All in the Family:
Recasting Religious Pluralism through African Contextuality

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Abstract: The issue of religious plurality and how to accommodate it in an increasingly global situation is debated in the academy. Approaches to the issue range from exclusivism to inclusivism to pluralism. In the Christian context, the two main sides of the debate argue for seemingly different ways to address the problem. Proponents of religious pluralism, such as John Hick, argue for a re-evaluation of the main tenets of Christian belief because these beliefs are seen as blocks to inter-religious dialogue; while proponents of Christian exclusivism, especially orthodox theologians like Karl Barth, insist that Christianity is based on revealed tenets and therefore in total discontinuity with any other forms of religion.

This essay offers a means of healing the bifurcation between Christian exclusivism and pluralism by a “dynamic exclusivism” that seeks to overcome both the triumphalism of current exclusivism and the extreme universalism that attends Christian pluralism. A dynamic exclusivism, based in Barth’s understanding of neighbor, allows for authentic dialogic encounters, as well as pastoral formation and ministry in inter-religious veins. Considering the issues within the African context, paying attention to the anthropological rather than ethical underpinnings of religious plurality, and accompanying case studies demonstrate how the pastoral moment provides a theologically sound basis for a Christian response to religious plurality.

Introduction
That we live in a religiously pluralistic world is indisputable, yet schools for religious education and formation for ministry often function in a religiously monolithic mode and even in denial of this plurality. Religious exclusivity in belief and attitude presents difficulties for adherents of various religious traditions in interacting with one another. The fear of compromising one’s religious claims and fervor, especially with missional religions, makes the possibility of thinking and framing religious claims in light of a global pluralistic awareness daunting. Debates between religious exclusivists and pluralists on the viability and tenability of distinct religious claims result in patent differences, with the former appearing ultra-conservative, intolerant and self-righteous and the latter appearing liberal, tolerant and also self-righteous. The seemingly proper course of action, both from a philosophical and theological perspective, is to opt for the pluralism agenda as it has been argued by its most ardent proponents, notably John Hick. Appreciative of the depth and riches of other religious traditions vis-à-vis Christianity, Hick believes that it is imperative for Christians to shift the center of their religious understanding from Christ to God, as a theocentric rather than christocentric emphasis augurs well for inter-religious dialogue and existence. At the same time, exclusivists, many of whom inhabit theological institutions and clerical leaders are
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evaluation of religious dialogue and the adoption of an exclusivist view as a more viable avenue not only for inter- and intra-religious dialogue, but also for soul-care. Finally, I examine from a Christian perspective examples of how this soul-care works within and across religious traditions.

Religious Existence in Sub-Saharan Africa

The plurality of religious existence is not new in Africa. Its current state wears a post-missionary and postcolonial face that contributes to the conflictual climate surrounding it. The contemporary expression of religious pluralism, especially with regard to the tensions and socially disruptive conflicts it sometimes generates, is largely due to the legacy of colonialism, which decentralized various ethnic states and drove large groups of people—and their accompanying tribal and ethnic identities, as well as religious affiliations—into the large cities.

Most city dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa are familiar with the areas of the inner city, or Zongo among Hausa speaking migrants. These are heavily populated Islamic town centers settled by Muslim traders, mainly from the northern territories. Here one is likely to see churches and mosques in close proximity to each other, as wells as shrines to local and clan deities. Among the worshippers of these local deities may be found Christians. People of the Zongo witness three dominant religious traditions and are affected by each other’s religious beliefs and adherences. Additionally, many households encompass these diverse religious traditions, either through inter-religious marriages or conversions.

In Ghana the high holy days of Christianity, Islam and Indigenous Religions are officially observed by the government. However, conflicts arise when one religious tradition is privileged by governments in post-independent Africa. In Nigeria clashes between Muslims and Christians are well documented, especially in the Northern Savannah regions, while in relatively peaceful Ghana the prevailing conflict is between some Christian sects and devotees of local shrines. Amidst these clashes, however, the daily lives of these religiously pluralistic peoples, even during the various high holy days, is interactive and amicable. It is not unusual to exchange greeting cards with one’s non-Christian friends at Christmas or join in festivities that end Ramadan with Muslim neighbors. While many Christians and Muslims are overtly syncretistic in practice there is, nevertheless, contention over which practices are cultural and which religious. This is a thorny issue in an environment in which religion subsumes culture.

The religious life of the people often bears no resemblance to what their respective religious traditions and tenets require or what various religious governing bodies and clergy advocate in polity and reflect in worship.

There is an obvious acknowledgement of plurality (the co-existence of the various religious groups or religions) but not pluralism. True pluralism goes beyond acknowledging the existence of other religious worldviews or interacting with them as autonomous traditions on equal footing. Religious pluralism does not have as its telos
the goal of intra-religious unity, nor does it require metanarratives that can embrace all religious traditions. Unfortunately, familiarity with religious plurality proves, almost paradoxically, a bane to authentic religious pluralism.

The greatest obstacle to moving beyond acknowledgement of religious plurality to real pluralism is the faith claims of the great historic religions. In Ghana and Togo, countries with which I am most familiar, the faith claims of each of the prominent traditional religions are tested when inhabitants concurrently participate in Christian healing services, Muslim fasting during Ramadan and divination practices dependent upon local deities. Within this context the salvific superiority of any one religion is contestable at best. Unfortunately the witness of the Christian church is often pursued as though it were a contest of religious superiority.

The following scenarios vividly illustrate some of the complexities of multi-religious living. They highlight some of the issues that need to be addressed if adequate preparation for pastoral ministry is to be implemented with fidelity and plausibility in African and other contexts. Consider the case of a Moslem man, Ali, married for fifteen years to Laura, a Lutheran. They have established a relatively healthy relationship with the extended families on both sides. At the death of Alice, his mother-in-law, Alice’s Pastor, Ashley, who provided pastoral care during the last stages of Alice’s life, both conducts the funeral (which the entire extended family is expected to attend) and provides the family ongoing pastoral care. In another case, identical twins Okoe and Akwese, born into a family practicing a Traditional Religion and whose parents are custodians of the local deity, attend a public school where morning assembly includes Bible reading and hymn singing, resulting in a conversion experience for Okoe. The family’s expectation of his engagement in the traditional rites becomes an issue, resulting in estrangement from his family. How does he live both his filial piety and obedience to Christian tenets?

These two vignettes raise similar concerns about religious identity and familial responsibility for the care-seekers, and pastoral sensitivity grounded in a clear theology of religion for the pastors. How may care-seekers and pastors faced with such situations transcend their respective religious practices through faithful Christian pastoral encounters in such a religiously pluralist context? With this question in mind I turn to the debate of the proper Christian stance toward religious diversity and truth, especially as explicated in Western theological debates.

**Accommodating Solutions to Religious Plurality: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism**

In many parts of the world religious plurality goes hand in hand with cultural and ethnic plurality; therefore, multicultural and multietnic dimensions need to be addressed together with religious plurality. On one side, so it is assumed, are traditionalists and fundamentalists holding for exclusivism, and liberals and progressives on the other who recognize plurality and move towards pluralism. In between are the inclusivists who, observing similar religious sensibilities among adherents of various religions, conclude that there must be a commonality in belief among them, which is merely named differently.

**Exclusivism**

The dominant position in the church, from its inception through much of its history up to the Enlightenment, has been exclusivist. Major proponents of this position include dialectical theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and more recently D. A. Carson. Key to their position is the understanding of general and special revelation, with the former seen through creation and latter through the incarnate Son. Insisting that we understand Christian truth claims in terms of encounter with a living God and not a set of axioms, these dialectic theologians claim that God does not reveal or convey truths about Godself, but rather God reveals Godself in the dynamic encounter between God and humankind. Since this encounter finds its ultimate expression in the incarnation where God and humankind are reconciled in Christ, Christ is the ultimate revelation and truth about God. It is this ultimate encounter founded on the Christ-event that makes Christianity the true religion. Its dictum is that there is no salvation outside Christ.

Often when exclusivism has been held as the properly religious stance toward religious aliens, conflict ensues, at worst Crusades and Jihad. The disparaging cries against exclusivism, then, are not without bearing or history, and ensuing conflicts in both the past and present are well documented. However, in Africa—especially Nigeria and Sudan, two countries currently witnessing significant bloodshed—while religious diversity might be a factor in these conflicts, post-colonial issues are also implicated. The resistance to Western intrusions through Christian mission and education rather than religious differences perse contributes to the conflict.

**Inclusivism**

Inclusivism is the blanket term used to describe those who occupy the “middle way” between exclusivism and pluralism. Inclusivists acknowledge the possibility of salvation outside Christ, and believe that the faith of non-Christians can lead to salvation. Here again, salvation is based in Jesus Christ but, unlike the exclusivist position, no declarative faith is necessary for such salvation. The most notable example of this view is that expressed through Hans Kung’s phrase “anonymous Christians,” which is based on observable Christ-like behavior among adherents of other faiths (Neuner 1967). Variations within inclusivism exist; Paul J. Griffiths recognizes not only open and closed variations but further proposes a “modalized open inclusivism” as the properly Christian stance towards people of other religions or “religious aliens” (2001, 63).

The critique of this view is well known. At the least, such critics argue, all truths are on a par and religions may learn about the way of salvation from one another. While this position might imply some parity as to truth across religious traditions, it also betrays a subtle religious superiority and imperialism. In this vein, it is also akin to pluralism—
which has gained ascendancy as the most viable way for inter-religious dialogue and conflict-free living—it tacitly ignoring the rock-bottom belief systems of the religious that can admit no contradiction, a point to which we shall return below.

Pluralism
The pluralism position appears to have the most potential for conflict-free religious and social life. Its notable proponents—John Hick, Paul Knitter and to a lesser degree Wilfred Cannell Smith—argue that due to the “infallibility of religious experience,” no religion can claim a title-hold on truth. In particular, Christianity is challenged to desist from declaring that Christ is the definitive and normative revelation in whom all truth and ultimate salvation resides, and to shift from a christocentric to a theocentric mode, which allows all religions to be equidistant to God. For Hick and Knitter, this is the only ethical way to promote justice in a religiously intolerant world (1987, vii-xii).

There are many critiques leveled against Hick’s foundational reasons for enjoining pluralism. In the case of Christianity for instance, Hick’s argument for a shift from christocentricity to theocentricity is based on New Testament scholarship primarily from its liberal wing that questions the incarnation and Lordship of Jesus as evidenced in the scriptural witness (Hick 1993, 163-6). Hick had previously submitted that if “Jesus was . . . the eternal creator God become man, then it becomes very difficult indeed to treat Jesus, the New Testament, and Christian faith as being on the same level as phenomena from other religious traditions” (1977, 172). Yet this is the overwhelming belief of Christians whose faith is rooted in the New Testament. To move towards pluralism one must negate this statement, in which case one cannot share the belief of the apostolic and early church. Moreover, Hick’s position is itself built on a form of exclusivism with a latent metanarrative, the very metanarrative he faults exclusivists for holding. As D. A. Carson points out, “as soon as it makes an absolute claim that all truth claims are relative, it has forged its own metanarrative” (Carson 1996, 147).

The shortfall that results from removing the foundational belief of a religious tradition, which is then offered back to the believer as a basis for faith and life, has serious implications for a pastoral theology of ministry. It is impossible to be a believing member of a religion and not assume its veracity. With this assumption comes a certain built-in exclusivity, for such belief cannot hold contradictory rock-bottom statements together as such fundamental tenets are essential for religious flourishing on both an individual and corporate level. In real life situations, pluralism seems anemic for soul-care since it tacitly conveys to people of faith that what they believe to be final revelatory truth about the Real, as well as their religious experiences and practices, is not reliable. From the Christian perspective, when one removes the incarnation and atonement as well as resurrection, reliance on a providential God also collapses. Even if the primary case for pluralism (peaceful human existence) were considered, it is my experience that in inter-religious encounters, uncertainty about what one believes provides more opportunities for inter-religious conflict than an

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unshakeable knowledge tinged with personal and communal experience of the Real. This sincerity produces peace in the religious believer and allows for the possibility of peaceful co-existence with religious aliens. Religious plurality is more a boost to dialogic engagement than a bane. In many ways our common humanity is underscored by our distinctiveness rather than our similarity, and an overemphasis on similarity results in a false irrecognition that glosses over the critical issues in need of attention. Moreover, as previously stated, the problem with religious conflict in Africa has more to do with residual colonial intrusions than religious plurality per se. That being the case, the push for pluralism in such a region may easily be read as itself an imperialist policing of truth claims that demands the parity of all other truth claims but its own (i.e., that all religions are true to some extend) in order to keep all others in their place.

Revisiting Christian Exclusivism: A Barthian Perspective

The pluralist position—as an invitation to live in harmony with religious difference as people on a quest, who only know partially the One Truth—obviously holds much promise for conflict-free living, and hence many want to embrace it. Yet, such promise is illusory and can only be accommodated among the religious, i.e., among those who do not take their “faithing” seriously. It is notable that in cultures more or less free of secularism, where biblical skepticism born of higher critical methods is minimal, the case for Christian pluralism is rather slim. Plurality of faiths and truths can be embraced without adherence to religious pluralism as currently framed and envisaged. Key is how one can affirm and maintain one’s religious identity without being an exclusivist in a narrow sense and without allowing pluralism to undercut the significant faith claims of various religious traditions. How may religion (particularly Christian exclusivity) be a catalyst for change and conflict-free inter-religious living and a basis for a pastoral theology of ministry for Christians as well as others?

Considering this question within the African context, I turn to Barth for formulating a response that allows for a faithful articulation of Christian exclusivism and soul-care across religious traditions. In his chapter on “The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion,” he states that since “grace is the revelation of God, no religion can stand before it as true religion” (Barth 1975, 211: 326). In this way revelation abolishes religion, but this need not be viewed negatively: “It can be upheld by it and concealed in it. It can be justified by it, and—we must at once add—sanctified.” Barth finds this justification attained in the Christian religion because of the Christ event. So he can say without hesitation “that the Christian religion is the true religion” (326). The emphasis on Jesus as the revelation of God, rather than some statements about or from God, undercuts the attempt to view Christianity as one more religion consisting of a set of tenets or propositional truths that do not admit of any internal contradictions. Barth, like other dialectic theologians, insists that we understand Christian truth claims in terms of encounter with a living God and not a set of axioms. God, they say, does not reveal or convey truths about Godself but rather God reveals Godself in the dynamic meeting between God and humankind. Since this encounter finds its ultimate
expression in the incarnation, where God and humankind are reconciled, Christ is the ultimate revelation and truth about God and thus makes Christianity the true religion. Therefore all religions not linked with Christ are not true (326). Barth is also quick to point out that all religion is unbelief as it is based inside human effort to do what only God can do. In this regard, when Christianity fails to live up to its identity as God’s religion, that is as what God has done for us rather than what we try to do to attain favor with God, it comes under the same judgment.

Barth goes on to demonstrate the relation of other religious traditions or truths to Jesus, who is the Truth. In his account of “words” and “lights” he elaborates, noting that while “Jesus is attested in the scriptures as the one ‘Word of God whom we must hear’” (1975-IV/3: 86), this exclusivity does not eliminate but delimits what is to be said of all other words from all others who witness to the Truth. More importantly, the one Word of God “can make use of certain men, making them His witnesses and confessing their witness in such a way that to hear them is to hear Him” (1975-IV/3: 101). Using the analogy of the circle with its center and periphery, Barth states that the relation between the Word and other words is not that of the center to the periphery for the Word is both the center and the periphery: “for the one truth Jesus Christ is indivisible” (123), and “the capacity of Jesus to create these human witnesses” is not limited to the Church alone but “transcends the limits of this sphere” (1975-IV/3: 118). More could be said about Jesus as the Light among lights, but suffice it to say that Barth’s thesis points not to the one Truth—God, seen and expressed in multiple ways—but Jesus as the One Truth encountered in all truths. So there can be human words that are good because they are spoken with the commission and in the service of God (1975-IV/3: 97 ff and 125 ff), and “the more seriously and joyfully we believe in Him the more we shall see such signs in the worldly sphere, and the more we shall be able to receive true words from it” (1975-IV/3: 122).

Barth’s insistence on Christianity as the true religion among others in the same genus, as well as his understanding of “neighbor” as one who helps us in praise of God but also who speaks truth to us and who is included in the children of God—“for there is not Abraham without Melchizedek” (1975-IV/2: 426)—offers an opportunity to reframe Christian exclusivism. I propose dynamic exclusivism as the proper Christian relation to other religious traditions. Dynamic exclusivism allows one to hold the truth of the ultimate revelation of God in Christ via the Church or Christianity, as explicated in Barth’s Church Dogmatics (17, 18 & 69) which demonstrate the importance of the “neighbor” as our evangelist and as one who offers assistance to the body of Christ, in tense unity with conceptual priority to the real “neighbor” who is Jesus in whom God and people become eternal “neighbors.”

At first blush, Barth’s concept of Jesus as Light among lights and Word among words, pointing to the Truth encountered in all truths, seems similar to Griffiths’ “modalized open inclusiveness” (a position that in many respects is akin to mine). However, I believe there is a distinction between encounters of truth as axiomatic statements (which allow for internal contradictions to negate the veracity of what is encountered) and the encounter with Truth as a person—the God-man. “Modalized open inclusivism,” which suggests the possibility that religious aliens may teach other faiths something that aids in their salvation, still leaves us in the realm of noetic rather than experiential knowledge with Truth as encounter.

**Dynamic Exclusivism as a Basis for Soul-care**

How may dynamic exclusivism aid in Christian dialogue with other religious traditions, and more importantly allow for soul-care in a context such as Africa, where inter- and intra-religious coexistence occurs within both nuclear and extended families? How may such an approach to soul-care provide optimum attention to presenting problems in pastoral encounters in a manner that allows the religious beliefs of each care-seeker to provide needed succor in crises and at the same time be a Christian witness in “praise of God” (Barth 1975-, IV/2: 419ff)?

In practice one must avoid the sentimentalism which a forced irenicism born of religious pluralism may produce. A proper understanding of neighbor and neighbor-love allows for agape that tells truth and holds to absolutes with the humility that allows grace to appear in places hitherto unimagined. While there is not space here to demonstrate how dynamic exclusivism will work in the earlier scenarios, I offer a few tentative suggestions that the promise of Christian dynamic exclusivism holds for soul-care in a multi- and inter-religious situation. Dynamic exclusivism, allows each religious tradition to maintain its truth claim. What transpires, if the Christian claim is true, is that the epistemological pitting of truth against truth is undercut by the encounter with Truth as a person, who is then invited into the space of our common need and embraces us. If the scriptural attestation is true, and Barth’s explication is on target—which I believe to be the case—the pastors in the scenarios do not need to require the care-seekers to exit their religious beliefscapes to be encountered by the Truth. Nor do they need to adjust their own Christian belief to accommodate disparate belief, for in this Truth as a person (co-creator and redeemer) invited into the care-seekers’ situation, both seeker and carer are at once judged, found guilty, redeemed and set free for joyful living. This is because in confessing that the Word became flesh, we must state that in Jesus Christ God is for God’s creatures, takes up creatures gone astray and elects creatures to participation in God’s glory. In electing Abraham down through to Christians via Christ, “what takes place in this election is always that God is for us: for us, and therefore for the world which was created by Him, which is distinct from Him, but which is yet maintained by Him. The election is made with a view to the sending of His Son. And this means always that in Him and through Him God moves towards the world” (Barth, CD II/2, 25-6). In this way the anthropological considerations focused on creation rather than soteriology, rightly turns our attention to re-creation via the second Adam (Jesus of Nazareth) who recapitulates the life of all humanity and brings us back to the creator. Soteriological considerations of ends
(which which most religious conflicts emanate) become a secondary focus of life with God.

In the above scenarios, then, the pastors could provide soul-care to the Muslim Ali, and to Okoe who may at best be straddling Christian faith and primal religions, with a christocentric stance that brings the finished work of Christ to bear on their particular situations without assent to Christianity, or exiting their religious beliefscapes. Both care-receiver and care-provider are invited to transcend their various religious tenets in the face of the claim of God made through the neighbor, the God-man, on their lives.

References: