

The Pluralist and Inclusivist Appeal to the Religious Sense As A Basis For Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Introduction

The discussion concerning pluralism and inclusivism in recent evangelical theology has tended to take a posture toward general revelation, which assumes that there are certain powers and abilities innate to the universal possession of religious sense (*sensus divinitatis*). Where theorists of religion and theologians do treat “general revelation” directly, as it relates to their argument, they often fail to give due care and attention to the Reformed critique of general revelation that ought to factor more prominently in the discussion. It is the purpose of this paper to give a proper account of this criticism of the “religious sense” by bringing it to bear on recent discussions within both pluralist and inclusivists camps, which are calling for the priority of inter-religious dialogue in theology. This paper is, as such, an exercise in Christian systematic theology, which is a discipline to often relegated to the periphery in the recent discussions. Indeed there are theologians of note who are willing to wager all of theology on the gambit of inter-religious dialogue. Not to long ago David Tracy wrote: “As any theologian involved in serious inter-religious dialogue soon learns, her or his earlier theological thoughts on the ‘other religions’ soon become spent. There is no more difficult or more pressing question on the present theological horizon than that of inter-religious dialogue.”¹

¹ David Tracy, *Dialogue With The Other* Grand Rapids; Eerdmanns Publishing Co. 1990, 27. Tracy makes it clear that his approach to inter-religious dialogue is driven by “the development of modern western hermeneutics modeled on dialogue and conversation and the pressing question of the applicability or non-applicability of Western hermeneutics to the question of inter-religious dialogue. The suggestion being that we need a new paradigm for the practice called “dialogue.” There has been a number of proposals, most of which are based on finding common ground in the religions, while ignoring or down playing the differences. See K. Sewer, *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977

While I agree with the first half of this statement, in that there is little to dialogue about regarding the comparative substance of the various religions, I disagree with the later half of the statement. Yet there are those in evangelicalism today who agree that the issue of inter-religious dialogue is the most pressing theological problem in the present multicultural situation in the West. In reconsidering the Reformed critique of the *sensus divinitatis* we shall give consideration to two declared evangelicals, (Clark Pinnock and Gerald McDermott) and one “former” self-confessed “fundamentalist”, namely John Hick. Hick is recognized as the most prominent exponent of pluralism today. For good or ill, Hick has made pluralism, and therefore all attenuating theories of religion created in response to it, one of the first items on the theological agenda in our times. Thus we must be prepared to “give an answer for the faith that lies within us” from that perspective. **But let me be clear that while inter-religious dialogue may be one of the most prominent issue in theology today, perhaps foisted on theology more by an ‘ideology of pluralism’ than an actual cultural demand, it is not theology’s first and most important subject in terms of the relation between religion and theology. As it relates to the right ordering of the God-human relationship, religion is a first order topic, just as it always has been, but it is not so in the terms of an “agreeable” inter-faith dialogue.**²

² For the purposes of this paper we shall focus on three primary works from these three proponents of inter-religious dialogue. Pinnock’s views are best represented in his important book called *A Wideness In God’s Mercy; The Finality of Jesus in a World of Religions*, Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997. His position is also presented in his *Flame of Love; A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996. Gerald McDermott’s recent book take a slightly more conservative, “quasi inclusivist” approach in his *Can Evangelicals Learn From World Religions; Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000. John Hick’s theory of pluralism has been well documented in his many books and regularly commented on in the current scholarly milieu. For our purposes we shall concentrate on his little book entitled *A Christian Theology of Religions; The Rainbow of Faiths*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 1995. We shall also have recourse to his major treatises *An*

Therefore, in order to establish some critical balance in the present discussion, I intend to bring these three proponents of “inter-religious dialogue” into dialogue with the Reformed critique of the *sensus divinitatis* (or *sensus deitiae; semen religionis*) represented in Calvin and Barth. From them we shall gain some insights as to the adequacy of the appeal to general revelation among these representative proponents of inter-religious dialogue, while not sharing their views entirely.³ *The goal is not to close off the debate, but to give back to Christian theology its independence as a standpoint in its own right, and not as a culturally driven, epistemologically pre-determined, subset of the larger enterprise called “inter-religious dialogue.”* While this may entail a certain posture towards other religions that some will see as dialogue ending, it is nevertheless crucial to Christian theology that it stand in the service of its own constituency first, on this and, for that matter, other central concerns. **As we shall see, there is room in Christian theology for dialogue with, and tolerance of other religions, but it makes much less of the ‘sense of the divine’, said to be the common thread of all major religions outside of the Bible, than we are led to believe.** Let us turn first to Hick, who sets the tone for Pinnock and McDermott in their inclusivist/quasi inclusivist response to him.

Interpretation of Religion, London: Macmillan Press, 1989. There are many other books that he has written on the subject, but these are the primary works.

³ Here we shall rely on Calvin’s *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, F.L. Battles (trans), J.T McNeill ed. in *The Library Of Christian Classics*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960. Barth’s famous critique of religion can be found in his *Church Dogmatics*, I/1-2, Edinburgh: T & T Clark press, 1932. Berkouwer’s much more balanced critique, which builds on Calvin’s, can be found in his *General Revelation; Studies in Dogmatics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1955.

The Pluralist Appeal to the Religious Sense

Hick's pluralist agenda has been well documented in recent scholarship and thus need not be rehearsed here in detail.⁴ Our purpose is to trace out the argument Hick puts forward in broad terms with a view to outlining precisely how he employs the "religious sense" in his call for an inter-religious dialogue, which he sees as necessitated by the western pluralist situation.

The first and most critical move that Hick tends to make, **in the myriad of places that he has laid out his argument for pluralism**, is reductionist in nature. That is, he must reduce Christianity to just another of the great religions of the world, whose "fruits" and "moral perfections", noticeable in the followers of Christianity, are comparable with other religions. "The spiritual and moral fruits of these other faiths, although different, are more or less on a par with the fruits of Christianity."⁵ The sum of the comparisons of the great religions, in regard to the evils and good they produce, does not "establish the moral superiority of Christian civilization."⁶ Thus Hick concludes:

We can, I suggest, only come to the negative conclusion that it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths. *It may be that in the sight of God one of them has in fact been, as an historical reality, superior to the others, but I don't think that from our human point of view we can claim to know this.*⁷

⁴ For one of the best treatments of Hick's Philosophy of Religion see H. Hewitt, ed. *John Hick's Philosophy Of Religion*, London, McMillan, 1991. Cf also D'Costa's 'Revelation and revelations: Beyond a static valuation of Other religions', *Modern Theology*, 10,2,1994, pp.164-168 and his chapter on the same subject in His (ed.) *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, Newyork: Orbis, 1990.

⁵ J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 14

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* 15

Clearly for Hick, what we know about God must be seen from the standpoint of what we can intuit about Him on the basis of rational observation, and not as a result of some “special” insight or source of knowledge that stands above the sum total of the negative and positive effects we observe in the moral and spiritual lives of religious people. What will establish Christianity as a true religion along with others, or not, will be based on what we observe in the lives of its followers. Since Christian moral pre-eminence cannot be sustained by the available evidence to any degree *better* than other religions, it cannot claim special status as a “transcendently revealed religion.” This means that the claims about the uniqueness Jesus will also need to be re-assessed in relation to the “particularity” of Christianity as a revealed religion centered in God’s self-revelation in the incarnation.

It is, rather, the *experience of the early disciples* that makes the Christian faith a “revelation”, of sorts. Thus, “religious faith is this uncompelled interpretive element within *all* religious experience.”⁸ Indeed the idea that Christianity is a revealed religion with unique status cannot be claimed on the basis of a book that merely contains the shared religious experiences of the followers of Jesus, which can be compared with the religious experiences recorded in the sacred books of other religions. Furthermore, the fact that the divine status of Christ was not established till just before 325 A.D. is proof enough that such claims are purely human in origin, and not a divinely revealed doctrine as such. Hick concludes; “I Thus see theology as a human creation. I do not believe that God reveals propositions to us. ...I hold that the formulation of theology is a human

⁸ J. Hick, “A Pluralist View”, in D.L. Okholm, T.R. Phillips, *Four Views On Salvation In A Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 34

activity that always, and necessarily, employs the concepts and reflects the cultural assumptions and biases of the theologians in question.”⁹

The appeal to *religious experience* now becomes the touchstone for the unification of all religions under the same religio-critical approach to understanding their significance for humanity in general. This is clearly an appeal to the *religious sense* as a means of grounding the relative value of the major religions, including Christianity. The central shared feature for working out the nature of this universal religious sense is the equally “universal” desire for salvation. This forms a second crucial aspect of Hicks argument.

For Hick, salvation in the “exclusivist” terms of a necessary knowledge of, and faith in, the atoning work of Christ is a “tautology” since the moral fruits do not seem to exceed those of other religions. Indeed, according to Hick, salvation, for Christ, was not about a proper understanding of the atonement, but “about men’s and women’s lives” in moral terms.¹⁰ Here he defines the salvation he thinks Jesus is proposing. “Suppose, then, we define salvation in a very concrete way, as an actual change in human beings, a change which can be identified— when it can be identified— by its *moral fruits*.”¹¹ This being the case, we then find that we are on the same ground as the other religions. “Each in its different way calls us to transcend the ego point of view, which is the source of all selfishness, greed, exploitation, cruelty, and injustice, and to become re-centered in that ultimate mystery for which we, in our Christian language, use the term God.”¹² All the

⁹ Ibid, 36. These views are worked out in two books edited by Hick. *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977 and the book he edited with P. Knitter called *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1987

¹⁰ Here Hick appeals to “the parable of the sheep and the goats” (Matt. 25:31-46) as the criterion that Jesus used to establish the reality of salvation. The concern for moral criteria as the defining principle of true religion pervades all of Hicks works. It is very often expressed in Kantian terms. J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 17

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

religions have as their center this moral orientation towards “the Real” in terms of the fulfillment of our true humanity through self-transcendence. This is the sum total of the universal possession of the *religious sense*. As such the great “post axial” traditions, including Christianity, “are directed towards a transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a re-centering in what in our inadequate human terms we speak of as God, or as Ultimate Reality, or the Transcendent, or the Real.”¹³ As such all religions are centered in the search for “salvation/liberation.” Given this reality, says Hick, “it therefore seems logical for me to conclude that not only Christianity, but also these other world faiths, are human responses to the Ultimate.”¹⁴

This is the basic substance of the argument for pluralism that Hick trades on in book after book after article. He does so in relation to the opposing positions, which he calls “exclusivist”, i.e. no salvation outside of the knowledge of special revelation in Christ, and “inclusivist”, which argues that salvation can be had only through Christ but who can be met with indirectly, yet ontologically, in other religions. Time does not permit a full exposition of his understanding of these positions here, but suffice it to say that, for Hick, they all express this central desire for salvation. In the end these limiting positions will be revealed as mistaken because, “the great world faiths orient us in this journey, and in so far as they are, as we may say, in soteriological alignment with the Real, to follow their path will relate us rightly to the Real, opening us to what, in different conceptualities, we call divine grace or supernatural enlightenment *that will in turn bare visible fruit in our lives.*”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid, 18

¹⁴ J. Hick, “A Pluralist View”, 44

¹⁵ J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 27.

What are we to make of this appeal to the universal nature of the revelation of the Real through the *religious sense*, which Hick sees expressed in all the major religions. It would appear that the general consensus of theologians who have studied Hick, is that his doctrine of universal revelation is Kantian in nature. One of the most able interpreters of Hick's pluralism, Gavin D'Costa, suggests that "Kant can be seen as the ambiguous archetype of latter day pluralism" which he understands as "the term given to those who hold that all religions are revelatory and therefore capable of being means to salvation, and that this salvation is not causally, ontologically, or historically related to Jesus Christ." Furthermore, he says that "John Hick is a modern equivalent to Kant, both epistemologically and ethically."¹⁶ He understands, correctly I think, that Hick's view of revelation is equal to Kant's in that it is universally *Theocentric* rather than exclusively *Christocentric*. "Hick argues that it was God, and not Christianity or Christ, that counted as normative revelation and it is toward God that the religions were oriented and from whom they gain their salvific efficacy."¹⁷ Christ is merely a "mythic" expression, among many others, of this divine self-revelation. When Hick was criticized for being too theocentric by other religionists, to the exclusion of non-theistic religions, his Kantian inclinations became even clearer. In response Hick "developed a Kantian-type distinction between a divine noumenal reality 'that exists independently and outside man's perception of it', which he calls the 'eternal One', and the phenomenal world, 'which is that world as it appears to our human consciousness'— in effect, the various 'revelatory' human responses to the Eternal."¹⁸ This certainly compares with Kant's understanding of

¹⁶ Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation and World Religions" in Paul Avis (ed), *Divine Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997, 120-121.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 122

God's place in the metaphysical scheme of his philosophy, as it relates to ethics.¹⁹ But there were deists who could well fit into the same category, notably John Lock.²⁰ What makes Hick's doctrine of universal revelation purely Kantian is his reduction of religion to morality.

At the heart of all religions Hick perceives a 'turning away from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness' that finds its ultimate expression in "moral fruits." The 'saints' produced in all religions, that is, those who best exemplify the moral fruits of a given religion, are the only verifiable means for gauging the revelatory value of that religion. As we look to these saints we gain this revelatory perspective from each other in dialogue. Clearly D'Costa is right to suggest that "while Hick's intentions are noble and serious, his project, like that of Kant's, finally divests all religions of any revelatory power and achieves precisely the opposite of its stated goal," i.e. that of inter-religious dialogue.²¹ Aside from failing to take the real differences between the world religions seriously, Hick also fails to account for the impossibility of the correspondence between the phenomenon and the perception of the thing-in-itself, which stands today as a core problem of Kant's philosophy, in that it fails to solve the epistemological split between the experience of an object and the absolute know-ability of it. This epistemological split denies any real revelatory knowledge as such. As a result "Hick is left in the odd position

¹⁹ I. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York: Harper and Rowe, Reprint, 1960. Kant writes, "Now a divine legislative will commands either through laws in themselves *merely statutory* or through *purely moral* laws. As to the latter, each individual can know of himself, through his own reason, the will of God that lies at the basis of his own religion; for the concept of the Deity really arises solely from consciousness of these laws and from the need of reason to postulate a might (power) which can procure for these laws, as their final end, all the results conformable to them and possible in a world. ...Pure moral legislation, through which the will of God is primordially engraved on our hearts, is not only the ineluctable condition of all true religion whatsoever but is also that which really constitutes such religion." 95

²⁰ J. Lock, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, New York: Dover Publications, 1959 See Vol. II Bk. IV Chapter x, 306f

²¹ G. D'Costa, *Revelation and World Religions*, 122

of apparently accepting that all religions are revelatory, but is actually committed to then denying the revelatory claims as made by other religions.”²² It is *the “golden rule” of morality* that determines true religion, not authentic, extra-worldly revelation. We are not alone in this assessment of Hick’s appeal to the universal religious sense. A number of scholars, evangelical and otherwise, have also pointed this out.²³ As we shall see further on, this assessment can potentially be applied to some inclusivists as well.

This reduction of all religion to morality is, furthermore, the primary motivation behind Karl Barth’s strident criticism of general revelation, natural theology and/or natural religion. To the degree that his criticism of it annuls this kind of “agnostic revelation”, which, Barth thinks, inevitably flows from the prioritizing of the *sensus divinitatis*, it is instructive for our doctrine of revelation, however overstated. But first we need to briefly note the similarity (not sameness) of the approach to the *sensus divinitatis* in the inclusivism of Clark Pinnock, and quasi-inclusivist approach of McDermott, in order to demonstrate that a moderated Reformed critique applies across the board.

²² Ibid, 123.

²³ See among others, A. McGrath, “A Particularist View”, in *Four Views of Salvation* 168; C. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, Pinnock describes the late Hick at one place as a “full-fledged Kantian” and yet further down, on the same page, he says: “My theory is that Hick personally does still believe that the Christian God will in the end turn out to be the true God.” 135f In my estimation this displays a complete lack of understanding of the full implications of Kantian epistemology, and merely serves as an attempt to invoke Hick at critical points in his own argument from a “Christian” perspective. See also, H. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2001; 224f; J. A. Dinoia *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992. And many more. Hick has refuted this, but his rebuttal does not exonerate him from the charge of reducing religion to morality in the end.

The Inclusivist Appeal To The Religious Sense

Inclusivist theologians come in many colors. They include the Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, and Gavin D’Costa. Evangelical theologians like Clark Pinnock and Gerald McDermott also fit into this category. While all of these represent a reaction to out right pluralism as such, they each have their own take on a theology of religions and would seem to ‘exclude’ one another in various ways. It is Pinnock and McDermott who have thus far offered the most comprehensive, inclusivist theology of religions from an evangelical perspective. For that reason, they deserve our attention here in the current evangelical context. But other inclusivist certainly figure in the debate as well.

Pinnock’s inclusivist theology of religions is worked out primarily in his significant book, *A Wideness In God’s Mercy*, though he comments on his view and summarizes it in other places as well.²⁴ His approach to other religions depend on two primary axioms: The first is Pinnock’s proposition that God, as a God of “unbounded Love”, offers *a universal means for salvation*, rather than a restricted means. This primary means is the redemptive act of God, available to the whole world, in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The second axiom is the uniqueness of this salvation, in the incarnation, to the Christian faith. But contrary to the “restrictiveist” approach of Reformed evangelicalism, such a uniqueness is completely compatible with an “optimistic” view of salvation for the majority of humanity, whether or not they hear the gospel. “A biblically based Christology does not entail a narrowness of outlook towards other people. The church’s

²⁴ Besides Pinnock’s, *A Wideness In God’s Mercy*, see also his “The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions,” in *Christian Faith And Practice In The Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Knoll and David F. Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 152-68; “An Inclusivist View,” in Okholm and Phillips, *Four Views of Salvation*, pp. 93- 148; *Flame of Love: A Theology Of The Holy Spirit*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1996.

confession about Jesus is compatible with an open spirit, with an optimism of salvation. ... 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.”²⁵ The tacit reason that Pinnock gives for this unique twist on the evangelical view is that the “fewness doctrine” of salvation is driving many conscientious evangelicals toward Pluralism.

The means whereby God may achieve this wider salvation is through His positive appropriation of some religions, wherein the basic knowledge of God can be ascertained, sufficient to lead the truly pious to a saving knowledge of God, which amounts to an ontological, but not necessarily epistemological, encounter with Christ. Although Pinnock does not endorse every religion as positive, indeed there is much that is evil in them, he nevertheless allows for the “prevenient” work of the Holy Spirit of God in other religions. While we may not be able to identify with certainty which religions are open to this revelation of God, we can say that “God *may* use religion as a way of gracing peoples lives and that it is *one* of God’s options for evoking faith and communicating grace.”²⁶ Thus, grace is operative outside of the Church and the scriptures, and can be encountered in a salvific way in other religions. Therefore, says Pinnock, evangelicals need to “buck a strong tradition that refuses to grant any gracious element in general revelation.”²⁷

What is of central significance in the availability of salvation in general revelation for Pinnock, is its “noetic impact.” It is more than just the basis upon which we establish human guilt, *it is a means whereby humanity can come to a clear and unambiguous knowledge of God.* Pinnock bristles at the former suggestion. He writes: “I am offended

²⁵ C. Pinnock, *A Wideness In God’s Mercy*, 74-75

²⁶ C. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View...”, 100

²⁷ C. Pinnock, “The Finality of Christ...”, 153

by the notion that the God who loves sinners and desires to save them tantalizes them with truth about himself that can only result in their greater condemnation.”²⁸ Then Pinnock proceeds to blur the line of distinction between general and special revelation with the rhetorical question, “is there not one author of both general and special revelation?”²⁹

In establishing this point Pinnock draws his biblical support from passages like Acts 10:34-5 and Acts 14:17, and then comments on Acts 17 as follows;

People possess truth from God in the context of their own religion and culture. ...In Paul’s speech upon the Aeropagus we hear how God has providentially ordered history ‘that they [people in general] should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him. Yet he is not far from each of us’ (Acts 17:27)³⁰

As Christopher Partridge comments, “quite simply, it is argued that, just as sin is ubiquitous, so is God’s love and witness. Hence... Pinnock affirms that non-Christian faiths, ‘reflect to some degree general revelation and prevenient grace.’”³¹ But Pinnock goes on to suggest, in quite stronger and more wide open terms than Partridge seems to allow, that, “because of cosmic or general revelation, anyone can find God anywhere at any time, because he has made himself and his revelation accessible to them. This is the reason we find a degree of truth and goodness in other religions.”³²

²⁸ Ibid, 160

²⁹ C. Pinnock, *Wideness...*, 104

³⁰ C. Pinnock, “The Finality of Christ...”, 158

³¹ Christopher Partridge, “A Hermeneutics of Hopefulness: A Christian Personalist Response to Pinnock’s Inclusivism”, in Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson, (eds) *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, Cumbrai UK: Paternoster Press, 2000, pp. 184-219

³² C. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy...*, 104

Aside from the theological issues and presuppositions that concern us here, there are a number of exegetical issues in Pinnock's reading of these and other biblical texts that must be addressed at some point in time. Pinnock's reading of the biblical tradition on both the "universal nature of salvation" and the general, "universal" availability of God's self-revelation are problematic on a number of counts, but time does not permit a full engagement here. Our concern is to bring his appeal to general revelation into comparison with the pluralist approach so that we can demonstrate the similarity of their appeals to the *universal sense of the divine*, and, therefore, the inclusion Pinnock in moderate Reformed critique.

It would appear to the careful reader of both Pinnock and Hick that while they differ on the important point of Christology, they certainly share a very similar understanding of the availability of revelation in other religions. While Pinnock would want to limit its potency in comparison to Hick, the end result is nearly the same; namely the possibility of universal salvation in other religions based on *the piousness of the adherent, visa vie moral fruits*. Both of them refer to pagan saints as crucial to the argument for prevenient grace in general revelation. Both of them invoke moral uprightness as a means of verifying it, and both affirm the possibility of salvation without hearing the Gospel. One recent commentator comes close to suggesting that Pinnock, while he affirms a "particularist" point of reference in his retention of Christology, ostensibly vacates it of any meaning because of his insistence on the "universal" nature of salvation. There is a tacit admission on Pinnock's part that the Bible is theocentric before it is Christocentric, thus placing him in proximity to Hick. Daniel Strange summarizes what he perceives to be a danger in this approach:

With regard to upholding both axioms of universality and particularity, I believe Pinnock has failed because the ultimate result of his argument is a subtle universalization of the particular. So while Pinnock still thinks he maintains the finality, particularity and primacy of Christ in soteriology, the real consequence of his thinking is that the incarnation and atonement have been reinterpreted to conform with the universality axiom. This move poses questions concerning the normativity of the incarnation, the necessity and purpose of the atonement, and ... the relationship between the work of Christ and the salvation of the unevangelized.³³

While we agree that Pinnock has done a service for us by putting this question on the theological map within evangelicalism, we must also bring to bare the necessary criticism of the Reformed tradition *visa vie* natural religion in order to correct the excesses of his appeal to general revelation. It is an appeal that, in my estimation, leaves the option of pluralism as open as ever, despite Pinnock's desire to close it off to conscientious evangelicals who cannot abide the "fewness" doctrine.³⁴

But before we move on to this critique, we should briefly note a more recent offering from a "quasi inclusivist" perspective that is much more cautious in its claims for general revelation, namely Gerald McDermott's, *What Can Evangelicals Learn From Other Religions?* Yet here too is, in my understanding of the biblical

³³ Daniel Strange, Presence Prevenience or providence: Dec..." in *Reconstructing Theology*, 257. In his Wideness in God's Mercy Pinnock gives every appearance of a Christocentric reading of revelation on pages 44-46. Then further on his real perspective emerges. He writes: It would be misleading to consider New Testament claims for Jesus in a vacuum when they are part and parcel of a larger claim to uniqueness on behalf of Israel's God. Biblical theism as a whole must be the context for assessing Christology. Uniqueness belongs first of all to the God of the Bible; and, if it should be that Jesus is unique, it will only be because of the special relation to God he is thought to enjoy as God's Son. Uniqueness and finality belong to God. If they belong to Jesus, they only belong to Him derivatively." 53.

³⁴ See H. Netland's critique on pp 311 and 323 of *Encountering Religious Pluralism*. Hick suggests in a response to Pinnock that inclusivism leads further on to pluralism and that Pinnock may not fully understand "*the implications of the reality of saintliness, goodness and piety outside the borders of Christianity*. J. Hick "Response to Clarke Pinnock" in *Four Views of Salvation*, 125.

material, an overly generous assessment of the sense (intuition) of the divine, but this time through the creation of a third category of revelation. The primary aim of McDermott's approach to an evangelical theology of religions is to ask; "can evangelicals learn from world religions?" In answering the question in the affirmative McDermott makes certain suggestions about revelation that leaves the possibility of God's self-revelation in other religions more open than his conservative sensibilities would like. Granted, he does not go so far as to suggest a saving knowledge of God can be had from these revelations, but he does assert that, just as our fore fathers learned from secular philosophy, so "other traditions *can help us make explicit what is only implicit in our present understanding of Christ*", as if some things regarding Christ remain hopelessly hidden without the light of other religions.³⁵ McDermott does not base this idea of "learning" from other religions on a view of general revelation as traditionally understood, rather, building on an understanding of revelation gained from the Catholic theologian, Avery Dulles, and the American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, he offers a third option called "revealed types".³⁶ While the various models of revelation offered in Dulles do not "begin to exhaust God's self revelation," they do "begin to open us up to the plethora of meanings for the word, and they suggest that when we ask about revelation in other religions, we must be open to the variety of ways in which that might happen."³⁷ Thus, because of the difficulty in defining revelation in terms of modes and interpretations we have, according to McDermott, license to add what he considers a helpful way of attributing a "type" of revelation to other religions. This is

³⁵ G. R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from other religions*, 17

³⁶ A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, c.f. p 60 in McDermott. See also his book on Jonathan Edwards.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 65

a move that not only complicates the present circumstance, but also leaves much to be desired as a separate mode of revelation.

But at the same time McDermott rightly repudiates any notion that salvation can be had outside of the revelation of God in Christ, in both the noetic and the ontological sense. What McDermott feels is missing in our relationship to other religions, *visa vie* revelation, is a view of the universal work of the Spirit who uses types to reveal the deeper meanings of various aspects of the Christian faith in other traditions. “In other words, Christ is the unique revelation of God, but the Holy Spirit is ever at work, as he was in the history of Israel before Jesus...and some of those insights may come from reflection upon what the Spirit is doing in and with people outside Israel and the Christian church.”³⁸ The way in which he grounds this approach to revelation is by appealing to Edward’s understanding of the covenants as an inadequate revelation in the first (OT), but nevertheless a revelation to a degree, and an adequate revelation in the second (NT). Given the difference in the degree of revelation from one to the next, and the fact that they both inform one another, one to a lesser, the other to a greater degree, is it not right to assume that other traditions of faith have a similar relationship to special revelation, even if to a much lesser degree? Indeed, as with Edwards, we may affirm, says McDermott, that **typology is “a system of representation by which God points human beings to spiritual realities.”**³⁹ That is “human intuitions can be *typical* of things in the spiritual world.”⁴⁰ His point is that this typological approach offers a theological way to conceive of revelation in other religions, which avoids the division and dissension that marks the

³⁸ Ibid, 95

³⁹ Ibid, 104

⁴⁰ Ibid, 105. He uses Eph 5:22f as an example.

approach of the past. He then invokes Barth as a regular user of this approach, which not only misses Barth's point in the contexts in which he employs typology, but also completely ignores the anathema that Barth pronounced over the revelation some attribute to other religions, on the basis of a sense or intuition of the divine. Towards the end of his section on "revealed types" McDermott is so confident that he can affirm, "there is no reason to think that there is not more truth and understanding of Christ and the Biblical revelation yet to be illuminated by the spirit, and perhaps aided by insights from other religions."⁴¹

To be fair to McDermott, we cannot really call him an inclusivist in the true sense of the term. But he does share certain presuppositions with Pinnock and Hick that leaves him open to the relativity of revelation implicit in Pinnock and explicit in Hick. This is certainly true in terms of his reliance on Pinnock's understanding of 'prevenient grace' available through the agency of the Spirit's universal presence. He also seems to share the same "optimism of salvation" that under girds Pinnock's whole approach to the universal availability of salvation. His final appeal to the Cornelius passage, which is key to the inclusivist argument, is cast in almost the same terms as Pinnock. What is refreshingly absent in his approach is the kind of moral interpretation of salvation and revelation seen in Hick and, to some degree, in Pinnock. In fact, he takes the time to distance himself from this. Our primary concern with McDermott's approach is his appropriation of Reformed thought for his revealed types. This third type is really only a sub-category of revelation that flows out of the covenantal theology of the Puritan era.

⁴¹ Ibid, 118. He goes on to suggest, "other religions can be used by the spirit to induce repentance."

In sum, what we have before us in the Pluralist/inclusivist appeal to the *sensus divinitatis* is a generosity of revelation that often appeals to the Scriptures for support in a selective way, while avoiding the hard questions of the knowability of this revelation, its lack of efficacy, and its epistemological obtuseness in the direction of relativity at best and agnosticism at worst. There is a tradition of criticism of this approach to the *sensus divinitatis* that, while it also has problems, can nevertheless provide a necessary, if only partial, correction to this over confidence in the *sensus divinitatis*. It is to this tradition, represented by, Calvin and Barth, that we can now turn.

B. The Reformed Critique of the Appeal to the Sensus Divinitatis

Calvin

We are not suggesting in this paper that Calvin, Barth, and Berkouwer are in agreement on the issue of the *sensus divinitatis*. However they do share a limiting view of general revelation that has too often been shoved aside as “too restrivist.” Nevertheless, they offer some good reasons for caution in positing a generousness of revelation in other religions. Barth and Berkouwer, who both build on Calvin, disagree as to the function of general revelation, but at the same time, share a limiting view that has its roots in Calvin’s Institutes. **Calvin’s doctrine of general revelation has an objective and subjective side. Subjectively we have a knowledge of God within our rational capacity (*ratio*) known as the *sensus divinitatis*, or *semen religionis*, (and/or the *sensus deiti*) which causes us to be religious beings and to agree with one another that some *God* does exist. We sense this either through a *general* “religious**

consciousness,” or a sense of “servile fear of God”, or even a “troubled conscience”. These three, says Calvin, exempt us from any excuse making at the judgment. The *sensus divinitatis* is a knowledge of God via the negative, subjective side of humanity that has no saving power. The reason is that this knowledge is distorted and made impure by our own sinful insistence in either ignoring it denying it, or misinterpreting it. Calvin writes,

As experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But, scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who cultivated it, and none in whom it ripens – much less shows fruit in season.⁴²

Rather than foster this subjective seed of divine knowledge we either, 1. Turn away from God and “flatly deny his existence” or, 2. We “fashion” a God according to our own whim. “Thus is overthrown that vain defense with which many are wont to gloss over with superstition. *For they think that zeal for any religion, however preposterous, is sufficient.*” While this seed of religion is there in humanity and is uncontestable, yet “by itself it produces only the worst fruits” and not saving knowledge of God.⁴³

But there is, according to Calvin, a second source of general Revelation. He writes that, “The knowledge of God shines forth in the fashioning of the universe and the continuing government of it.”⁴⁴ If the revelation of God, subjectively, leads humanity to obscure it, the revelation of God in creation, “strips us of every excuse”. God reveals himself and discloses himself in the “whole workmanship of

⁴² Institutes, I. Bk I.48 (Ps. 1:3)

⁴³ Institutes, I. Bk I.51

⁴⁴ Institutes, I. Bk.I.51

the universe.” Indeed, man, created in the image of God, is the “loftiest” of this source of divine self-revelation. This is the substance of God’s objective self-revelation. “While it is true that a negative sign stands over the whole of revelation in creation in Calvin’s theology, we must not allow this sign to erase from our minds the magnitude of the sum thus negated.”⁴⁵ Despite our inability and disobedience in regard to receiving general revelation, it is there for us to see. For Calvin, the “actual guilt of man is the result of actual rejection of an actual revelation that remains clear.”⁴⁶ And yet there is “*a great gulf fixed*” for Calvin between the original purpose of revelation in creation and its function. While man was created with the capacity for revelation in both its subjective and objective modes, he is functioning, in fact, “under the conditions of sin”. “It no longer achieves its original purpose, but it operates only to involve the whole human race in the same condemnation.”⁴⁷ “Men who are only taught by nature, have no certain, sound or distinct knowledge, but are confined to confused principles, so that they worship an unknown God.”⁴⁸ This leads Calvin to an important conclusion vis-à-vis the extent and usefulness of general revelation in both its forms. This is a conclusion that we must keep in mind, if we hope to have a balanced view of the Reformed understanding of general revelation. He writes:

Vain therefore, is the light afforded us in the formation of the world to illustrate the glory of its author, which though its rays be diffused all around us, is insufficient to conduct us into the

⁴⁵ Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, p. 73

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Institutes*, I. Bk. IV.12

⁴⁸ *Institutes*, I. Bk. V.12

right way. Some sparks are kindled, indeed, but they are smothered before they have emitted any great degree of light.⁴⁹

There is no question that Calvin stands at the center of the debate regarding the place of general revelation in religion and theology. He has been read, by some theologians, as laying the groundwork for a full natural theology, (Brunner), and by others as closing off this alternative altogether, (Barth). The truth, as usual, is somewhere in the middle. Regardless of ones orientation to Calvin, his argument remains a difficult one to overcome for those who want a generous revelation of God in nature that leads to saving knowledge on its own merits.

The outcome of this approach hinges on the relationship between the revelation of God as a sensus divinitatis and the revelation of God in His works. Contrary to Pinnock and other inclusivists, and pluralist as well, Calvin does not approach his subject with the intent to be “restrivist” in his denial of the efficacy of general revelation. That is not his goal here. He is merely working out what he sees to be the universal witness to the response to this general revelation, outside of a knowledge of the incarnation, on the basis of Scripture.

*Calvin understands the relation between the sense of the divine and the self-evident works of God in creation as related in a priority of order. Innate knowledge of God is prior to the knowledge of God inferred from creation. Here the sense of the divine is primary, without which we could not infer the knowledge of God from the works. But he understands this **sensus** to be the gift of God implanted in each of us, and not the product of human rationality per se. Edward Adams recently wrote that the **sensus divinitatis** in*

⁴⁹ (*Institutes*, I. Bk. I.51)

Calvin is “not simply a gut feeling, intuition, or vague impression, but a cognition, an intellectual consciousness of God the creator.”⁵⁰ In Calvin’s words it is a “deep seated conviction that there is a God.”⁵¹ But Calvin feels compelled to take account of the affects of sin in his doctrine of general revelation, a concept not really accounted for adequately in either Pinnock or Hick. Calvin argues that the phenomena of religion, idolatry, and atheism all point to the corruption of the *sensus divinitas*, while at the same time establishing its existence. This sense of the divine cannot be ‘effaced’ or ‘uprooted’ by these phenomena, but neither can it lead to saving knowledge because of sin.⁵² Calvin displays a distrust of these phenomena because of his wariness of “an intellectual works righteousness” in theological investigation, wherein reason threatens to supplant revelation. “For Calvin, there is no dichotomy of revelation and reason in the sphere of natural theological knowledge. The faculty of human reason has its part to play in the reception of God’s communication of himself in nature. It does not operate independently or in a vacuum but is contingent on experience.”⁵³ But what is clear in Calvin is that the priority of the *sensus divinitatis* is a point of divine revelation and not a natural human knowledge arrived at through some human faculty divided off from the Divine. “Thus, while revelation and reason are viewed as complementary and not antithetical, revelation has priority over reason.”⁵⁴ Indeed Calvin seems to hold that were it not for the fall of Adam, the *sensus divinitatis* could well have established communion between him and God. Calvin is not comparing our “post-lapsarian” situation with Adam’s pre-lapsarian state, “but our actual situation, with our situation as it might have been had Adam stayed

⁵⁰ Edward Adams, “Calvin’s View of The natural Knowledge of God”, IJST, 3:3, 284.

⁵¹ Institutes, I. III.1

⁵² Ibid, I. III.3; I. IV.4.

⁵³ Edward Adams, 290

⁵⁴ Ibid.

upright. Had history taken a different course, and we were now living in un-fallen conditions, his point seems to be that, natural revelation would alone be sufficient to secure a right standing with God.”⁵⁵ Here we must conclude with Dowey that, since this is the actual course of history we took in Adam, “the function of natural revelation” in the world in which we live is a negative one. But in the life of the believer it may function as the “spectacles” through which we can see the glory of God, who has become incarnate for us in Christ.⁵⁶

*What Calvin’s view does not permit is an understanding of the **sensus divinitas** outside of the effects of the fall, as with Hick and Pinnock. Nor does he permit the reduction of the Christian faith to a set of rationally perceptible moral fruits, as Hick affirms. In short, the debate continues to be that of the priority of reason over revelation, a delicate balance so often forgotten in our desire for inter-religious dialogue. **This was a danger** that Barth fought to correct throughout his illustrious career. While he often overstated his case, it must be remembered that there was a good bit of validity in his argument, especially given his historical situation. There is still something to learn in his trenchant denial of general and natural revelation, and therefore his censure of “religion” as unbelief.*

Barth

There is probably no other aspect of Barth’s theology that has received more attention and criticism than his doctrine of revelation. However, this body of secondary

⁵⁵ Ibid, 291

⁵⁶ Dowey, *Knowledge of God...* 83.

*material must remain largely untouched here, in favor of letting Barth speak for himself. But even here the material is vast and unwieldy. For our purposes we shall focus on the slender section in CD I/2:§ 17, where Barth offers his most important critique of religion. As will be shown, the reasons for Barth's criticism of the **sensus divinitatis** are much broader than the popular characterization of it in terms of his opposition to the German Church and the natural religion of National Socialism. Furthermore, to read it solely in terms of his "Nein" to Brunner is equally misleading. Throughout his career as a Pastor and theologian, after 1914, Barth is determined to destroy the hegemony of the liberal, "culture-Protestantism" that established itself on a basis of natural theology, through which, reason and the rational self held sway over God in His self-revelation, witnessed to in the Scriptures. This culture-Protestantism had its origins in the natural theology of 16th-17th century Reformed theology, which was built on the humanistic impulse of the Renaissance, and led to Neology and finally the epistemological agnosticism of Kant, who denied supernatural revelation and reduced religion to morality. Several of Barth's reasons for rejecting the revelatory value of other religions can be applied to our three proponents of a generous revelation of God in those religions. However, it is in his careful analysis of the development of the appeal to religious consciousness in the European theological tradition that is most important. It is this reason, seen in that historical development, which should give us pause in following Hick, Pinnock, and McDermott, precisely because their approach reflects this tradition, to varying degrees, especially in its terminus in the priority of reason over revelation. Time does not permit a full exposition of his exhaustive investigation of that tradition, but his conclusions bare directly on the end point of Hick's program, and potentially can be applied to Pinnock*

and McDermott as well. So I offer it to the later two as a caution that needs serious consideration in their approach to the *sensus divinitatis*.

Having surveyed the tradition from Aquinas to Buddeus, and Wolleb., wherein the predominant theological method has been a mixture of appeals to general revelation, via the *sensus divinitatis*, and special revelation, Barth concludes that: “The Christian element, [special revelation]— and with this the theological reorientation which had threatened since the Renaissance is complete— has now become a predicate of the *natural* and universal human element.”⁵⁷ As such, Revelation has become merely the historical confirmation of what man can know about himself and therefore about God apart from revelation. The Liberal-Protestant appeal to the light of nature may even, in terms similar to McDermott and Pinnock, “show me the true characteristics” of this special revelation. In *Liberal-Protestantism*, says Barth;

No revelation is true, except it conform to the light of nature and increase it. ... A true revelation must prove itself such in my heart by a divine power and conviction which I can feel...which the light of nature teaches, which therefore leads me on and gives me a desire to seek out and challenge such a revelation, and in that way to demonstrate the true religion.⁵⁸

Barth concern here is to demonstrate the tendency of reason to overtake revelation when, even in the slightest degree, over a period of time, we give increasingly more weight to the universal sense of the divine. While the conservative theologians of the Reformed tradition initially intended to “find a more or less perfect agreement between the Bible and traditional teaching on the one hand, and on the other the postulates of *religio naturalis*,” their efforts actually led to an “untenable compromise” which issued in the Neologianist reduction of revelation to pure natural religion. “The Neologians could not convince

⁵⁷ CD I/2, 289

⁵⁸ Ibid, 290

themselves that all or even most of what had so far been regarded as revelation could be substantiated before the critical authority of reason.”⁵⁹ They therefore felt it necessary to submit “ Christian dogma, as well as the Bible, to a very severe criticism on the basis of the **notiones of religio naturalis**.”⁶⁰ In the parallel philosophical development during this history, this acquiescence issued in the Kantian critique, which for Barth is the final result of this history of accommodation. Barth concludes that the neologians:

Were followed by Kantian rationalism, which abolished the Neology, reducing **religio naturalis** to an **ethica naturalis**, and ultimately rejecting revelation, except as the actualizing of the powers of moral reason. Then Schleiermacher tried to find in religion as feeling the essence of theology, revelation being a definite impression, which produces a definite feeling and then a definite religion. Then, according to Hegel, and D. F. Strauss both Christian and natural religion are only a dispensable prototype of the absolute awareness of philosophy purified by the idea.⁶¹

Preliminary Conclusion

What concerns us most here is the idea that once Christianity has been reduced to an **ethica naturalis** it can, as well as any other religion, be dispensed with as a mere part of the process on the way to the realization of philosophy as the Idea, the Absolute, or, in Hicks conception, the Real. Clearly this criticism can be applied to Hick, whose Pluralism amounts to this complete reduction of all religion to the Real. But we may not, as of yet, say this about Pinnock, and certainly not about McDermott. What is important to register here is the **tendency toward the elevation of reason over revelation** that attends an overly generous reading of the **sensus naturalis**. While I must register my agreement with the vast majority of commentators who criticize Barth for overstating his case here, we must

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid.

also keep in mind there are also danger's attendant in understating it. It is interesting that precious few who criticize Barth here, actually follow closely his careful reading of the tradition at this point. They read him as though his only reason for rejecting natural religion is simply to deny the German Church a basis for the natural religion of blood and soil developed to support Nazism.⁶² It is a critique of that to be sure. But it is much more than that. It is also the denial of a liberal tradition that allowed for precisely this state of affairs to exist in Germany between 1928-1945. But this tendency was something Barth was already clear on after all his theological teachers signed Kaiser Willhelm's declaration of war in 1914. Barth's opposition to the *sensus divinitatis* should be dated from this point. It was then, says Barth, that "all of the Biblical, theological and ethical presuppositions" of his liberal Protestant heritage came crashing down.⁶³ Unfortunately, the narrow, and usually surface, critique of Barth has blinded us to the value of his critique of the *sensus divinitatis*. I am merely suggesting that this is precisely the problem in recent attempts to offer an evangelical theology of religions from a pluralist or inclusivist perspective. In the long run it shares in the concomitant loss of theology's subject, namely God in His self-revelation, which Barth correctly sees as the problem of religion in theology. This, and only this, was his reason for characterizing natural religion, and therefore other religions as unbelief. However overstated, his criticism should give us pause for thought in attributing too much to the *sensus divinitatis*. This

⁶² The number of scholars who do this is depressingly large. In all of them, including J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993 *passim*. ; B. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, 122f; C. H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 47; R. Theiman, *Revelation and Theology*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, 78-79; This is to name a few. There is a distinct lack of their close exposition of Barth's handling of the tradition at this point. In my estimation this puts Barth at a greater advantage, despite their denials of his argument, precisely because he has a greater sense for the development of the tradition. In my limited investigation of the tradition he lays out, I must concur with his argument.

⁶³ Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*,

issue should and must be decided on, as it was for Calvin, in relation to the one true subject of theology, God, and therefore decided on “theologically.”