

# “Is Our God Listening?”

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

IN CHAIM Potok’s novel *The Book of Lights*, a young rabbi from Brooklyn, on leave from his post in Korea during the Korean War, travels for the first time in Japan. One afternoon he stands with a Jewish friend before what is perhaps a Shinto shrine with a clear mirror in the sanctum or perhaps a Buddhist shrine with an image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. We are not told which, and it really does not matter. The altar is lit by the soft light of a tall lamp. Sunlight streams in the door. The two young men observe with fascination a man standing before the altar, his hands pressed together before him, his eyes closed. He is rocking slightly. He is clearly engaged in what we would call prayer. The rabbi turns to his companion and says,

“Do you think our God is listening to him, John?”

“I don’t know, chappy. I never thought of it.”

“Neither did I until now. If He’s not listening, why not? If He is listening, then—well, what are we all about, John?”<sup>1</sup>

Is “our God” listening to the prayers of people of other faiths? If not, why not? What kind of God would that be? Would the one we Christians and Jews speak of as maker of heaven and earth not give ear to the prayer of a man so earnestly, so deeply in prayer? On the other hand, if God is listening, what are we all about? Who are we as a people who cherish our own special relationship with God? If we conclude that “our God” is not listening, then we had better ask how

we are to speak of God at all as people of faith in a world of many faiths. But if we suspect that “our God” is listening, then how are we to speak of ourselves as people of faith among other peoples of faith?

Is our God listening? It is a disarmingly simple question, a Sunday school question, not the sort most proper academic theologians would care to pursue. But this simple question leads us into the most profound theological, social, and political issues of our time. We all know that this is not solely a question about God’s ears, the capacity of God to listen, or the destiny of our prayers. It is a question about the destiny of our human community and our capacity to listen with openness and empathy to people of faith very different from ourselves. It is a question about how we, whoever we are, understand the religious faith of others.

The question of religious difference elicits a variety of responses. A collection of Gandhi’s writings on religion is published under the title *All Religions are True*, and that assertion is certainly one way of responding to difference. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those that assert that all religions are false and are fundamentally misguided—look at the wars and violence, the atrocities perpetrated in the name of God. A third option is to insist that one religion is true and the rest are false. Or one might claim that one religion is true and the others are partially true. Most of us have operative ideas about the diversity of religious traditions that fall somewhere along this spectrum. We carry these ideas along with us as we encounter people whose religious faith is different from ours. Even those who consider themselves quite secular employ some such set of evaluative ideas about religions in order to interpret the meaning of religion and of religious difference. We also carry with us notions of what it means for something to be true—literally true, metaphorically true, true for us, universally true.

While the interpretation of religious difference and plurality has long been a question, the close proximity of people of many races, cultures, and religions in urban environments has decisively shaped our response to this question today. In 1965, Harvey Cox began *The Secular City* with the observation that “the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related.”<sup>2</sup> In the urban environment from which the gods have fled, he argued, secularism was the dominant worldview, relativizing and bypassing religion, rendering it irrelevant and a private affair. In 1985, Harvey Cox noted “the return of religion” with *Religion in the Secular City*. The demise of religion had been prematurely announced. Sud-

denly there were Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority; one in five adults in the United States weighed in with the Gallup Poll as an evangelical or pentecostal Christian.

In the “secular city” of the 1990s, we would have to report the rise of *religions*, in the plural. We just might be tempted to turn Cox’s sentence wholly around and postulate that today the collapse of urban civilization and the rise of traditional religions are the two main hallmarks of our era. It is not that secularism is now no longer an issue, for the privatization and relativization of religion is still a reality to contend with. The challenge today, however, is not so much secularism, but pluralism. If one of the great issues of the secular city was anonymity, the great issue of the multicultural city is identity—ethnic, racial, and religious identity, African-American, Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, Buddhist, Muslim.

In both the urban and global contexts we rub up against the new textures of religious diversity with increasing frequency. The question *Is our God listening?* poses in a blunt way the challenge of our encounter with real difference. Responses to this question take theological, social, and political forms. There are many types of responses, but we will explore just three possibilities, indicative of the range of interpretation within almost every religious tradition.

First, there is the exclusivist response: Our own community, our tradition, our understanding of reality, our encounter with God, is the one and only truth, excluding all others. Second, there is the inclusivist response: There are, indeed, many communities, traditions, and truths, but our own way of seeing things is the culmination of the others, superior to the others, or at least wide enough to include the others under our universal canopy and in our own terms. A third response is that of the pluralist: Truth is not the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one tradition or community. Therefore the diversity of communities, traditions, understandings of the truth, and visions of God is not an obstacle for us to overcome, but an opportunity for our energetic engagement and dialogue with one another. It does not mean giving up our commitments; rather, it means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation.

Put in terms of our question, in the view of the exclusivist “our God” is not listening to those of other faiths. For the inclusivist, “our God” is indeed listening, but it is our God as *we* understand God who does the listening. The pluralist might say “our God” is listening, but he or she would also say that God is

not ours, God is our way of speaking of a Reality that cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition, including our own.

The most significant difference between the inclusivist and the pluralist is the self-consciousness of one’s understanding of the world and God. If we are inclusivists, we include others into a worldview we already know and on the terms we have already set. If we are pluralists, we recognize the limits of the world we already know and we seek to understand others in their own terms, not just in ours. In the final chapter, I will suggest that pluralists go beyond this, however, for the terms of “the other” are no more sacrosanct than our own and the point of our encounter is to bring the terms in which we understand the world into dialogue with one another—even into the dialogue of mutual truth-seeking critique.

Mere plurality—diversity—is not pluralism, though often the two words are used as if they were interchangeable. We can interpret diversity as exclusivists, as inclusivists, or as pluralists. One might argue that the greatest religious tensions in the world in the late twentieth century are not found between the Western and the Eastern traditions, between the prophetic and the mystical traditions, or indeed between any one religion and another; they are the tensions that stretch between those at opposite ends of the spectrum in each and every religious tradition. Exclusivists and pluralists, fundamentalists and liberals, wall-builders and bridge-builders—are there in a variety of forms in every religious tradition. Intra-religious tension is today as powerful as inter-religious tension. Very often the religious conflicts that flare up have less to do with *what* one believes than with *how* one believes what one believes.

The last few years have seen a burst of Christian theological discussion of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This is important work because it amply demonstrates the tremendous diversity within Christian thinking. There is no one Christian view of other faiths. Even in the statements of today’s churches there is a wide range of Christian interpretation. For example, the 1970 Frankfurt Declaration of the Evangelical Church of Germany explicitly rejected “the false teaching that nonchristian religions and worldviews are also ways of salvation similar to belief in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> This declaration is clearly an exclusivist statement. At the other end of the spectrum, members of the United Church of Canada meeting in Naramata, British Columbia, in 1985 crafted a clearly pluralist statement, insisting, “If there is no salvation outside the church, we reject such a salvation for ourselves. We come to this notion of the salvation

of others through being loved by Christ. We would be diminished without the others as others."<sup>4</sup>

Since there are many theologians who have laid out typologies of the various Christian theological positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, I will not do that here in anything but a skeletal and suggestive form. My point is a wider one: that these three ways of thinking about the problem of diversity and difference are not simply Christian theological positions, but are recognizable in the thinking of people of other religious traditions and in the thinking of nonreligious people. All of us—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others—struggle to interpret the experienced facts of diversity to ourselves and to our communities, and our interpretations have social and political reverberations. Theology is not isolated from its context. If "our God" has no regard for our Muslim neighbors, why should we? Or, put the other way around, if we have no regard for our Muslim neighbors, why should God?

While we may be interested in exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as theological viewpoints, it is all too clear that they are also social and political responses to diversity. We can recognize them in our churches, in our communities, and in our world. And while we speak of exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists as if they were entirely different groups of people, let us remember that these ways of thinking about diversity may well be part of the ongoing dialogue within ourselves. Since they represent attitudes, ways of thinking, the move from one position to another is often more of a sliding step than a giant leap. One of the continual challenges and dilemmas in my own writing and thinking is recognizing the ways in which I move back and forth along this attitudinal continuum, coming from a context of Hindu-Christian dialogue, understanding myself basically as a pluralist, and yet using what some will see as inclusivist language as I widen and stretch my understanding of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to speak of my Christian faith in a new way. I cannot solve this dilemma, but I can warmly issue an invitation to join me in thinking about it.

### *"In No Other Name . . ."*

Every time I speak to a church group about religious diversity, someone inevitably raises a hand to confront me with a passage mined from the New Testament to illustrate the exclusivity of Christianity. If she were there, Grandma Eck would certainly have her hand up, too. "It says in the Bible, 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by

which we must be saved.' So how can you speak of the Buddha?" The statement quoted is that of Peter in Acts 4:12. It is true that it says "no other name." In those remarkable days following Pentecost, when the energy of the Holy Spirit made Peter bold in his faith, he healed a man lame from birth, saying, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Peter was asked by the elders and scribes of the temple, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" He was unambiguous. It was not in his own name he had healed the man, nor was it in the name of a foreign god, as the council of elders perhaps suspected. It was in no other name than that of Jesus Christ.

Krister Stendahl has often remarked that phrases such as this one "grow legs and walk around out of context." The words "no other name," despite the spirit of affirmation in which Peter must have uttered them, became words of condemnation: only those who call upon the name of Christ are saved and all others perish and suffer eternal punishment. Actually, Christians have disagreed through the ages on the meaning of "no other name." From the time of Origen in the third century, to John Wesley in the eighteenth century, to C. S. Lewis and Paul Tillich in the twentieth, there have been those who have insisted upon the universality of God's grace and the omnipotence of God to restore all creatures to Godself. And there have likewise been those such as Augustine in the fourth century, John Calvin in the sixteenth century, and the fundamentalists of the twentieth century who have insisted upon the eternal damnation and punishment of unbelievers. In the past few years two books have been published that attempt to summarize the range of meanings implicit in these words. In *No Other Name?* Paul Knitter sets forth the array of Christian interpretations of other religions across the Protestant, evangelical, and Catholic spectrums, questions the adequacy of exclusivism as a response to the religious plurality of today, and develops his own pluralistic position.<sup>5</sup> John Sanders's *No Other Name* retains the phrase as a declarative, not a question; it is what the author calls "an investigation into the destiny of the unevangelized," and it also presents a full range of Christian views on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

In the decades and centuries following Jesus' death, many Christians gradually transferred their Spirit-filled affirmations about Christ to affirmations of allegiance to "Christianity" and "the church." Over time, their positive affirmations about Christ somehow became sharply negative judgements about any religious community other than the church. By the time of Cyprian, in the third century, we have the famous dictum "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*"—"Outside the