

Exclusivism and Exclusivity: A contemporary theological challenge

Abstract

The phenomenon of religious exclusivism increasingly confronts peoples of faith and goodwill who wish only for peaceful co-existence in equality and freedom with their religious neighbour. But there is more than one variety of religious exclusivism. This paper will show that there are at least three variants of religious exclusivism, namely open, closed and extreme. Further, inasmuch as exclusivism indicates a positing of religious identity over against any ‘other’, then it will be argued that the variant exclusivisms themselves reflect a continuum of ideological and theological stance that is taken toward the concept of variety as represented by the religious ‘other’ *per se*. This ranges through antithetical acknowledgement, enactive ignorance, and the intentional invalidation of variety. It is the issue of the invalidation of otherness which, I contend, constitutes the severe theological problem of religious exclusivism *in extremis*. It is here, in the modality of religious fundamentalism and extremism that theological ideology impinges most dramatically upon the public domain. Might it be possible to speak of a proper religious exclusivity without falling necessarily into the pit of exclusivist extremism? In addressing this question I shall briefly examine the views of Alvin Plantinga, Gavin D’Costa, and the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II.

Introduction

Australian sociologist, Gary Bouma, speaks of our “twenty-first-century postmodern and secular world where spiritualities are rife and religious diversity is an accepted feature” as the contemporary temporal locus of “a seriously multicultural society”.¹ Plurality rules, in virtually all things. But plurality can also be highly contentious, and that is certainly the case in some religious quarters. Indeed, in New Zealand, on the occasion of the May 2007 meeting of the government-sponsored multi-national Asia-Pacific Interfaith Dialogue,² the leader of the ultra-conservative Destiny Church, the self-titled “Bishop” Brian Tamaki, proclaimed his church’s opposition to the promotion of religious diversity in New Zealand. Although resiling from advocating an outright exclusion of other religions, he nonetheless asserted that “alternative or foreign religions” should “not be afforded equal status” with Christianity. Tamaki represents an extreme conservative view that identifies “opening the door to a diversity of religions” with “dismantling our own Christian heritage”.³ In its dynamic essence, such sentiments parallel those of so-called Islamic fundamentalists who advocate an impositional Islamic State upon an otherwise majority, largely “traditionalist”, Muslim society. Significantly, whether Christian, Muslim, or whatever, such exclusivist viewpoint holders manifest no desire for interfaith détente, let alone any real interest in engaging in authentic dialogue. Indeed, far from it.

In the context of discourse on interreligious dialogue exclusivism has been posited as the default position inimical to dialogue and against which, through the application of either inclusivism or pluralism, positions of openness to dialogical engagement have been

¹ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 1.

² Waitangi, Bay of Islands, May 29-31, 2007.

³ Cf. ‘Lockout sparks unholy row’, *The New Zealand Herald*, A3, Tuesday, May 29, 2007, where

contrasted and advocated.⁴ A close analysis shows, however, that exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism do not denote three discrete paradigms but that each refers, in fact, to a range of sub-paradigms that may be better thought of as expressing relative positions upon a continuum.⁵ Furthermore, it can be argued that, in the end, the pluralist must necessarily be an exclusivist of some sort, and that the paradigm of inclusivism, when pressed, also tends to collapse into some form of exclusivism.⁶ Nevertheless, the critical issue today, I contend, is not so much the vexed issue of pluralism, nor even problems raised by inclusivism, but questions posed by the persistence – even growth – of religious exclusivism.

Recent analytical and reflective work into the phenomenon of contemporary religiously-driven terrorism shows the presence of a distinctive and rigid form of exclusivity inherent to the paradigm of religious fundamentalism.⁷ Such exclusivity can certainly be understood as a variant of the paradigm of exclusivism, and exclusivism is itself an element of fundamentalist ideologies, whether religious or otherwise. A fundamentalist perspective, for example, is inherently absolutist: all other relevant phenomena are simply explained on its terms, or viewed in a relativising, even negating, way with reference to it. Fundamentalism,

⁴ See, for example, Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 2nd Edition, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993.

⁵ Douglas Pratt, 'Religious Plurality, Referential Realism and Paradigms of Pluralism' in Avery Plaw, ed., *Frontiers of Diversity: Explorations in Contemporary Pluralism*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005, 191-209; – 'Pluralism and Interreligious Engagement: The Contexts of Dialogue', in David Thomas with Clare Amos, eds., *A Faithful Presence, essays for Kenneth Cragg*, London: Melisende Press, 2003, 402-418.

⁶ See, for example, the work of Gavin D'Costa, especially 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions' (*Religious Studies*, 32, June 1996, 223-232). Cf. John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001.

⁷ See Douglas Pratt, 'Religious Fundamentalism: A paradigm for terrorism?' in Rachel Barrowman, ed., *International Terrorism: New Zealand Perspectives*. Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2005, 31-52; - 'Terrorism and Religious Fundamentalism: Prospects for a Predictive Paradigm'. *Marburg Journal of Religion* (An on-line journal), Vol. 11/1, June, 2006, pp.11., see: <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/>

as a mindset, is a mentality that expresses the modern quest for universality and coherence writ large: only one truth; one authority; one authentic narrative that accounts for all; one right way to be. Fundamentalism typically excludes nuanced and variant readings of whatever is its authoritative text or guiding source. This is sometimes understood in terms of ‘literalism’, but for a fundamentalist the key issue is that the source authority is such that no intermediary interpretive framework is required – the text itself provides pellucid expression of truth, whether in terms of an abstract universal, or in respect to a pragmatic or programmatic articulation of the values and views espoused by the fundamentalist as “The Truth”. Fundamentalism, on the one hand, may do little more than express an exclusive religious identity and worldview. On the other hand, it may also tend toward an extremism which, under certain circumstances, may itself lead to violence and terrorism.

In today’s world a rather sharp question can be posed: Is there a proper way of speaking of exclusive religion, or of religion in terms of exclusive identity, without necessarily falling into the pit of exclusivist extremism? It seems that, especially in the context of interreligious engagement and dialogue, if religious identity is not to succumb to syncretistic blurring or relativist reduction then some measure of exclusivity must necessarily apply. Religious identity, in being discrete, must – as with any discrete identity – incorporate a measure of the ‘exclusive’ if only as a marker of, or a synonym for, being ‘unique’; for uniqueness is a necessary element of identity *per se*. In which case, the paradigm of exclusivism, so long virtually automatically eschewed by all except, supposedly, fundamentalists, needs to be rehabilitated – or at least given a more nuanced attention so as to admit the distinction between exclusion (*qua* the behaviours of ‘excluding’) and exclusive (*qua* the mark of distinctiveness). What interests me, in particular, is the fact that on the one hand a measure of exclusivity is logically required for clarity of identity, and that clarity of identity is a necessary prerequisite for dialogical engagement; yet, on the other hand, when taken to an extreme, exclusivity of identity militates against any sort of dialogical rapport by becoming

exclusionary – and that is a hallmark of extreme religious fundamentalism. So, the distinctive contemporary challenge is to clarify the exclusivity that adheres to proper religious identity as something distinct from the exclusion of religious exclusivism that is inimical of any validation of the ‘other’.

In order to address this challenge I shall begin by commenting on the context of religious plurality and the paradigms of exclusivism that connote one set of responses to this plurality, and also on religious exclusivism in the context of a nuanced understanding of fundamentalism. That will lead to a discussion of an understanding of exclusive religion that yet upholds the validation of religious variety. This will involve examining views of the philosopher Alvin Plantinga, the theologian Gavin D’Costa, and the 1965 Vatican II declaration of the Catholic Church’s relation to other religions (*Nostra Aetate*). The point of this discussion is to contrast the notion of religious exclusivity with the paradigms of religious exclusivism so as to resolve the problem of the invalidation of variety that appears to inhere to exclusivism *per se*.

Religious plurality as context

Plurality names much of the context of contemporary life; it names the present situation of religion in society. Religious plurality is a fact of our time in a way that, arguably, is qualitatively different to almost anything hitherto. Indeed, an affirmation of plurality is a hallmark of so-called post-modernity. As Bouma remarks, “Being consciously multifaith is part of being a postmodern society”.⁸ Individual freedoms today juxtapose with accommodating the presence of otherness: that which was formerly ‘other’ in the sense of being not-present, of being ‘over-there’, is now on our doorstep and down our street. Today, in just about all quarters of the globe, the religious dimension of any given community is pluriform. And this raises many issues, not the least of which is the manner of interrelating

⁸ Bouma, *Australian Soul*, 5.

across religious identities. The question of interreligious dialogue is thus not merely theoretical. People of different religious allegiances are neighbours who must talk with each other, live together in our communities, and together address concerns held in common. While most, if not all, religious traditions have unity – or internal uniformity and coherence – proclaimed as a *sine qua non*, the lived reality of many religious people today is the context of, and contention with, difference of viewpoint, experience, cognition, interpretation, and hence competing claims for allegiance and identity. Furthermore, this plurality is not only *between* religions, it is also something *within* religions. Both intra- and inter-faith dialogue, to be authentic, necessarily involves dialogical partners who are committed to, but not close-minded about, both their own religious identity *and* the cause of dialogue. And it is also the case that such dialogical engagement is rejected by some – indeed possibly many, if the global resurgence of religious fundamentalisms is anything to go by – as too threatening to the fundamentals of their faith, or too potentially disruptive of a secure religious identity.

I would argue that the conditions for interreligious engagement and dialogue are set by the contextual paradigms that pertain to the understanding of the nature of religious diversity, or plurality, as such. These paradigms of perspective and interpretation in turn govern the nature and extent of interreligious engagement as lived reality. Broadly speaking, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism may be regarded as the contextual paradigms for contending with this plurality, so setting the scene for interfaith relations and allied dialogical engagements.⁹ It is these paradigms, I suggest, which form the cognitive or intellectual background to interreligious engagement and dialogue and, indeed, provide the context within which things happen, or not – as the case may be. They denote various means of cognitively coping with religious diversity. Thus, religious plurality may be an inescapable reality, but it can be responded to cognitively in a number of ways, given its

⁹ Douglas Pratt, 'Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Relations'. *Current Dialogue*, No 42, December 2003, 3-9.

acknowledgment as fact. And one mode of response – indeed, arguably, the default position of Christianity until comparatively recently, and the apparent default position of much of Islam – is that of exclusivism. But what, precisely, is this religious exclusivism? And in what way is it problematic?

The response of religious exclusivism

As a response to plurality as such, the paradigm of exclusivism may be formally defined as *the material identity of particular and universal*. That is to say, religious exclusivism involves the identification of a particular religion (or form of that religion) as being, in fact, the essence and substance of true universal religion as such, thereby excluding all other possibilities. From this viewpoint the exclusivist's religion is the 'Only One Right One' because there can be only One that is right or true. That is to say, given the assertion that, from a religious viewpoint, truth and salvation are universal values, for example, the exclusivist position holds that this universality is materially identified with but one religion, namely that of the exclusivist. The Harvard theologian, Diana Eck, has commented that:

The exclusivist affirms identity in a complex world of plurality by a return to the firm foundations of his or her own tradition and an emphasis on the distinctive identity provided by that tradition....Exclusivism is more than simply a conviction about the transformative power of the particular vision one has; it is a conviction about its finality and its absolute priority over competing views.¹⁰

For the exclusivist the mutually tolerant co-existence of religions is simply not possible. John Hick, for example, speaks of religions in terms of "way of life" and "path of salvation", in respect of which Christian exclusivism regards all but its own way and path as invalid or

¹⁰ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God, a Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banares*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 174.

void. From the Catholic dogma of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to various conservative Protestant declarations of condemnation of any but their own viewpoint, the “controlling assumption”, says Hick “is that outside the church, or outside Christianity, there is no salvation”.¹¹ Although formally discounted by both pluralists and inclusivists, exclusivism in fact remains a problematic impinging more on practical and pastoral dimensions of interreligious relations than on the realm of theoretical reflection. Yet theoretical reflection is impacted, and attending to it is a necessary task to which I now turn.

I suggest the paradigm of exclusivism comes in at least three variants: open, closed, and extreme or ‘hard-line rejectionist’. By its very nature exclusivism *per se* is hostile to any form of interreligious dialogue or rapport, yet it nevertheless impinges on interfaith engagement, most often contributing to outright resistance, or at least the undermining of efforts to engage in it. Exclusivism is varyingly undermining of interfaith engagement, and this is where nuanced variations of the application of the exclusivist paradigm may be more clearly identified. An *open exclusivism*, while maintaining cognitive and salvific superiority, may at least be amenable disposed toward the other, if only to allow for – even encourage – the capitulation (by way of conversion, for example) of the other. Some early twentieth century ‘open’ exclusivists include Visser t’Hooft, a leading ecumenical figure, who argued against what he viewed as “incipient pluralism” wherein syncretism and the notion of a single world-faith were viewed as inexorable outcomes of taking a non-exclusivist line. Yet he affirmed the value of cultural plurality nonetheless.¹² Similarly, Hendrikus Kraemer, for many years a missionary in Islamic Indonesia, popularised and promoted the Barthian view

¹¹ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. London: Collins, 1977, 121.

¹² W.A. Visser t’Hooft, *No Other Name: The choice between syncretism and Christian Universalism*, London: SCM Press, 1963, 88.

that, at the level of human institution, Christianity was no different to other religions in being yet another religion.¹³

However, following Barth, Kraemer argued that with respect to its basis in revelation and the uniqueness of its truth-claims, Christianity is essentially *other-than* the religions. ‘Religion’ thus names the human seeking for the divine; Christianity, by contrast, is the sole authentic arena of the divine encountering the human. Christianity stands apart, holding a position of exclusive privilege: “Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions, but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history”.¹⁴ Kraemer upheld the validity of cultural plurality, just like Visser t’Hooft. Nevertheless, the open exclusivism espoused by such ecumenical Christian leaders of the 20th century asserted a triumphant Christocentric salvific proclamation of essential Christian identity. Openness has limits, at least in so far as what openness might mean for the self-identity of that which is taking a stance of openness. Open exclusivism implies openness to some form of relationship with another without expectation of, or openness to, consequential or reciprocal change of self-identity with respect to that relationship. The “other” is acknowledged, but only as an “antithetical” other whose presence calls forth either or both of patronising and polemical engagement.¹⁵

In contrast to open exclusivism, *closed exclusivism* simply dismisses the ‘other’ out of hand. Relationship to the ‘other’, especially the religious ‘other’, is effectively ruled out. The ‘other’ may be acknowledged as having its rightful place, but that place is inherently inferior to that of the closed exclusivist who, *inter alia*, prefers to remain wholly apart from the other. An ‘open’ exclusivism may yet entertain a ‘dialogue’ of sorts – perhaps a

¹³ See Kraemer, H., *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁵ A cursory perusal of the respected journal *International Review of Mission*, established in 1912, will provide ample corroboration of these attitudinal stances.

conversational interaction – if only with a view to understanding the perspective of the other in order, then, better to refute it and so proclaim the ‘Only One Right’ religion. By comparison, a ‘closed’ exclusivism will spurn interaction with another religious viewpoint altogether: imperialist assertion is the only mode of communication admissible. The contrast between the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ forms of exclusivism is given instantiation by reference to two denominations of protestant Christianity, namely the Open Brethren and the Closed Brethren. The former function as an ultra-conservative Christian community; the latter live a sectarian existence, effectively withdrawn from the wider world. The Closed Brethren see themselves not just as superior to other forms of Christianity but, indeed, as the only true form which must be protected from contamination with lesser and corrupt forms of the faith.

However, as indicated, I suggest that the open and closed variants are not the only forms of exclusivism that can be held. The third variant is that of *extreme exclusivism* which marks a shift from the closed form understood more simply as the exercise of a right to withdraw into itself, as it were. Extreme exclusivism gives expression to hard-line rejectionist exclusivity, the viewpoint that asserts an exclusive identity to the extent that the fact and presence of an ‘other’ is actively resisted, even to the point of taking steps to eliminate the other. If examples of such extreme forms of exclusivism can be adduced from within the history of Christianity, then it is certainly the case that today the more obvious instantiations are to be found at the extremities of most major religions, with Islam currently to the fore. The distinguishing feature denoting extreme exclusivism is the negative valorising of the ‘other’ – howsoever defined – with concomitant harsh sanctions and limitations imposed upon the other. It is this level of exclusive religion which, in its hostility to variety or ‘otherness’ *per se*, inherently invalidates alterity. It is this level or version of religious exclusivism which lies at the heart of so much religious strife, not to mention terrorism and insurgency, and thus poses an acute challenge to those who would advocate religious freedoms, toleration, and

peaceful co-existence. It is this exclusivism that inheres to the extreme wings of religious fundamentalism.

Religious exclusivism and fundamentalism

The term 'religious fundamentalism' denotes a worldview-type that can be found across different religions. In particular, it denotes a paradigm that paves the way for a shift in mentality from the relative harmlessness of an otherwise quaint, ultra-conservative – or in some other sense idiosyncratic relative to an orthodox 'norm' – religious belief system, to the reality of a religiously motivated and fanatically followed engagement in aggressively impositional, even terrorist, activity. Paradoxically ideological exclusivism and polity inclusivism feature in a detailed consideration of fundamentalism. On the one hand ideological exclusivism means no competing or variant ideological view is granted credibility: a fundamentalist perspective will exclude, virtually automatically, anything that admits of limitation, provisionality, otherness, openness or change. On the other hand, religious fundamentalism inclines to the propensity to include, in respect to the policies and praxis of social organisation, all that falls within its frame of reference or worldview understanding. This may be innocuous, but it may equally be sinister. The main point is that the religious fundamentalist is now poised to become activist – to act exclusively, as it were, on its polity inclusivism whether covert (as in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints vicariously baptising the dead) or overt (as in the Taliban's insistence that everyone in Afghanistan live according to their application Islam).

The exclusivism inherent in extreme fundamentalism involves the negation of otherness, or alterity as such, and the corresponding assertion of self-superiority over all opponents, real and putative. The negation of otherness is perhaps critical, for it involves a devaluing and dismissal of the 'other', whether in terms of rival community or competing alterities, ideological or otherwise. In the process of negating the other, the self is asserted as

inherently superior. My God is greater than your god. My Truth reigns over your ignorance. And so on. Indeed, such alterities may be – and in fact often are – demonised. The religiously ‘other’ on this view is often cast as ‘satanic’, or at least seriously and significantly labelled as a hostile opponent, and so hostilely regarded. However expressed or referenced, it will be clear enough that the exclusivist fundamentalist is applying the key value set of negativity to otherness *per se*, and concomitantly asserting self-superiority.

Arguably today we see much evidence of the imposition of fundamentalist’s exclusive views and polity that are believed, by the fundamentalists concerned, to be sanctioned by a higher or greater authority – whether that authority is conceived in terms of deity or the dynamics of historical necessity. This reference transcends the local, particular, ordinary taken-for-granted freedoms of everyday life with the requirement to be, live and do in accord with the fundamentalist’s ideological dictates.¹⁶ The sanctioning of the imposition of the fundamentalist’s programme may lead to the legitimising of extremist action, for once there is in place a sense of transcendent sanction for programmatic action the way to viewing as legitimate extreme behaviours to achieve requisite outcomes is eased. Sanctioned imposition and legitimated extremism are the two sides of the one coin in the currency of contemporary religious terrorism. Submission to the dictates of the fundamentalist is, thus, a matter of necessary imposition – as Afghani women found to their cost, for example. And the alternative to even an involuntary submission is outright destruction: hence, from the Taliban’s fundamentalist perspective, the Buddha ‘idols’ had to be destroyed. How else does the fundamentalist ensure that the imposition that has been sanctioned can actually be effected? In a nutshell, at the extremity of exclusive religion lies an inherent, and inevitably

¹⁶ For a discussion of the attempt by the Exclusive Brethren Church to impose its ideology onto the political arena in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, see Nicky Hager, *The Hollow Men*, Nelson: Craig Cotton Publishing, 2006.

enacted, invalidation of otherness and variety as the necessary corollary of an unyielding religious exclusivism.

Exclusive religion beyond religious exclusivism: the validation of alterity

Alvin Plantinga, in articulating a defense of religious exclusivism,¹⁷ goes rather to the heart of the matter by asking: “What does the awareness of religious diversity mean or should mean for my religious beliefs?”¹⁸ Plantinga, for the sake of his discussion, defines exclusivism in terms of holding certain religious tenets to be true such that “...any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false”.¹⁹ He then goes on to counter purported attacks on exclusivism as being either morally deficient or epistemically faulty – what he refers to as criticisms of the “*propriety and rightness* of exclusivism”²⁰ – and argues instead for the human inevitability of some form of exclusivism. It is not my intention here to rehearse his counter-arguments, for I think his definition of exclusivism, and so his targeted criticisms of it, to be far too narrowly focused. He takes his stand on the notion of discoverable absolutes – out of all possible religious answers to a given question, either one is true or none are true, but not more than one can be true if, *prima facie*, the answers are inherently incompatible. This amounts to an incommensurability *reductio ad absurdum* for exclusivism *per se*. The axiom further presumes a perspective that (i) can make a judgment that there is, or can be, an absolute answer as such, and (ii) that *prima facie* incompatible answers mean absolute irreconcilable incompatibility, and (iii) that a position of final determination of truth and falsity between given answers is at least potentially attainable. But can these be known to be so? Are they not themselves intentional judgements that guide interpretation and ratiocination? And is the

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, ‘A Defense of Religious Exclusivism’, in Louis P. Pojman, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003, 507-521.

¹⁸ Plantinga, ‘A Defense of Religious Exclusivism’, 508.

¹⁹ Plantinga, ‘A Defense of Religious Exclusivism’, 509.

²⁰ Plantinga, ‘A Defense of Religious Exclusivism’, 509.

assertion that there can be only one perspective that is right, only one winner with the rest consigned to necessary falsehood and/or delusion, the real point of exclusivism in relation to plurality?

Although Plantinga strikes me as somewhat overstating the supposed moral and epistemic criticisms of exclusivism – or more aptly, of exclusivists – as manifesting arrogance, imperialism, and oppression on the one hand, and irrationality and lack of justification on the other, and also that he strays somewhat into the territory of ‘straw man’ argumentation, the thrust of his concern is not so much with denying other religions, or alternative religious perspectives, but with maintaining appropriate distinction and differentiation. The reality of religious distinction cannot be reduced to a soup of sameness. In the end, his exclusivism equates somewhat with what I define as “open exclusivism” and for him the engagement with the realm of other religions and their beliefs serves only to reinforce the role of faith and promote cognitive humility. The religious exclusivist, on Plantinga’s terms, may hold beliefs as true exclusively, but he also acknowledges that that gives no warrant for cognitive confidence. Religious belief is not the same as apodictic knowledge; faith is pre-eminent, although Plantinga is no simple fideist. In effect, he advocates for some sort of irreducible a priori exclusivity which, *prima facie*, adheres to all religions and which therefore allows for the possibility of mutual exclusion with respect to truth claims. But religion – as Plantinga himself concedes – is more than a question of belief; the exclusivity of markers of religious identity involves more than just a consideration of propositional Truth-claims.

By way of a contrast to Plantinga, whom we may refer to as an intentional exclusivist, the theologian Gavin D’Costa may be regarded as an intentional inclusivist who nonetheless shares similar concerns. In effect he approaches the question of habituating exclusivism from

another tack.²¹ Although acknowledging the difficulty of “judging another religion by the criteria and standards of one’s own”, he eschews the option of there being “neutral criteria” that stand outside of all religions, or are commonly found across them, as points of discriminating reference, and he argues in the end for the necessity of “a tradition-specific starting point”. Following Karl Rahner, D’Costa advocates inclusivism defined as affirming “the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God”.²² D’Costa is clear on the point of maintaining the fundamental core of Christian verity and interpretation of what is deemed true. On his terms, Christian identity is in no way to be compromised or challenged in respect to engagement with other religions, for there is a perspective of reality and truth which relativises all competing or conflicting claims.

D’Costa perhaps stands rather closer to an open exclusivism. His aim is to hold in dynamic tension two axioms of orthodox Christian belief: “that salvation comes through God in Christ alone, and that God’s salvific will is truly universal”.²³ On these points he promotes religious exclusivity even as he proposes that, indeed, engagement with other religions may well “lead to a self-discovery which can only enhance and clarify the most basic commitment of Christians, that in Jesus Christ, God has disclosed himself as a God of suffering and redemptive love”.²⁴ D’Costa’s intentional inclusivism certainly has a ring of the exclusive about it. But the necessity he advocates of approaching religious issues and assessments from a religion-specific perspective is not so much an admission of religious exclusivism *per se* as recognizing the unavoidability of the exclusivity of religious identity – otherwise all would be in the melting pot of non-differentiated religious relativism.

²¹ Gavin D’Costa, ‘Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality?’ in Gary E. Kessler, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1999, 562-573.

²² Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 80.

²³ D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 136.

²⁴ D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 136.

Plantinga and D’Costa represent two philosophical responses to the problem of exclusivity and exclusivism in the context of religious plurality. Plurality as such is not objected to; rather the question of its meaning and impact on religious identity and questions comparative assessments of truth and value is enjoined. In the process, the issue of distinguishing between ideological exclusivism, which rejects, denies, or in some sense negatively valorises any religious ‘other’, and religious exclusivity that registers the distinctiveness and uniqueness inherent to religious identity as such, is highlighted. The question of attempting to resolve competing truth claims, for example, or the following of the logic of irreconcilable differences of worldview presuppositions and metaphysical beliefs regarded as axiomatic, do not necessarily imply the invalidation of the other as other. Indeed, to the extent Plantinga and D’Costa represent contrasts of exclusivism and inclusivism with pluralism, they do so in the context of affirming the validity of alterity as such nonetheless. The other is accepted and acknowledged as ‘other’; it just happens to be wrong or deficient – at least on the grounds that Plantinga and D’Costa propose as representing unassailable positions on matters of religious truth.

Vatican II: The Paradigm of *Nostra Aetate*

The *Nostra Aetate* declaration of Vatican II,²⁵ which rang in a sea-change in terms of the formal self-understanding of the Church’s relations to non-Christian religions, may be regarded not so much a declaration of theological inclusivism – which it implies – as expressing a paradigm of exclusive religion that nonetheless expresses and upholds the validation of religious alterity. Wesley Ariarajah notes that *Nostra Aetate* “did not deal with the theological issues involved in relating to people of other faiths, but it advocated openness to other religions” yet, at the same time, it proclaimed “an uncompromising stand on the

²⁵ See for example Francesco Gioia, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)* Boston: Pauline Books and Media/Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1997, 37-40.

uniqueness of Christ”.²⁶ An epoch-changing affirmation of the legitimacy of, and openness to, other religions was proclaimed in the context of an uncompromising assertion of an exclusive religious identity. As a critical passage from *Nostra Aetate* states:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men (sic). Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Co. 5:18-19), men (sic) find the fullness of their religious life.²⁷

This declaration certainly “marks the beginning of a fresh approach of the Catholic Church to members of other faiths”; nevertheless the Council’s thinking was not entirely new, rather “the sensitive approach suggested by some Catholic theologians was given official approval”.²⁸ An attitude of openness to other faiths and their communities was clearly encouraged and, in another document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, the salvific relevance or dimension of other religions, especially that of Islam, was given due recognition, albeit within a framework of theological inclusivism.²⁹ The overriding concern of Vatican II was arguably pastoral: innovation in both policy and practice was aimed at enhancing the life of the Church and its people. Accordingly, a special office, the *Secretariat for Non-Christians*, since renamed the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, was established to oversee

²⁶ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought* Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi; and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1991, 29.

²⁷ Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 38.

²⁸ Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*. London: SCM Press, 1992, 247.

²⁹ Cf. Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 42.

relationships between Catholics and non-Christian religions.³⁰ The Secretariat was charged with being “a visible and institutional sign of the dialogue with non-Christians” and its work, whilst providing inspiration, stimulation and guidance, was to “forestall all danger of irenicism and syncretism, and ... dispel any false idea of the equal value of the different religions”.³¹ The early objectives of the Secretariat have been summarily stated as the opening of “friendly relations, communication and dialogue” with followers of other religions; the promotion within the Church of knowledge of other faiths with a view to stimulating this dialogue and communication.³²

Nostra Aetate signalled a radical disjunction from all previous predominating orientations: the past trajectory of negative inter-faith relations is to be “forgotten”.³³ The patterns and perspectives that previously held sway were no longer held up as determinative for interreligious relations and the quest of dialogue.³⁴ On the other hand a virtual default caveat, namely that a chief task in the pursuit of proper dialogue is “to avoid syncretism and

³⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Progredivente Concilio*, May 19, 1964. See Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 63-64, cf. p.121 for text of the Announcement of the Establishment of the Secretariat, Rome, May 17, 1964. See also *Pastor Bonus*, Apostolic Constitution of John Paul II, (June 28, 1988), Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 658-659, cf. Papal statement to the plenary session of the PCID, Rome, April 26, 1990, Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 429-432.

³¹ Paul VI, as cited in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 159.

³² Atuallah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* London: Macmillan and NY: St Martin's Press, 1997, 44; see Rossano Pietro ‘The Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions from the Beginnings to the Present Day: History, Ideas, Problems’, *Bulletin secretariatus pro non christianis* Vol XIV/2-3, nos. 41-2, (1979), 90.

³³ See J. Cuoq, ‘Toward Islamic-Christian Understanding’, *Bulletin secretariatus pro non christianis* No 1 (1/1), 1966, 23-27.

³⁴ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis and London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002.

the distortion of Revelation”, was also noted.³⁵ Thus, primarily in the text of *Nostra Aetate* itself, yet also in the corollary brief given to the Secretariat for Non-Christians, there is evidence of an emerging new paradigm – that of an exclusive religious identity that is yet relationally open. This contrasts with the preceding dominant paradigm in the life of the Church, namely that of an exclusivism that was effectively closed to meaningful and dialogical interactive relationship with any religious ‘other’. It is the juxtaposition of relational openness and clear assertion of particular identity which precludes a slide into an identity-destroying relativism – where difference no longer matters or counts for anything – or a collapse into syncretism, wherein identities are blurred or merged. Ever since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* the Catholic Church has been vigilant in maintaining its distinctive Christian identity and witness to the preclusion of relativism and syncretism.

The distinctive contemporary challenge, which *Nostra Aetate* arguably addresses, is the quest to clarify what is meant by an exclusivity of proper religious identity that yet avoids the relational limitations of a religious exclusivism hostile to interfaith relations. Clearly *Nostra Aetate*, and also subsequent dialogical developments advocated by the Catholic Church, eschews both closed and extreme paradigms of exclusivism. *Nostra Aetate* offers no comfort to religious fundamentalism. *Prima facie* it could appear to be advocating an open exclusivism, and a case could be made for this interpretation. However, even open exclusivism is so relationally limited that it would hardly provide a justifying basis for the pursuit of interfaith relations that has been attendant upon the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. I suggest, rather, that *Nostra Aetate* may be viewed as a paradigm of an ‘exclusive religion’ – that is of religion that asserts its exclusive identity whilst nonetheless upholding the validation of religious variety – in contrast with the paradigms of exclusivism that imply, to lesser and greater degrees, the invalidation of any and all religious variety.

³⁵ Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, 107.

Conclusion

The critical contrast which has been addressed in this paper may be stated thus: exclusive religion as a matter of identity articulation on the one hand; religious exclusivism as a governing ideological set on the other. Exclusivity of identity is a requirement for interreligious relational engagement: interlocutors need to know who they are and that their respective identities are mutually exclusive, otherwise dialogue would effectively collapse. Exclusive religion is not a cipher for religious exclusivism; the one validates the variety of religious otherness, the other is intent on invalidating such otherness. Religious exclusivism plays into the hand of ideological extremism; exclusive religious identity allows for the integrity of difference and otherness and thereby the possibility of interfaith relations. Thus the paradigm of exclusive religion that yet upholds the validation of religious variety may be asserted as applicable to religious identity as such and in contrast to the paradigm of religious exclusivism as a specific marker of highly conservative or fundamentalist religion. The affirmation of a particular, unique, and so exclusive religious identity does not necessarily entail, nor require, a denial of alterity. Religious exclusivity is not the same as religious exclusivism: the one refers to identity uniqueness; the other to an excluding attitude and ideology. The former can be positively, or at least neutrally, disposed toward the fact of religious diversity and plurality, and indeed to engagement with the 'other'; the latter quite clearly is not.