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# Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion, by S.M. Heim

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"Without hope," Virgil tells Dante of Limbo's denizens, "we live in desire." That all human desiring should seek surcease in one divine fulfillment has not been much doubted by Christian theologians. Mark Heim now invites us to see in the multitude of aims held up by the various religions a real theological value. Along the way, he provides us with what may be the best-argued critique of pluralist theories of religion in print.

The first half of the book is given to the criticism of John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter, leading representatives of the pluralist model of the theology of religions. Although occasionally Heim overstates his case or is unnecessarily strident, on the whole his arguments are very sensible. Building on the work of Joseph DiNoia and Shubert Ogden, Heim finds irony in the fact that pluralist theologies are not in fact very pluralistic at all. They seek to erase real religious differences by reducing the religions to a lowest common denominator: "Reality" (Hick), "Faith" (Smith), and "soteria" (Knitter). Reductions such as these are not religiously neutral. Pluralists have imposed their own western standards for authentic religiosity on all the traditions. The second half of the book offers a constructive proposal for a theology of religions willing to recognize a multiplicity of religious aims and fulfillment. Toward this end, Heim looks to Nicholas Rescher's theory of orientational pluralism.

Oriental pluralism seeks to safeguard two important truths. First, for any given cultural perspective, only one interpretive theory is appropriate. Second, all interpretations are of necessity perspectival. Thus reality is plural, not merely multifaceted. Ultimate truth may be one, but it is not such that its many interpretations can be reconciled into one comprehensive theory. Every attempt to interpret reality, including attempts which purport to transcend the many perspectives, are themselves perspectival. Oriental pluralism is not another late-modern form of relativism. Heim's goal is not to argue that all views of reality are equally valid, but rather to show how one might recognize other views as legitimate from their own perspectives.

In addition to his elimination of any "God's-eye view" of religions, Heim also argues convincingly that pluralist theories about religion are either exclusivistic or inclusivistic. For example, Hick's "Reality," despite its claim to be meta-religious, in fact is but another religious perspective which makes particular claims about salvation and then alleges that this salvation is at work in religions other than itself. Heim's theory likewise is a form of theological inclusivism, but unlike Hick, Smith, and Knitter, Heim guards against the temptation to erase the particularities of other religious traditions by reducing them to versions of one's own religious truth.

Oriental pluralism is a philosophical clarification. The task remains for Heim to place this clarification in the service of a workable theology of religious diversity. Rahner's inclusivist theology holds that other religions may be paths to the same salvation Christians witness to in Christ. Heim's inclusivism affirms the theological significance of the different religious ends that distinguish religions. Christianity aims at communion with the Triune God as the ultimate human fulfillment. Buddhism holds up nirvana. Recognizing the theological legitimacy of a plurality of ends will require a significant revision of Christian doctrine. On this score, Heim is more suggestive than comprehensive. He cites Dante's *Paradiso* to show that Christians have in the past recognized that there can be degrees of

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intimacy with God in heaven. Following Joseph DiNoia, he raises the possibility that religious diversity may in fact be willed by God. Recognizing what he calls "eschatological plenitude" will allow Christians to see their own fulfillment as ultimate, while recognizing other religious fulfillments as real.

Elsewhere I have argued that a complete theology of religions is no longer possible for Christianity. The theology of religions debate should be set aside in favor of addressing the entire question of religious diversity by means of limited exercises in theological comparison. The success of a theology of religions should be measured according to the extent that it makes comparative work a theological necessity. Heim has articulated the most plausible (least problematic) Christian theology of religions of which I am aware. To the extent that orientational pluralism demands we recognize the legitimacy of differing religious aims and resists attempts to reduce religious differences to some form of transcendent unity, Heim's theology of religions does help to clarify the need to study religions on their own terms. Thus Heim's theology of religions finds its fulfillment beyond itself in a comparative theology: the skillful revision of Christian self-understanding based on a critical study of other religious traditions in their specificity. I, for one, would like to hear Mark Heim address this issue in depth.

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