

Article

A Christology of Religions and a Theology of Evangelism

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Abstract: In this paper, informed by Vatican 2 and one of its premier modern day scholars, Gerald O’Collins, we will argue (1), that while the Christian evangelist should proclaim that Jesus is the only way to God, she should nonetheless be open to the possibility that Christ is saving those in non-Christian traditions as non-explicit or anonymous Christians, and, (2), that other serious religious traditions can be interpreted as doctrinally consistent with (or something nearby) the Nicene Christian tradition. In conclusion, these theses will lead us to argue that in the Christian’s approach to evangelism, her first step in persuading her non-Christian counterpart should be to emphasize the commonality that exists between the Christian tradition and the relevant non-Christian tradition. The evangelist then, should not see her main task as developing arguments against her interlocuter’s religious tradition (though, this has its place), but rather her focus should be on proclaiming an additional truth that her interlocuter can accept alongside many of her already held religious commitments.

Keywords: christology of religions; evangelism; Vatican 2; anonymous Christian; Rahner



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The missiologist Lalsangkima Pachuau argues that a theology of religions holds the interpretive key for understanding and developing how the Church should understand its mission (Pachuau 2000). Pachuau is not the only one to propose this. Inspired by the Church’s mission, Veli Matti Kärkkäinen in his *Hope and Community: Constructive Christian Theology for a Pluralistic World*, develops his own theology of religions by putting into conversation Christianity with Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Kärkkäinen 2017). Kärkkäinen highlights the commonalities shared between these traditions, though ultimately, he takes it that there are substantial differences between the religions discussed. It has recently become evident that there is a connection between mission and a theology of religions. This is becoming less and less controversial. But more needs to be said about how we should conceive of the two and their relationship. Our paper in a sense, is another attempt to bridge the gap between a theology of religions (or rather Christology or religions¹) and missiology, or more specifically, with evangelism (one aspect of the Church’s mission). Specifically, in this paper, informed by Vatican 2 and one of its premier modern day scholars, Gerald O’Collins, we will argue (1), that while the Christian evangelist should proclaim that Jesus is the only way to God, she should nonetheless, be open to the possibility (open in a non-trivial sense) that Christ is saving those in non-Christian traditions as non-explicit or anonymous Christians, and, (2), that other serious religious traditions can be interpreted as doctrinally consistent with (or something nearby) the Nicene Christian tradition. In conclusion, these theses will lead us to argue that in the Christian’s approach to evangelism, her first step in persuading her non-Christian counterpart, should be to emphasize commonality that exists between the Christian tradition and the relevant non-Christian tradition. The evangelist then, should not see her main task as developing arguments against her interlocuter’s religious tradition (though, this has its place), but rather her focus should be on proclaiming an additional truth that her interlocuter can accept alongside many of her already held religious commitments.

1. O'Collins' Theology of Religions

The Christian tradition has historically endorsed that there is only one path to salvation. New Testament passages like John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 are generally appealed to support the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. This means that at least historically speaking, pluralism seems ruled out by Christian thinkers, if by pluralism, we just mean there are more paths to salvation than just one. That leaves exclusivism² and inclusivism³ as the only live options.⁴ Karl Rahner reasoned for inclusivism in the following way:

Anonymous Christianity means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity . . . Let us say, a Buddhist monk . . . who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so, if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity. (Rahner 1979, p. 18)

This view is now the official view of the Catholic Church since at least Vatican 2. We look to use Gerald O'Collins' work, *Christology of Religions*, to develop a Christocentric theology for how Christians should understand non-Christian religious traditions. In doing this, we hope to argue for part (1) of our thesis. Notice we are not making an exhaustive case for (1). That would require a whole volume by itself. Rather, we are merely arguing that the Christian evangelist should take the sort of inclusivism discussed seriously such that it is at least alive theological option. The primary point of all this again, is to show how a theology of religions can and should influence our understanding of mission.

O'Collins first looks at New Testament passages where Jesus seems to be concerned with not only 'God's people' but also the Gentiles. The first passage O'Collins discusses is Mark 7: 24–30. Jesus encounters a Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew calls her a Canaanite in Matthew 15: 21–28). The woman pleads for help on behalf of her demon possessed daughter. While at first, Jesus seemed to state that gentiles were dogs in some way, Jesus ends up declaring to the woman that, 'great is your faith'. As O'Collins puts it, 'A Gentile dared to ask him for a miracle, and he was willing to perform it—thus, he began breaking down the barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles. Even though she did not share in the special blessings of the Jewish covenant with God and seemingly had enjoyed no previous contact with him, Jesus according to Matthew, praised her "great faith." (O'Collins 2018, p. 4)'.

O'Collins moves on to discuss the faith of a Gentile centurion in Matthew 8: 5–13. The centurion believed that a simple statement from Jesus would heal his son. Jesus' response was to say that, 'in no one in Israel have I found such faith'. ⁵ Once again, O'Collins highlights how the faith of a Gentile outsider was far greater than those, 'who enjoyed the special revelation of God given through Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and various wisdom figures (Ibid., 5)'. In Luke's version of this story, we also see Jesus state that, 'I tell you, many will come from the east and from the west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness'.

One other relevant passage worth mentioning is John 10: 16, where Jesus states that, 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd'. It is not uncommon for contemporary theologians to understand that the lost sheep that do not belong to 'this fold' are Gentiles who do not explicitly follow the God of Israel. Nonetheless, as O'Collins points out, Jesus stated that those who belong to his family (in this case fold) are . . .

'Whoever does the will of God.' As O'Collins states, 'He did not specify as candidates for his new family, "all those Jews who do the will of God." Any man or woman—read

now Buddhist, Confucian, follower of a traditional religion, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, agnostic, and so forth—who does what God wants qualifies for admission to this new community and becomes, whether he or she knows it or not, truly related to Jesus, a “family member in the kingdom” of God. (Ibid., 10)’

Jesus’ praises the faith of Gentiles in the highest terms available, again, those who are unlikely orthodox followers of the God of Israel. Jesus informs us that he has sheep that are not of the Jewish fold. These are Gentiles who have no explicit awareness of the person of Jesus, yet, will ‘listen’ to Jesus as the folds become one. In fact, given that Jesus informs us that it is ‘whoever does the will of God’ that belongs to his family, it is plausible to assume that these sheep that belong to Him are indeed, Gentiles who implicitly follow the Father’s will.

O’Collins moves from discussing Jesus’ theology of religions to how theologians understand Jesus’ priestly sacrifice (Ibid., 51). There is a universal dimension in Christ’s atonement. In fact, O’Collins references Newman’s work on the conscience to express how Jesus’ triple office of priest, prophet, and king is manifested in the human conscience. Newman states that the ‘Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its information, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have sway (Newman 1914, pp. 69–70)’. O’Collins helpfully characterizes Newman’s point by stating, ‘Here Newman presented the triple office as if it were a spiritual genetic code that preexisted any institutional structures and highlighted in particular “the sacerdotal principle” as intrinsically shaping the human spirit. (O’Collins 2018, p. 51)’. As O’Collins shows, this fits well with Karl Rahner’s theory of the sacerdotal existential. Sacerdotal existential is a kind of grace that primes a subject to accept the message of Christ. The rough idea is that Christian revelation already exists implicitly in the human person. We are in a sense designed for Christian revelation and are already inclined to accept it. Drawing from both Newman and Rahner, O’Collins states, ‘Through the sacerdotal existential, which is their conscience, human beings are positively preconditioned from within to share through baptism in the priesthood of Christ (and in his office as prophet and king). But they already experience that priesthood in the depths of their being and through the voice of their conscience (Ibid., 52)’. In this way, humanity is already connected with Jesus, the ultimate high priest, who makes atonement for all humanity. As O’Collins states, ‘The sacerdotal existential suggests the way in which Christ’s priestly work has already shaped them before they ever have a chance of responding to what that work brings them in the offer of God’s grace (Ibid.)’. Christ’s priestly work then, enables those who are not of the Jewish fold to follow Jesus. They implicitly follow Jesus by following their conscience which is connected to and shaped by the priestly work of Christ.

Vatican 2 and World Religions

In what follows, we will move our discussion from a theology of religions to specifically discussing the theology of religions at Vatican 2. We find explicating the aforementioned theology helpful, even if one is not a Catholic. This is because we think Vatican 2 gives us a plausible model to help us understand and make sense of how implicit faith can save.

In *Nostra Aetate* (NA), we read the following:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense. Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry.

They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing “ways”, comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14: 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.⁶

There are a couple of things that we want to emphasize from this text. First, NA seems to affirm that from ancient times, people from all sorts of backgrounds and cultures have become aware of Divinity, or perhaps to put it slightly differently, the Other. That is, non-Jewish and non-Christian worshippers, are still aware of Divinity’s reality; that is the same Divinity that exists in the Jewish and Christian traditions. According to NA, we are all in touch with the same reality.

Second, we should not only consider that practitioners of other religious traditions, like Buddhism and Hinduism are aware of Divinity, we should also recognize that the Church ‘rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions’. Christians may rightly rejoice and commend the truth espoused in other religious traditions. One might even dare to kiss a holy book that contains many religious truths. After all, these truths are ‘holy’.

Third, according to NA, while other religious traditions have truth, the Church should never fail to preach Jesus as the only way to God. Now, one could make the following suggestion:

Jesus is truth incarnate. If these religious traditions are full of truth, then should we not say that these religious traditions have Christ to some extent? Let us move on to *Lumen Gentium* 16 before we address this point:

LG 16

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge humankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. *Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel* (italicizing is our own doing). She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator.

Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, “Preach the Gospel to every creature”, the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.⁷

In LG 16, we first see that Jews and Muslims ‘adore the one merciful God’. While NA seems to support the view that non-Jews and Christians are aware of Divinity, we see this more explicitly stated with a specific reference to Islam. Moreover, it goes beyond NA in saying that we all ‘adore’ this God.

Second, we see a powerful statement regarding all those who do not explicitly confess faith in Christ. Looking at the italicized words, we see that those who through no fault of their own, lack knowledge of the Gospel and Christ’s Church, yet moved by God’s grace, follow God’s will as it is known by the ‘dictates of conscience’, can still be saved. We read, ‘Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel’. God uses faith in what points to the Gospel as if the faith was explicitly in the Gospel. *Ad Gentes* (AG) can help us understand this more:

But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil’s domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men.(24) Thus, missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness.(25) For by it the people of God is increased to that measure and time which the Father has fixed in His power(cf. Acts 1: 7). To this people it was said in prophecy: “Enlarge the space for your tent, and spread out your tent cloths unsparingly” (Is. 54: 2).(26) By missionary activity, the mystical body grows to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4: 13); and the spiritual temple, where God is adored in spirit and in truth (cf. John 4: 23), grows and is built up upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme corner stone (Eph. 2: 20).⁸

We are told that truth and grace are found among the nations and that this enables God to have a ‘secret presence’. Nonetheless, by proclaiming the Gospel, those who had access to God are now maturing and are experiencing the ‘fullness of Christ’. In this way, the rites and customs of cultures which are good, are not thrown away but find their ultimate fulfilment in Christ. In fact, by saying that ‘truth and grace’ are found in the nations, we see that in some sense, Christ is already in the nations and is at work, before the Gospel is ever explicitly preached. As O’Collins notes that AG, ‘picks up the Johannine terminology of “truth and grace” (John 1: 14, 17) to recognize how Christ, “the author” of these elements, is already present among “the nations” even before they hear the word of Christian preaching. As giver of gifts of revelation (“truth”) and salvation (“grace”), he has already come to the nonevangelized, albeit mysteriously . . . ’. Nonetheless, we are told in AG, that we need to keep proclaiming the Gospel so that cultures and the nations can ‘participate fully in the mystery of Christ’. So, while it is true that those who from no fault of their own lack explicit knowledge that the Gospel message is true, can indeed be saved, they are still saved by their implicit faith in Christ. And we should of course still be motivated to preach the Gospel, so that those who are saved by implicit faith in Christ can participate fully in Him. Now, once again, we are not saying that the theology constructed at Vatican 2 is more plausible than alternative theologies proposed. Instead, what we have shown is that this theological model should be seen as reasonable or as a live option.

Having now sketched a theology of religions in Vatican 2, we now move briefly to discuss if this theology is at odds with the historical witness of the Church. Those familiar with the Church’s tradition are likely familiar with the saying that ‘there is no salvation outside of the Church’. How this has been understood has developed over time. As Francis

Sullivan points out, there was a time when it was common to believe that the Gospel had gone out to all people groups. To support this claim, Sullivan offers up Gregory of Nyssa when he states that, ‘But if in fact the call has gone out to all, with no difference on the account of rank, age or nation . . . how could it be right to blame God for the fact that his word has not achieved dominion over all (Sullivan 2002, p. 25)?’ Sullivan also quotes Ambrose for evidence. Ambrose states that, ‘For the Mercy of the Lord has been spread by the Church to all nations; the faith has been spread to all people. (Ibid., pp. 25–26)’. Finally, Sullivan references Chrysostom’s quote that, ‘One should not think that ignorance excuses the non-believer . . . When you are ignorant of what can easily be known, you have to suffer the penalty. (Ibid.)’ Chrysostom seems to think that unbelievers can easily know the Gospel, at least if they put in the effort. Because the Gospel can be easily known to non-believers, they are indeed liable to judgment.

However, new reflections on the doctrine occurred when the New World was discovered. There were continents of people who never had access to the Gospel. When theologian Domingo Soto reflected on the situation, he advocated that the people of the New World could be saved in the same way as those in the Old Testament were saved (Ibid., 76). Around the same time, Albert Pigge developed the idea that some Muslims could be saved by possessing an implicit faith in Christ (Ibid., 81). Of course, these themes will continue to develop as the Church comes to understand more and more how individuals may not culpably possess knowledge of the Gospel. This makes plausible the claim that Vatican 2’s doctrine is not so much an innovation brought about by 20th century liberalism, but rather is a doctrine that organically develops over time given reflection in various diverse contexts. Having stated all this, we have made our case for the first part of our thesis for this paper. We now move on to (2).

World Religions

While one could write a whole book (or maybe a few?) on how and to what extent various world religions can be seen as consistent with one another, for the purposes of this paper, we simply want to sketch various approaches one could take to argue that serious religious traditions can be interpreted as doctrinally consistent with (or something nearby) the Nicene Christian tradition. In order to do this succinctly, we will not be able to explain the fundamentals of each religious tradition.⁹ What we will do instead is assume that our reader has background knowledge of the religious traditions being discussed and we will simply offer up alternative or unique ways to understand how these religious traditions can be seen as consistent with Christianity. This means we will only bring up those doctrines which we see as most relevant for our task. This should not by any means be seen as an exhaustive argument for a genuine synthesis but simply a way to show that the thesis is plausible. One final note before our exploration begins: We will not attempt to show how Christian belief is consistent with Judaism. This is because this paper is assuming that the Christian message is true. And of course, on Christianity, the message and theology of the Messiah are supposed to be seen as consistent with the Tanakh. We now move to first discuss Islam, as it stands the best chance of being doctrinally consistent with core Christian commitments.

Islam

Quranism is an Islamic school of thought that rejects that the tafsir and Hadith should be taken seriously or possess any important authority within the Islamic community. For a proponent of Quranism, the Qur’an is all that matters. The Hadith it is argued, are not reliable and came about far later than the Qur’an, and often they came about in politically charged contexts. For the sake of this paper, we will interpret Islam from these religious lenses. Of course, it must be acknowledged that those who endorse Quranism are by far in the minority. It does not matter. As stated, our interests are purely related to whether there is logical space to interpret Islam in such a way that it is consistent with Christian belief. Now, even by putting the Hadith and the tafsir aside, there are three main areas of potential conflict between Christianity and Islam which we will discuss in this section:

- (1) Jesus is God and the only begotten Son of God.
- (2) Jesus died on the cross.
- (3) Muhammad is a prophet from God.¹⁰

Abdulla Galadari has argued that the Qur'an can be read consistently with the Gospel of John (Galadari 2018). This should come across as a surprise as the Gospel of John is the Gospel where Jesus is most explicitly called God and named the only begotten son of God. Traditionally, Islamic theology denies these propositions. Having stated this, we will use Galadari's work to help resolve the tension behind (1). Galadari starts off his work by reminding his readers that at times the Qur'an suggests that Christians should use the Gospels to judge the revelation of the Qur'an:

And let the People of the Gospel judge by what Allah has revealed therein. And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed—then it is those who are the defiantly disobedient. (Surah 5: 47)¹¹

One traditional interpretation to this text is to endorse the doctrine of abrogation. Roughly, the idea is that the later Surahs should trump or abrogate the earlier Surahs if there is theological conflict between the earlier and later passages. In this case, passages that will later explicitly deny that Jesus is begotten or passages that seem to assume that Jesus is not God, will change our understanding of passages like Surah 5: 47, which seems to indicate that the Gospels are consistent with the Qur'an. One such passage that is used to demonstrate that Jesus is not God, is Surah 9: 30–31:

The Jews say: "Ezra ('Uzayr) is Allah's son [Ibn]", and the Christians say: "The Messiah is the son [Ibn] of Allah." These are merely verbal assertions in imitation of the sayings of those unbelievers who preceded them. May Allah ruin them. How do they turn away from the Truth? They take their rabbis and their monks for their lords apart from Allah, and also the Messiah, son of Mary, whereas they were commanded to worship none but the One True God. There is no god but He. Exalted be He above those whom they associate with Him in His Divinity.

On the surface of this passage, it seems that the Messiah (Jesus) is not the son (Ibn) of God. Apparently saying so, resembles the words of those who disbelieved before. We are then told that 'they take their rabbis and their monks for their lords apart from Allah, and also the Messiah Son of Mary . . . ' This passage is a bit puzzling for several reasons. First off, Jews do not believe that Ezra is the son of God. So, it is not obvious that we should interpret Ibn as a literal son. Instead, assuming that Muhammad knew what he was talking about, Galadari, looking at how the book of Ezra uses the Hebrew word 'bn' (to build), suggests we interpret Ibn here to mean house. This way, the passage is condemning the relevant persons who claim a connection to Ezra and the temple of God (Ezra of course being the person who is primarily responsible for the 2nd Temple's existence) and Jesus as the temple of God. But are they being condemned for their beliefs? Galadari suggests that they are not but rather are being condemned for being hypocritical:

In these Qur'anic passages, it seems that when the Qur'an uses the term "with their mouths (*bi-afwāhihim*)" it is contrasted that what they say with their mouths is not the same as it is in their hearts. Also, Qur'an 9:30 mentions that when the Jews and Christians say things with their mouths, they imitate the unbelievers of before using the term "*kafarū*." This term is also found in Qur'an 3:167 and 5:41, as mentioned above. This could make use of a different understanding of the Qur'anic passage. If the Jews and Christians are making a claim about the Temple of God, it is nothing but a saying with their mouths, implying it is not in their hearts. (Galadari 2018, p. 90)

In personal correspondence, Galadari tells me that in Arabic, the Surah can read differently:

In the Arabic text, it says they have taken their rabbis and monks as lords instead of God and the Messiah . . . The way it is recited makes it as if grammatically the Messiah though mentioned after God to be conjoined with the rabbis and monks

based on the ending vowel. Arabic of course was not written with vowels in its earliest literary form including the Qur'an. Due to the peculiarity of this text, there is equal if not even possibly higher probability that the Messiah is conjoined with God and not with the rabbis and monks. (Galadari 2022: Personal Correspondence)

If Galadari is right, then there is no reason to think that this text is at odds with the Gospel of John. In fact, if anything, the 'Messiah' being conjoined with the word 'God' would be evidence for the deity of the Messiah.

What about all of those passages in the Qur'an, such as Surah 111: 3, that tell us that God does not beget? Even if we can read Surah 9: 30–31 in a way that is consistent with Jesus being identified with God, what are we to do with John explicitly stating that Jesus is the begotten Son of God? Christian theologians have generally understood language about God to be analogical, rather than univocal. In this case, when Christians read passages like John 3: 16, where Jesus is called the 'only begotten Son', they do not literally think that Jesus is begotten in the same way that a human father begets a son. Now, Christians would not take this completely equivocal either such that the word begotten does not resemble how we predicate it to humans in our everyday experience. Rather, it is in between both univocal usage and equivocal usage. We can read the Qur'an's condemnation against God begetting as a condemnation of a univocal understanding of God begetting Jesus. So, when John affirms that Jesus is begotten and when the Qur'an condemns the view that Jesus is begotten, there can still be consistency. To put it in a way to appease analytic philosophers, we can say that God does not beget¹ but rather, God does beget².

Notice that the second part of our thesis for this paper is simply that these religious traditions can be read in such a way as to render various religious traditions consistent (or nearby) with Nicene Christianity. Even if you do not find the reading offered here compelling, our thesis will succeed if you grant that it is remotely possible. After all, what we are after is logical consistency, not textual plausibility. Having said this, how are we to understand the Qur'an's apparent denial of Jesus' death on the cross. Surah 157 states the following:

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger—they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain.¹²

Traditionally, Islamic theology has interpreted this passage to entail that Jesus was never actually crucified but rather he only appeared to be crucified. Typically, someone like Judas is seen as taking Jesus' place on the cross. But Surah 157 does not state this. Rather, it simply states that Jews who claimed to have crucified Jesus were wrong. They had not crucified Jesus but rather it was made to simply look like it. Rather as Christians believe, in a sense it was really God the Father who killed Jesus (Isa 53). (Galadari 2022: Personal Correspondence).

Finally, what should we make of proposition (3)? Can Christians really believe that Muhammad was God's prophet? Anna Bonta Moreland has recently argued that even Roman Catholics can believe that Muhammad was a prophet, at least in some sense (Moreland 2015). To be clear, the Church teaches that Jesus is a complete and sufficient revelation. *Dominus Iesus* (DI) states this much as follows:

The definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christian faith as compared with that of belief in other religions, the inspired nature of the books of Sacred Scripture, the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit, the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church, the inseparability—while recognizing the distinction—of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church. (no. 4)

Yet, as Moreland points out, DI is completely consistent with thinking that the Qur'an is a private revelation (Moreland 2015, p. 549). In the Catholic tradition, while private revelation is never universally binding on all believers (and therefore not part of dogmatic theology), private revelation can still be interpreted as God granting prophetic utterances to His people. While we personally find the proposal implausible, nonetheless, it does seem that there is logical space to believe that God raised up Muhammad to exhort the nations, especially those in the Arab world, that there is no God but Allah, and, that Nicene Christianity is true. Having now argued that Islam can be interpreted to be doctrinally consistent with Christian belief, we now turn to examining the Advaita Vedanta tradition.

The Advaita Vedanta tradition is well known for endorsing claims such as 'I and Brahman are one'. Advaita Vedanta is often interpreted to be a radically monistic tradition. That is a tradition that has little room for ontological pluralism. Victoria Harrison helpfully puts the tradition's ontology in schematic form:

Layer 1: Absolute reality

Nirguṇa Brahman, Qualityless Brahman, Brahman/Ātman.

Layer 2:

Absolute reality seen through categories imposed by human thought Saguna Brahman, Brahman with qualities. Creator and governor of the world and a personal god (Īśvara, or Iswara).

Layer 3:

Conventional reality. (Harrison 2012, p. 58)

It is not hard to see why the Advaita Vedanta tradition is typically taken to be in conflict with Christianity. It seems that the Advaita Vedanta tradition denies the existence of a personal God, at least, at the ultimate level of reality. Similarly, if there is only radical monism, then it seems the proponent is committed to pantheism or at best, panentheism. But must the Advaita Vedanta tradition be interpreted in such a way as to not have any room for pluralism about objects? Contrary to standard interpretations of the tradition, Anantanand Rambachan argues that there is room 'manyess'.¹³

What's important for Rambachan is recognizing that at the ultimate layer of reality, there is only Brahman. In a private email correspondence, we asked Rambachan if the Advaita tradition could rightfully be seen through the lenses of Classical Theism. Specifically, can the Advaita proponent faithfully view God as ultimate reality, and yet, argue that in some weaker sense, distinct objects also exist and participate in Brahman for their existence. Rambachan responded, 'Your language of participation is an interesting possibility, if by participation you mean that nothing exists apart from brahman, nothing exists independently of brahman, and while things may have unique attributes, etc., at the most fundamental level of being or existence, all is brahman (Rambachan 2022: Personal Correspondence)'. Of course, the Classical Theist will rejoice in stating that God is ultimate reality, nothing exists apart from God and nothing can exist independently of Him. And since God is seen as Being or Existence itself, it is fair game to state that at the ultimate level of reality, all is God.

Now, you might wonder how one can be a Classical Theist and think that God is not personal at the most ultimate layer of reality. In this case, must the Advaita Vedanta proponent think that God is impersonal? And are Classical Theists able to say that God is ultimately qualityless? Christopher Isherwood seems to think that the Advaita proponent must think that God is impersonal when he states, 'Are there then two Gods—one the impersonal Brahman, the other the personal Iswara? No—for Brahman only appears as Iswara when viewed by the relative ignorance of maya. Iswara has the same degree of reality as maya has. God the Person is not Brahman in his ultimate nature'.¹⁴ But we are

not convinced that in the most literal sense, Isherwood is right, at least, if we are to believe that Brahman is truly qualityless.

To say that God is impersonal seems to put God into a genus. We are still using human categories to make sense of God. But at the ultimate layer, human categories do not correspond with God. Therefore, it might be better to say that God is neither personal nor impersonal, but rather, God is completely Other. The Classical Theist is more than happy to concede that our language about God is only analogical. God does not literally possess properties since God is metaphysically simple. We, therefore, see no reason why the Classical Theist cannot agree with the Advaita proponent about the various layers of reality. In this way, it seems plausible to us that the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta can be interpreted in such a way that it is consistent with the traditional theism of the Abrahamic traditions. Having argued for as much, we now move to argue that Buddhism can also be interpreted in a way that is consistent with Christian Theism.

Buddhism¹⁵

The Buddhist philosopher, Jay Garfield, summarizes a more contemporary and minimalist interpretation of Buddhism as follows:

Suffering (*dukkha*) or discontent is ubiquitous in the world . . .

The origin of *dukkha* is in primal confusion about the fundamental nature of reality, and so its cure is at the bottom a reorientation toward ontology and an awakening (*bodhi*) to the actual nature of existence.

All phenomena are impermanent (*anitya*), interdependent (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and have no intrinsic nature (*śūnya*) . . .

Fundamental confusion is to take phenomena, including preeminently oneself, to be permanent, independent and to have an essence or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).

The elimination (*nirvāṇa*), or at least the substantial reduction of *dukkha* through such reorientation, is possible.

An ethically appropriate orientation toward the world is characterized by the cultivation of *mudita* (an attitude of rejoicing in the welfare and goodness of others, of *mettā*) beneficence toward others, and especially of *karuṇā* (commitment to act for the welfare of sentient beings) (Garfield 2014, p. 2).

The highlighted portion is what we take to be most in tension with Christian doctrine. At the heart of Buddhism are the interdependence and impermanent theses. Roughly the idea of interdependence is that all things, ontologically are dependent on one another.

For example, if X is a thing, then its existence (both causally and conceptually) would depend on Y, and Y would depend on Z, and so on. David Burton puts this thesis as follows, ‘all entities have a dependently arisen and conceptually constructed existence . . . (Burton 2015, p. 36)’. Garfield puts it slightly differently when he states, ‘All events in time, all Buddhist philosophers agree, occur in dependence to prior causes and conditions, and all states of affairs cease when the cause and conditions that are necessary for their occurrence cease. (Garfield 2014, p. 27)’

Impermanence on the other hand is the thesis that all things are in constant state of change. Usually, a radical interpretation to Leibniz’s law of identity is applied. Anytime there is subtle change with respect to some object O, O no longer exists, but rather a new object, O², comes into existence. Any new property gained, or any property lost, while it might seem subtle, constitutes a new identity. Endorsing these two theses leads to the doctrine that things ultimately lack *svabhāva*, or an intrinsic nature.

Now, you might be wondering how these theses are consistent with theism or specifically, Christianity. We concede that if one primarily construes God as a thing, that is, simply as an additional object in the universe, then one would have to accept the absurd view that the God who existed yesterday, is not the same God who exists today, and, will not be the same God who exists tomorrow. Similarly, one would have to be committed to the view that God is dependent on his creation as all things are interdependent. These are unacceptable conclusions for theists, especially of the Nicene Christian stripe. But God is not another entity in the universe or simply one existent thing among many other existent

things. As Pseudo-Dionysius puts it, 'He is no thing (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 103)'. Rather, God is Existence itself.

It is at least not *prima facie* obvious to us why a Christian cannot endorse the aforementioned theses. For example, Brian Davies is under the impression that both Jonathan Edwards and Catherine of Sienna both affirmed the interdependence thesis:

God is the ultimate reality. And Catherine of Sienna, whose thinking is governed by the notion of God as the source of everything, repeatedly says that only God is and she herself is not. In similar vein, Edwards explains that creatures are, in a sense, 'empty'. By creature being thus wholly and universally dependent on God', writes Edwards, 'it appears that the creature is nothing, and that God is all'. (Davies 2007, p. 373)

Similarly, Edwards seems to also endorse the impermanence thesis and has his own way of making sense of personal identity and eschatological judgement.¹⁶ For those interested in how Buddhist religious experience and Buddhist soteriological beliefs can be consistent with Christian views, see Tyler Dalton McNabb and Erik Baldwin's *Classical Theism and Buddhism*. As for now, we will take it that we have made plausible the second part of our thesis for this chapter, namely that, other serious religious traditions can be interpreted as doctrinally consistent with (or something nearby) the Christian Nicene tradition.

2. Conclusions

A Christology of religions is extremely practical for evangelism. How should we evangelize other faiths? First, the Christian evangelist should approach people of other faiths, not as 'reprobates', but rather she should first acknowledge that there is a non-trivial chance that the person she is encountering is an anonymous-Christian. Moreover, if other religious traditions contain plenty of truth and can be interpreted as an attempt to know the same Divine reality, the evangelist should concede as much as possible to those who are not, at least explicitly, believers. That is, the focus should not be on religious disagreement. Rather, the focus should be on showing how the religious tradition in question can be seen as consistent with the core doctrines of Christianity, as well as proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel message. We think the approach offered here fits right in-line with Paul's approach to those in the meeting of the Areopagus. In Acts 17, Paul appeals to their knowledge of the unknown God and does not disregard Greek philosophy but references it to explain the Gospel message. Now, one might wonder why we should evangelize if we can be optimistic about the number of those who will ultimately partake in the beatific vision. Why should we approach evangelism with urgency? We suppose this is a paper for another day. However, we did want to entertain an objection to the approach offered here.

An objection one may raise to our proposed evangelistic strategy is to question the scope of applicability of our model. Specifically, given that, on our proposal, it is only "remotely possible" that religious traditions outside of Christianity can interpret their core doctrines as being consistent with central Christian commitments, why think they will do so? In other words, if the most we can say on our approach is that these various non-Christian doctrines are broadly logically consistent with Nicene Christianity, is such an approach really (evangelistically) that practical?¹⁷

A number of comments in response. First, evangelistic methodology is not homogeneous. A random survey of the conversion stories of any number of Christian converts will, in all likelihood, yield evidence of multiple evangelistic approaches at work (with certain converts requiring more than just one method of evangelism). Given this fact, it seems right to think that the evangelist will benefit from having multiple tools in the toolbox (so to speak), including those tools (methods) which entail highlighting the broadly logical consistency of Nicaean Christianity with other world religions.

Moreover, if the objection is that we should abandon such evangelistic approaches because they bring into question an interpretation of non-Christian theologies that is

inconsistent with Nicene Christianity, then the follow up question to be asked is, what sort of evangelistic method(s) are we to use? Is it not, whether implicitly or explicitly stated, an aim of Christian evangelism to bring into question, some interpretations of reality, at least interpretations of reality that have not been informed by Christian belief? Even when we pray for the conversion of the world, is it not done with the hope (we assume) that one will feel the presence of the Christian God and abandon any contrary theological interpretations? Thus, if the worry is the questioning of the prior theological interpretations that are inconsistent with Christian belief, the casting aside of such methods seems to leave the evangelist with her feet firmly planted in mid-air: for there is, arguably, no evangelistic method that does not entail the questioning of the non-Christian's prior theological interpretations of reality.¹⁸

Nonetheless, we think by utilizing resources from the field of apologetics, we can create motivation for why a non-Christian might take the Christian friendly interpretation of their religion that is offered here, more seriously. Two examples to demonstrate how this works: a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and a historical case for the reliability of the Gospels. A number of philosophers, historians, and apologists have put forth forceful historical arguments in support of the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead and the claim that the Gospel account are historically accurate.¹⁹ The details of such arguments need not be rehearsed here outside of one point: these arguments do not tread on any prior Christian theological commitments, as they are based solely on historical analysis. In turn, for those Non-Christians persuaded by these apologetic arguments, we can utilize our evangelistic model (i.e., the demonstrating of the broadly logical consistency of Nicene Christianity with other world religions) to convince the Non-Christian that she can have her cake and eat it too. Namely, one need not abandon (at least wholesale) their prior theological commitments when confronted with the compelling evidence for the Resurrection or the reliability of the Gospels. Otherwise, embracing the conclusions of these apologetic arguments may seem too large a pill to swallow. Thus, the pre-evangelistic tools of apologetics can ground the practicality of our evangelistic model. The non-Christian can accept the historical evidence for the claims of Christianity while not abandoning the basic framework of her worldview. Our consistency thesis then, has clear and practical implications for the theology of evangelism.

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Notes

- ¹ As Christians, we should view other religions through a Christocentric interpretation. There is a sense in which Jesus is God and as such, all attempts to speak of the divine are really attempts to speak of Jesus. For a defense of there being high Christology taught in the New Testament and in the early Church, see (Bauckham 2008).
- ² By exclusivism, we mean the thesis that there is only one path to salvation and one must formally recognize the path in order to be saved.
- ³ By inclusivism, we just mean the thesis that while there is only one path to salvation, one does not have to formally acknowledge the one path or recognize that she is on such path in order to be saved.
- ⁴ See Jonathan Kvanvig (2022), for a recent defense of inclusivism.
- ⁵ Unless specified, translations are from the NRSV.
- ⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed on 30 September 2022).
- ⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed on 30 September 2022).
- ⁸ *Ad Gentes*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html (accessed on 30 September 2022).

- ⁹ For a survey on what world religions teach, see [Baldwin and McNabb \(2018\)](#).
- ¹⁰ For an argument that the Qur'an is deeply in conflict with the Christian Scriptures, see [\(Durie 2018\)](#). For a work that fits better with our thesis, see [\(Reynolds and Qarai 2018\)](#).
- ¹¹ Sahih International translation unless otherwise noted.
- ¹² Pickthall translation.
- ¹³ See [Rambacan \(2015, p. 64\)](#).
- ¹⁴ See the introduction to Śaṅkarācārya, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, trans. Swami Prab-
havananda and Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood: Vedānta Press, 1978), 18.
- ¹⁵ For details for the argument that is about to be laid out, see [\(McNabb and Baldwin 2022\)](#).
- ¹⁶ See chapter One of [McNabb and Baldwin \(2022\)](#).
- ¹⁷ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer from the Journal of Analytic Theology for pressing us on this point.
- ¹⁸ The debate over the reasonability of questioning fundamental religious commitments has some interesting parallels in the philosophical literature on peer disagreement and deep disagreement (see, for example, [Matheson \(2021\)](#))
- ¹⁹ Many examples can be cited. One example of a case for the Resurrection is [Craig \(2001\)](#). For an example of a case for the reliability of the Gospels see, [Licona \(2016\)](#).

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