

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 14/2 (Fall 2003): 100–113.
Article copyright © 2003 by Nestor C. Rilloma.

Toward a Theology of Religion in an Asian Adventist Perspective

Nestor C. Rilloma

Adventists in Asia live in a vast region where all the major world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.—had their beginnings, where religion is a way of life, and where Christianity is generally considered a western religion. As Adventist Christians, we cannot avoid the problem of religious diversity and pluralism. We are faced with the question: What attitude should Adventist Christians take toward other religions? This article aims to answer the query by: 1) briefly describing the phenomenon of religion; 2) examining several Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians' views of religion; and 3) proposing a biblical theology of religion in an Asian Adventists perspective. In this article, the Adventist Christian perspective is emphasized in three important elements: our distinctive theological insights, unique lifestyle, and distinctive worldview.

What Is Religion?

It has been said that humans are *homo religiosus*, inherently religious.¹ But what is religion? When one examines the literature, one soon discovers that scholars have difficulty formulating a generally acceptable definition. The difficulty lies in the fact that defining something involves specifying its limits, and it is hard to limit such a wide range of religious phenomena.² For this article we take as our own a definition proposed by Roger Schmidt: religion is “a set of beliefs, practices, and social structures, grounded in a people’s experience of the

¹Roger Schmidt, *Exploring Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1988), 7. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 15.

²Disparate categorizations of various scholars’ definitions are offered in Terry C. Muck, *The Mysterious Beyond: A Basic Guide to Studying Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 19–30; Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 33–48; and John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 1–3.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

holy, that accommodates their emotional, social, intellectual, and meaning-giving needs.”³ We choose this definition for its broad scope, encompassing practically everything that has been said on the subject.

Let us unpack this loaded definition. Firstly, all religions share common forms of expression. According to Schmidt, all religions are: 1) “conceptual,” that is, they have a set of beliefs constituting a worldview which is seen in the symbols and language they use; 2) “performative,” that is, they involve practices which are enacted in the rituals that members perform; and 3) “social,” that is, their members are organized into communities with distinctive patterns of relationships.⁴

Secondly, all religions share common functions. Schmidt claims that all religions meet the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of human beings. Religions respond to the human desire to know the how and why of things. They are powerful forces for social stability, role clarification, and individual and group identity. And they provide resources for the creative expression and mediation of human emotions.⁵

Thirdly, all religions “have an essential nature in spite of real differences in the content of religious belief system.”⁶ According to Schmidt, this shared essential nature has two fundamental features: 1) “the conviction that there is something holy”; and 2) “the belief that human existence, if it is to be fulfilled, must be harmonized with or subordinated to what humans experience as holy.”⁷ As Adventist theologians, we recognize that religion is simply people’s attempt to identify a divine Creator and His unique relation to and active interaction with His creation, as exemplified in human beings’ experiences and emotion.

Christian Views of Religion

How do we come to terms with the challenge of religious pluralism? How should other religions be viewed? Should all of them apart from Christianity be seen as the creation of humanity under demonic influence, their work thus needing only to be disavowed, rejected, and replaced? Or should they be seen as possessing “Christian” values that need to be discovered, appreciated, and nurtured? Theologians are divided over how to answer these questions. Many of them advocate a “Christ-against-religions” theology, while a few argue a “Christ-of-religions” theology, to borrow the terminology of Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris.⁸

³Schmidt, 17.

⁴Schmidt, 16.

⁵Schmidt, 12–14.

⁶Schmidt, 14–16.

⁷Schmidt, 14–16.

⁸Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Quezon City: Claretian, 1988), 88.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Christ-against-religions theologians—those advocating “discontinuity between the gospel and religions,” in the words of J. Robert Nelson⁹—include such preeminent twentieth century Reformed theologians as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Hendrik Kraemer. For Barth, “Religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man.”¹⁰ According to Pieris, Barth “reduced the notion of religion to a blasphemous manipulation of God, or at least an attempt of it.”¹¹ His negative assessment of religion arose from his Neo-Orthodox view of general revelation. For him there was no such thing; he refused to acknowledge any revelation outside the Word of God.¹² Brunner clashed with Barth on this point, asserting that the knowledge of God derived from nature is a “point of contact” for hearing the gospel, against Barth’s idea that the gospel creates its own point of contact.¹³ Nevertheless, Brunner echoed Barth’s criticism of the basic concept of religion, insisting that “no ‘other religion’ knows the God who is Himself the Revealer.”¹⁴ Kraemer, the eminent Dutch missiologist, took a similar position, arguing that “all religions . . . are the various efforts of man to apprehend the totality of existence, often stirring in their sublimity and as often pathetic or revolting in their ineffectiveness.”¹⁵ In Kraemer’s view, because men and women are sinful, these efforts are necessarily corrupted, representing their attempt to be like God.¹⁶ The answer to the human quest is to be found not in religion but only in the Christian revelation, “giving the divine answer to this demonic and guilty disharmony of man and the world.”¹⁷

A few theologians have questioned this idea of absolute discontinuity between the gospel and religions. For example, Walter Freytag asks,

Is everything in the religions really only Godforsakenness and rebellion? Has God really forgotten the works of His hands? Is there no humanity in the religions, in the rectitude and truthfulness we can encounter, in the tenderness of conscience, the genuine coming together in human community, the heartfelt sympathy for the suffering, in the

⁹J. Robert Nelson, “Christian Theology and the Living Faiths of Men,” in *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 109–124 (121).

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, trans. G. T. Thompson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 299–300; quoted in Nelson, “Christian Theology and the Living Faiths of Men,” 120.

¹¹Pieris, 91.

¹²B. A. Demarest, “Revelation, General,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 944–45.

¹³See Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 84; and John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 91.

¹⁴Nelson, 120.

¹⁵Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 111.

¹⁶Kraemer, 113.

¹⁷Kraemer, 113–14.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

honest quest for God, in the resolute obedience to that which a man has perceived as being right, in genuine modesty, in humble self-moderation?¹⁸

Asian Evangelical theologian Ken Gnanakan offers a similar objection: “But is it biblical (or are we being Barthian) in saying that there is nothing good in religions? Is there nothing in religion that will cause the adherent to draw a bit closer to experiencing salvation in Jesus Christ?”¹⁹ According to C. S. Song, an Asian Reformed theologian, if we claim that Christianity is the only valid religion, then we have to assume that “God left Asia in the hands of pagan powers and did not come to it until missionaries from the West reached it. That would have left Asia without the God of Jesus for millions of years.” To him, nothing is farther from the truth. “God could not have been such an irresponsible God.”²⁰ To reject the validity of other religions is plain “dogmatism,” a “product of western religious absolutism.”²¹ He firmly believes that (here he is quoting Tillich) “[t]here are revealing and saving powers in all religions. God has not left himself unwitnessed.”²² Indeed, God reveals himself equally through all religions. Some Asian theologians, like Raymond Pannikar of India, go so far as to say that Christ is already present in non-Christian religions, albeit “hidden” and unacknowledged.²³

“Inclusivism” is a middle position between contemporary pluralism and traditional exclusivism that attempts to resolve the perceived problems of both. Clark H. Pinnock, an articulate proponent of this perspective, contends, “There is no salvation except through Christ, but it is not necessary for everybody to possess a conscious knowledge of Christ in order to benefit from redemption through him.”²⁴ According to him, “Responding to premessianic revelation can make [non-Christians] right with God.”²⁵ For biblical support, he cites Heb 11:6 in defense of the thesis that “people are saved by faith, not primarily by knowledge [of Christ].” Taking Abel, Enoch, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Cornelius, and others who had heard little or nothing of Christ as examples of those saved by faith without such explicit knowledge, he argues that those who have yet to hear of Christ today can be saved in the same way.²⁶

¹⁸Walter Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions* (London: SCM, 1957), 29, quoted in Nelson, 122.

¹⁹Ken Gnanakan, *The Pluralistic Predicament* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 32.

²⁰C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 167.

²¹Choan-Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 180.

²²Song, 190.

²³C. V. Mathew, “Indian Theology,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 557–58.

²⁴Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 75. Although Pinnock cannot be considered Reformed, we include him here because of his stature as an Evangelical theologian.

²⁵Pinnock, 105.

²⁶Pinnock, 22, 111, 158–68.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Exclusivists are uncomfortable with Pinnock's idea, insisting that it smacks of pluralism or even universalism. To Gnanakan, "an inclusivism without some clear parameters constantly faces the danger of straying into pluralism. Some inclusivists, we have noted, are really "anonymous' pluralists."²⁷

Ramesh Richard comments,

Pinnock's theology of religions portrays salvific revelation in the realm of history, outside special, normative revelation. God salvifically reveals Himself, at least indirectly, in ordinary *and* special events of universal history. This salvific revelation is uncovered by the "faith principle." A question . . . may be asked. If salvation is possible outside the Bible, why is the Bible treated as *if* it were special at all?²⁸

Conservative Evangelicals take issue with Pinnock's use of isolated examples, such as that of Melchizedek, to support the assertion that people can be saved by "responding to premessianic revelation." Richard argues,

In Scripture, more people are saved in relation to the main stream of salvation from Abraham rather than outside it. These occasional instances definitely point to extraordinary, "divine revelatory initiatives." . . . [O]thers mentioned as standing under the Melchizedek umbrella were all divinely nudged into contact with Israel, the news-bearers of salvation, as she fulfilled her elective missionary role.²⁹

Asian Evangelical thinker Ajith Fernando observes that those described by the Scripture as having been saved without explicit faith in Christ actually received a special revelation of God, a revelation which "presents a covenant relationship between God and his people, which is mercifully initiated by God and received by man through faith."³⁰

Roman Catholics have debated the question of pluralism longer than Protestants. According to Catholic scholar Richard McBrien, over the centuries there have been three basic Catholic positions: 1) "exclusivism," the view that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation apart from the church); 2) "religious indifferentism" or pluralism, the view that all religions are equally valid; and 3) "inclusivism," the view of theologians who reject both exclusivism and

²⁷Gnanakan, 222. He describes himself as an "exclusivist-inclusivist."

²⁸Ramesh Richard, *The Population of Heaven: A Biblical Response to the Inclusivist Position on Who Will Be Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 142 n. 32; emphasis his.

²⁹Richard, 39–40; the quoted phrase is taken from Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 260.

³⁰Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude toward World Religions* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 136, quoted in Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 267.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

pluralism as they try to deal with religions in a positive and constructive fashion.³¹

McBrien describes three contrasting approaches taken by Catholic inclusivists: “Each of these three . . . respects the uniqueness and truth of Christianity, and, in varying degrees, the intrinsic religious and salvific value of non-Christian religions.”³² The first is identified with Karl Rahner. This view holds that,

. . . there is but one true religion and that insofar as other “religions” embody authentic values and even saving grace, they do so as “anonymously Christian” communities. All grace is grace in Christ, who is the one Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). Therefore, all recipients of grace are at least in principle new creatures in Christ, people whose lives are governed implicitly or virtually by the new life in Christ that is at work within them.³³

The second approach has no “marquee name” identified with it. According to McBrien, this,

. . . acknowledges the salvific value in each of the non-Christian religions and underscores, as the preceding view does, the universality of revelation and of grace. It does not speak of the other religions as “anonymously Christian,” but instead implicitly regards them as lesser, relative, and extraordinary means of salvation.³⁴

The third approach is identified with Hans Küng and others. Again according to McBrien, this

. . . affirms [without prejudice to the uniqueness and truth of Christian faith] the intrinsic religious value of the other great religions of the world and, going beyond the second view, insists on the necessity and worthwhileness of *dialogue* with them. These other religions are not only to be tolerated or even respected; they are to be perceived as having something to teach us, not only about themselves and their own “doctrines,” but also about God, about human life, about Christ, that is, about *our own* doctrines.³⁵

The inclusivist perspective is apparently presumed by the 1965 Second Vatican Council “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”:

³¹Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 380–82.

³²McBrien, 383.

³³Demarest, “Revelation, General,” 945.

³⁴McBrien, 382–83.

³⁵McBrien, 383; emphasis his.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. It looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what it holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, it proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom everyone finds the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18–19), men find the fullness of their religious life.³⁶

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, there is no agreement even among these theologians of a single tradition—we have examined the positions of several Protestants and Roman Catholic theologians—on how Christians should view other religions. Some say religions other than Christianity are not valid and need to be disavowed, rejected, and replaced. Others say they have redeeming values that need to be discovered, appreciated, and nurtured. Our Adventist worldview permits the contention that God’s truths drawn from natural revelation and found in non-Christian religions are strictly limited and not salvific in any way. They are even damnific. Such truths may inspire their adherents to live virtuous lives, but they cannot save people from the presence, power, and penalty of sin. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can justify and reconcile people to God (2 Cor 5:17–21). Christ explicitly declares: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV; see also 1 Tim 2:5; Acts 4:12). God has revealed Himself to all peoples, but salvation is found in the Lord Jesus Christ alone. In short, revelation is universal, but salvation is particular. General revelation allows us to understand and experience the reality of God’s Being as a supreme Creator, but not as a Redeemer.

Toward a Biblical Theology of Religion

Where does this discussion lead us? The most logical thing to do is to turn to the Scriptures and see how they treat the topic of religion. This is no easy task because the Bible does not say much about the subject. In fact, there is no Hebrew word for “religion” in the Old Testament. In the New Testament three Greek words are commonly translated as “religion” or “religious” by the New International Version (NIV). The first of these is *thrēskeia* (Acts 26:5; Col 2:18; James 1:26, 27). Literally, this means “worship of God, religion.”³⁷ The second is *deisidaimonia* (Acts 17:22; 25:19). This has three possible meanings, namely “fear of or reverence for the divinity,” “superstition” or “religion.”³⁸ The third is

³⁶Austin Flannery, gen. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello, 1975), 739.

³⁷Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 363.

³⁸Bauer et al., 173.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

eusebeia (1 Tim 5:4), which literally means “piety, godliness, religion.”³⁹ The adjectival form of this word, *eusebēs* (translated “devout” in the NIV), is used to describe Cornelius and one of his aides (Acts 10:2, 7). A related word is *thēosebeia* (“reverence for God, piety, religion”⁴⁰), but the NIV does not translate this as “religion” where it appears (e.g., 1 Tim 2:10; 2 Tim 3:5; John 9:31).

Eric Sharpe observes that where the word “religion” occurs in the English Bible, it always renders words meaning “not a systematic collection of statements *about* God, but a living relationship *to* God within the terms of a ‘covenant’ or ‘testament’.”⁴¹ Pieris concludes that the conspicuous infrequency of such words in the New Testament is due to the fact that the whole concept of “religion” as understood in the West is alien to the Bible.⁴² From this we see that a study of such words is not very helpful in formulating a theology of religion. Where do we start then? It is probably best to begin with the question: Why is a human being religious?

It is implicit in the Bible that human nature has something to do with one’s religiosity. What is a human? What does it mean to be a human being? We read in the Book of Genesis that *ha’ādām* (“the man,” both male and female), unlike other creatures, was created by God “in his own image” (1:27). What does it mean to be created “in the image of God”? Among other things, this means that humanity was created to have an intimate relationship with God. To be a human being, according to Millard Erickson, is to be “consciously related to God.”⁴³ To be a human is to be a follower of God.⁴⁴ This is the main reason why humans are incurably religious: God created them that way. The pagan Roman statesman, orator, and writer Cicero (106–43 BCE) said something similar: “Nature herself has imprinted on the minds of all the idea of God.”⁴⁵ Therefore, a man or woman without religion is not really a human being,⁴⁶ but a beast or a machine.

Secondly, humans are religious because, being rational creatures, they possess a rudimentary “knowledge of God” (Rom 1:28). Humans know something about God because they were created with the mental capacity to recognize the effects of God’s actions in the world. They have the innate ability to understand God’s thoughts (Amos 3:7; 4:13) and mysteries (Job 12:22; Dan 2:22, 47). Paul made this point explicit when he wrote, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:20, NIV). The

³⁹Bauer et al., 326.

⁴⁰Bauer et al., 358.

⁴¹Sharpe, 41–42; emphasis his.

⁴²Pieris, 91.

⁴³Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 510.

⁴⁴Johannes Blauw, “The Biblical View of Man in His Religion,” in *Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), 31–41 (32).

⁴⁵Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*.

⁴⁶Blauw, 32.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Greek word translated as “being understood” is *nooumena*, from the verb *noew*, which literally means “to perceive with the mind.”⁴⁷ In the same vein, the psalmist proclaimed: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. . . . Their voice goes out into all the earth” (Ps 19:1, 4, NIV).

Thirdly, humans are religious because God has indelibly written His moral law on their hearts. Again, Paul made this point explicit when he wrote that “the requirements of the law are written on [human] hearts” (Rom 2:15). John called this “the light of humans” which, when the time had fully come, appeared in the person of Jesus, the “true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:4–6).

So it appears that being religious is not wrong in itself. To be religious is to be true to our human nature. To be a human being is to have religion.

Since religion is the human response to God’s self-disclosure mediated through the created order, the most appropriate way of continuing this discussion is by considering the contents and consequences of that disclosure. To reiterate, Paul taught that God had revealed Himself through nature (Rom 1:20) and the moral law (Rom 2:15), and through creation and the human conscience. But did Paul consider this general revelation to be salvific? According to the Book of Romans, can one genuinely know God through general revelation alone and thus be saved? This is difficult to answer. But judging from Paul’s high regard for general or natural revelation, he probably believed that it was at least “theoretically possible.”⁴⁸ There was one condition, though. If a person who had access only to such knowledge of God were to experience salvation, he or she must respond to that knowledge in faith and obedience. After all, Paul taught that only those who are justified by faith will live (i.e., be saved) (Rom 1:17). For him, this was what made the possibility of salvation via general revelation purely theoretical. He saw the problem as lying not with God’s revelation but with humans whose minds had been corrupted and led astray by their own folly (Rom 1:18–3:20).

Human history has shown that instead of responding to God’s revelation in faith by glorifying and thanking him, humans, in Paul’s words, “suppress[ed] the truth” about God and “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (Rom 1:20, 28). Because of their godlessness and wickedness, God had allowed them to seek their own happiness independent of Himself. Paul described the “way of life” they had created as basically blasphemous (Rom 1:23, 25). In his mind, therefore, all other religions were idolatrous and demonic in nature. He warned the Corinthians, “The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Cor 10:20, NIV). Demarest concludes,

⁴⁷Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* (n.p.: AMG, n.d.), 1958.

⁴⁸Erickson, 173.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

... the consistent response of the sinner when confronted with the truth-content of general revelation is to dismiss it from his consciousness (Rom 1:21–32). Thus instead of worshiping and obeying God, the unregenerate person asserts his own autonomy and fashions lifeless idols which he proceeds to venerate. Whereupon God deliberately gives man over to the sordid impulses of his sinful nature (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Instead of proving salvific, general revelation serves only to condemn the sinner and to establish his guilt-worthiness before God (Rom 1:20).⁴⁹

Asian Adventist theologians agree and subscribe to this perspective. This is the prevailing perspective among conservative Evangelicals. Fernando says, “[the scripture] shows that no one lives according to the light he receives.”⁵⁰ Reacting to Pinnock’s “manyness” doctrine of salvation, Richard says, “Unfortunately, Scripture does not portray [the] masses of humans coming into salvation during that time [i.e., before Judaism and Christianity existed] which would justify the inclusivist’s wider-hope conclusion.”⁵¹ Commenting on Rom. 1:19–20, Stott states, “For what Paul says here is that through general revelation people can know God’s power, deity and glory (not his saving grace through Christ), and that this knowledge is enough not to save them but rather to condemn them, because they do not live up to it.”⁵² But to Pinnock, Demarest’s idea—that nobody responds positively to general revelation, so that general revelation only serves to condemn the sinner—makes no sense. He asks, “Why would God . . . do such a thing? Is there not one author of both general and special revelation? Is the God of creation not also the God of redemption?”⁵³ Again he points to Job, Enoch, Noah, and others as biblical examples of those who responded favorably to general revelation.⁵⁴

This point is far from settled. Nevertheless, it is clear to us as Adventists that although other religions are idolatrous in nature, they express some elements of truth as well. Without diminishing the evil of the former, Pinnock is right to insist on the validity of the latter.⁵⁵ Paul himself accepted this point. In his sermon to the crowd at Lystra, he declared, “In the past, [God] let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony” (Acts 14:16–17). Signs of God’s grace are evidently found in the religious expressions of all peoples. This is why Paul had no qualms about quoting pagan sources in his dialogue with the Athenians. Obviously their revered poets spoke God’s truth when they said, “We are his [God’s] offspring” (Acts 17:20). Paul believed

⁴⁹Demarest, “Revelation, General,” 945.

⁵⁰Fernando, 120.

⁵¹Richard, 40.

⁵²John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1994), 74.

⁵³Pinnock, 104.

⁵⁴Pinnock, 105.

⁵⁵Pinnock, 81–113.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

that God's revelation was not limited to just one religion, for "the truth, wherever it is to be found, is God's truth."⁵⁶ From Paul's example, we may conclude that to reject another religion outright on the basis of distortions we find in it is not wise.⁵⁷ As with Paul, our attitude toward other religions ought to be both humble and intrepid. According to Kraemer, "radical humility" comes from the recognition of revelation's divine origin. "Downright intrepidity" is needed because the Christian worker nevertheless bears a message from God.⁵⁸

One way of expressing this attitude is to engage in meaningful inter-religious dialogue with the intention of "straightening up" our myopic view of God and His ways. Enhancing our understanding of other traditions will certainly help us to proclaim the gospel message in terms that people raised in those traditions can more readily grasp. Indeed, to conservative Evangelicals this is the primary goal of such dialogue.⁵⁹ For example, Filipino Evangelical theologian Rodrigo D. Tano warns, "Evangelical Christians must not merely engage in dialogue with adherents of other religions with no intention to persuade them to own Christ as Lord."⁶⁰ To Roman Catholics, on the other hand, especially Asian Catholics leaning toward pluralism, the primary goal of inter-religious dialogue is "shared religious experience, that constantly reaches out, in a deeper way, to the ultimate [i.e., God]."⁶¹ This disparity of objectives reflects the fact that the Bible itself exhibits a certain tension in its attitude toward religions. Dean Flemming, a missionary working in Asia, observes, "Man's [*sic!*] religions and cultures can be the arena of both sinful opposition to God and his gracious activity that prepares people for the final and saving revelation in the Christ event."⁶² As one ethnologist expresses it, "God employs culture [which encompasses religion] as a teacher to prepare" people for Christ.⁶³ This is the starting point of our dialogue with non-Christian religions.

Contrary to Barth's contention, there is indeed a common ground for dialogue with those of other religions. Muck suggests three complementary concepts that provide a basis for this interchange. First is the idea of the *logos spermatikos* ("seed of reason") developed by Justin Martyr in defense of early

⁵⁶Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987; New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 7.

⁵⁷Song, 191.

⁵⁸Kraemer, 128.

⁵⁹See Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 79–80.

⁶⁰Rodrigo D. Tano, "Toward an Evangelical Asian Theology," in *Biblical Theology in Asia*, ed. Ken Gnanakan (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1995), 46–76 (60).

⁶¹John Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred, ed., *Being Church in Asia*, vol. 1, *Theological Advisory Commission, 1986–92* (Quezon City: Claretian, 1994), 17.

⁶²Dean Flemming, "Biblical Theological Foundations for a Response to Religious Pluralism," *ATA Journal* 4:2 (July 1996), 3–29 (17).

⁶³Morris A. Inch, *Doing Theology across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 20–22, 29.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

Christians and Greek philosophers who were both experiencing persecution. According to Muck, Justin argued,

All human beings have a seed of rationality planted within, but the devils work to discourage its cultivation. Good humans who have only a part of the seed are persecuted some, but those who have much more of the seed (those who know the whole seed, the *Logos* himself, Jesus Christ) are persecuted unrelentingly.⁶⁴

As a contemporary example of Justin's *logos spermatikos*, Muck cites the familiar story of Don Richardson's experiences in Irian Jaya, pointing to the practice of exchanging infants to stop violence between warring tribes, what Richardson calls a "redemptive analogy,"⁶⁵ "[There is] the seed of wisdom planted in all cultures waiting to be discovered, watered and grown."⁶⁶

The second theological basis for inter-religious dialogue Muck suggests is the *sensus divinitatis* ("awareness of God"),⁶⁷ a term used by the great Reformer John Calvin. According to Calvin, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity."⁶⁸ Also according to Calvin, "[There is] no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep seated conviction that there is a God."⁶⁹ The proof of this is that all human cultures have had a religion; even idolatry only underscores the point. The world's religions are not the evil invention of the devil but the natural result of the *sensus divinitatis*.⁷⁰ Calvin stressed that all human beings everywhere intuitively know God, although he denied that this awareness would lead to salvation. Sin prevents us from taking full advantage of our knowledge.⁷¹

The third basis for dialogue Muck suggests is the *imago Dei*. He says,

If Justin's *logos spermatikos* emphasizes the objective nature of a common ground for all religions and Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* emphasizes the subjective intuition of a common ability to know God, then one way of understanding the *imago Dei*, the biblical teaching that human beings "by creation uniquely bear the image of God," is to see it as somewhere between the two poles. That is, one way to understand it is to see it as an inherent drive we all have to be in relationship to God.⁷²

⁶⁴Terry C. Muck, "Is There a Common Ground among Religions?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997), 99–112 (105).

⁶⁵See Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, 3rd ed. (Ventura: Regal, 1974), 193–206, 288.

⁶⁶Muck, 106.

⁶⁷Muck, 107.

⁶⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I, 43.

⁶⁹Calvin, I, 44.

⁷⁰Calvin, I, 45.

⁷¹Calvin, I, 47.

⁷²Muck, 109.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

He summarizes,

The *logos spermatikos* affirms that Truth exists. . . . The *sensus divinitatis* affirms that we can know the Truth. . . . The *imago Dei* reminds us . . . that all God's children are similarly engaged and that the proper response to any human being, Christian or non-Christian, is to consider how God is working in their life and aid them in growing in relationship to the one true God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷³

Conclusion

We began this exercise with the question: How should Adventist Christians view other religions? Let us summarize our findings:

1. Religion is difficult to define. In fact, we saw that there is no single definition accepted by all scholars. We defined it as "a set of beliefs, practices, and social structures, grounded in a people's experience of the holy that accommodates their emotional, social, intellectual, and meaning-giving needs."

2. Christian theologians have been divided over the issue of how to view other religions. Even within the two traditions we examined, Protestant and Roman Catholic, we saw that there is no agreement. Some say that religions other than Christianity are not valid; others say they are to be valued.

3. We saw a tension in the Bible's attitude toward religions. On one hand, these are described as expressing the rebellion and idolatry of fallen humanity; on the other hand, they are viewed positively as sources of godly insight and preparation for faith in the true God. This is the reason some theologians are exclusivists while others are inclusivists. The former emphasizes religions' negative side; the latter highlights their positive side.

4. In light of the above, the attitude of Asian Adventist Christians toward adherents of other religions ought to be one of respect and openness, paving the way for meaningful dialogue. We engage in this:

4.1 To correct our own distorted understanding of God. We all have theological blind spots due to "our culture, our religious traditions, our personal history and so on."⁷⁴

4.2 To enrich our own Christian spirituality. Even exclusivist Harold Netland acknowledges that we can learn a lesson or two from other religions. He writes,

We can admire the tenacity with which Muhammad, in a highly polytheistic environment, condemned idolatry and called for worship of the one God. And surely we must be impressed with the great compassion and sensitivity to human suffering evident in the Gautama Buddha. One cannot help but be struck by the keen insight

⁷³Muck, 111–12.

⁷⁴Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 61.

RILLOMA: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

into human nature and interpersonal relationships found in the teachings of Confucius.⁷⁵

John R. Davis, a missionary who served in Thailand for thirty years, has written about effective models for communicating the gospel in the context of Thai Buddhism. He observes,

The oriental mind places great value on the mystical, subjective experience of the worshiper. The eastern mind places emphasis on “spirituality,” a quality of life which stresses meditation, contemplation and asceticism rather than the cerebral and logical approach of the West. This is why many Buddhists discount Christianity as a “shallow” religion which is incapable of answering the deep philosophical questions of life.⁷⁶

Davis characterizes true biblical spirituality as: 1) action-oriented (cf. the Pentecost Christians of Acts 2);⁷⁷ 2) christocentric and theocentric;⁷⁸ and 3) “affective” (i.e., characterized by love; cf. John 13:35).⁷⁹

4.3 To “contextualize” the Christian message. By “contextualization” we mean “the articulation of the biblical message in terms of the language and thought forms of a particular culture or ethnic group.”⁸⁰ We need to make the gospel understandable to men and women of different worldviews because it is the only message that possesses the power of God both to save them (Rom 1:16) and to “transform” their cultures and social orders into the likeness of the kingdom of God.⁸¹

Nestor C. Rilloma currently serves as the vice president for editorial services and editor of *Health and Home*, the national journal of better living of Philippine Publishing House. Prior to this he was academic dean and head of the theology department of Northern Luzon Adventist College in Artacho, Sison, Pangasinan, Philippines. He holds a Th.D. degree in Systematic Studies from the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary (ABGTS), operated by the Southern Baptist Convention at Baguio City, Philippines. His dissertation was titled, “Ellen G. White’s Model of the Person of Jesus Christ from the Framework of the Chalcedon Formula.” Email: ncrilloma@hotmail.com and *ppheditor@edsamail.com.ph*

⁷⁵Netland, 261.

⁷⁶John R. Davis, *Poles Apart: Contextualizing the Gospel* (Bangkok: OMF Literature; Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1993), 122.

⁷⁷Davis, 123.

⁷⁸Davis, 123.

⁷⁹Davis, 125–26.

⁸⁰Davis, 60–61.

⁸¹For a classic discussion of Augustine’s (and Calvin’s) view of Christ as the transformer of cultures, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), ch. 6.