologetic strategy is, an *ad hoc*<sup>133</sup> apologetic that addresses specific audiences from particular social, cultural and historical backgrounds is favorable. A contextually based shared rational space,<sup>134</sup> rather than universally accepted principles, becomes the point of apologetic discourse between interlocutors.<sup>135</sup> Lindbeck argues that though religions are not subject to absolute proof or disproof, they can nevertheless be tested in a way not wholly unlike general scientific theories or paradigms. Just as a scientific paradigm is affirmed in the face of other theories and tested on basis of its power to successfully or unsuccessfully explains the shared data, so too a religion is judged by its assimilative power.<sup>136</sup> *Ad hoc* apologetics is holistic and somewhat coherentist; as it stands in the background, *ad hoc* apologetics endeavors to present the Christian web of beliefs as a coherent whole, buttressed by epistemological, philosophical, historical, scientific, sociopolitical, anthropological, and theological apologetic arguments, pragmatic considerations and its ultimate assimilative power.<sup>137</sup> Religious truth claims are not vindicated by appeal to external standards of rationality but "an interpretation of human history and the world from the perspective of the Christian faith provides an intelligible and persuasive explanation of the

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<sup>132</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 11.

<sup>133</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 131.

<sup>134</sup> Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," 589.

<sup>135</sup> Crane, "Postliberals, Truth, Ad Hoc Apologetics, and (Something Like) General Revelation," 50.

<sup>136</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 130-31.

<sup>137</sup> As sketched by Werpehowski. See: (Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," 295-97.) in Kamitsuka, "The Justification of Religious Belief in the Pluralistic Public Realm: Another Look at Postliberal Apologetics," 598-99.

aspects of human life shared in a particular context.<sup>138</sup> Admittedly, ad hoc apologetics alone is not the focal point in choosing a religious tradition but does give warrant to taking reasonableness<sup>139</sup> in religion seriously.<sup>140</sup>

Individuals from different religious traditions may reasonably consider each other to be wrong on certain factual points (ex: "Is God or Brahma, as the source of all contingent reality, ultimately personal or impersonal?"). In the regard to the case study, the Christian apologist can discuss religious similarities and differences while affirming Christianity is true; and if there is a basic point of contradiction between two different views, the Christian can still believe she is right and the other is wrong and yet respect the other as being rational in their beliefs. Such an attitude can be adapted from William Rowe's notion of "The Friendly Atheist"<sup>141</sup> and formatted into "The Friendly Christian." Suppose a Muslim asserts that historically, Jesus did not die by crucifixion. The Christian can accept that the person contradicting core Christian doctrine, though wrong, may still be rationally justified in that holding that view. Rowe gives the following analogy:

*"Suppose your friends see you off on a flight to Hawaii. Hours after take-off they learn that your plane has gone down at sea. After a twenty-four hour search, no survivors have been found. Under these circumstances they are rationally justified in believing that you have perished. But it is hardly rational for you to believe this, as you bob up and down in your life vest, wondering why the search planes have failed to spot you. Indeed, to amuse yourself while awaiting your fate, you might very well reflect on the fact that your friends are rationally justified in believing that you are now dead, a proposition you disbelieve and are rationally justified in disbelieving."*<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Crane, "Postliberals, Truth, Ad Hoc Apologetics, and (Something Like) General Revelation," 41.

<sup>139</sup> As Thomas Kuhn points out with respect to science, reasonableness has something of an aesthetic quality.

<sup>140</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 131.

<sup>141</sup> William L Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1979): 340-41.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

So too a Christian may be rationally justified in her Christian preference and yet hold that some other religious theists “are rationally justified in believing just the opposite of what [she] believes.”<sup>143</sup>

It seems appropriate to capture the character of Christian preference by concluding with the conviction of the Second Vatican council: “The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.”<sup>144</sup>

To summarize briefly, the Cultural Linguistic approach to Christianity contends that the Biblical narrative framework makes possible a truthful rendering of the one world which we all inhabit. Privileging the Christian tradition is not based on an appeal to universal principles and structures but on an *ad hoc* apologetic coherently explaining and assimilating a contextually based shared space. However, an explanation of how one might understand Christianity to be preferred to other religions is not a proposal that Christianity is preferred. Though, in this thesis, I do not intend to defend the claim that Christianity is more preferable, it may be legitimate to undertake such a project. The proposal is that the Cultural Linguistic approach allows for a feasible religious preference and apologetics may have a role to play in justifying the preferentiality of a specific religion.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)



## Conclusion:

Though the last century has presented an increased intensity of encounter with the religious other, the conversation about the plurality of religions is one that has lasted thousands of years and this thesis enters into only a small portion of that conversation. The purpose of this thesis was to address the question of whether it is legitimate to make an apologetic attempt to argue for a specific religious preference and selected Christianity as a case study. By religious preference, I referred to warrantedly preferring a specific confession of a traditional religion as true, even in the face of a plurality of different religions. The preferred religion is the one which *merits my preference* and affirmation in the existential commitment of faith.

The first section introduced what was entailed in a claim of religious preference. A religion that is preferable, in the public and objective sense, enables a person to speak, see, and act truly; it is a lens and a language for the believer. The tradition expresses most truly what is, explains what is observed in the world, and empowers a person to live in a way aligned with that reality. However, religious preference is not a claim to completely possess absolute truth, but to be placed on a path that by following which we are led toward the truth.<sup>145</sup> Section One then proceeded to offer a defense of religious preference. After discussing a dualism between “public facts” and “private values”<sup>146</sup> that pervades pluralist assumptions, prominent moral and epistemic objections to religious preference were addressed. The conclusion was that

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<sup>145</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 12.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

religious preference is inescapable if one is to take religion seriously. If religious preference is dismissed because its claims are arrogant, ideologically imperialistic, culturally conditioned, epistemically arbitrary personal beliefs that may be “true for you but not for everyone,” then pluralism should be dismissed because its claims are arrogant, imperialistic, culturally conditioned, epistemically arbitrary personal beliefs that may be “true for you but not for everyone.” Ultimately, religious preference is neither a moral nor epistemic failure, and something like it is wholly unavoidable given our human condition.<sup>147</sup> One must “run the risk of acting as if my passionate need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.”<sup>148</sup>

Objections aside, the second section proposed that a promising foundation for religious preference could be found in Lindbeck’s Cultural Linguistic approach. In contrast to the Cognitive Propositional and Experiential Expressive model, the Cultural Linguistic approach views religions as a kind of cultural/linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought and makes possible thoughts, sentiments, and experiences that (if rightly utilized) are capable of corresponding to ultimate, universal reality.<sup>149</sup> In the way that the “language” of mathematics makes possible a description of quantity that could not be if we were limited to the language of music or poetry, the preferable religion allows for the possibility of an experience that corresponds to the ontological reality. On the one hand, a Cultural Linguistic religious preference is a strong claim to make because it suggests that the religious preference is based on categorical accuracy. On the other hand the religious preference is weak in so far as categorical accuracy neither guarantees nor excludes the

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<sup>147</sup> Plantinga, "Pluralism : A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," 175.

<sup>148</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe1," (1997): 7.

<sup>149</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 33.

possibility of propositional truth or error. The second section ended by transitioning to a distinctively Christian Cultural Linguistic religious preference that allows the Christian tradition to shape the entirety of life and make possible thoughts, sentiments, and experiences that (if rightly utilized) are capable of corresponding to ultimate, universal reality. Christian doctrines become rules of language which make it possible to speak truthfully about God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, see the true center of history in the story of the world, and act in accordance to God's will as the sign, agent, and foretaste of his kingdom.<sup>150</sup>

The final section applied the Cultural Linguistic model to Christian preference and was concerned with the possibility of apologetically justifying the preferentiality of a specific religion. Clooney provided a concrete illustration of the character of a Christian preference in accord with the Cultural Linguistic approach. With regard to apologetically justifying a specifically Christian preference, a difficulty arose between the notion of incommensurability and the practice of apologetics. An exploration of ways in which incommensurability and apologetics could be reconciled followed. What emerged was an *ad hoc* apologetic strategy that preferred a religious tradition not on the basis of an appeal to universal principles and structures but on coherently explaining and assimilating a contextually based shared space. Though, in this thesis, I did not intend to defend the claim that Christianity is more preferable, it may be legitimate to undertake such a project. The proposal is that the Cultural Linguistic approach allows for a feasible religious preference and apologetics may have a role to play in justifying the preferentiality of a specific religion. All things considered, I conclude that it is warranted to make an apologetic argument for a particular religious preference; which is to say,

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<sup>150</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 65.

paraphrasing Chesterton, some dogma and philosophy can be believed on Mondays in the twelfth century as well as on Tuesdays in the twenty first.

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