Paul J. Griffiths and the Interreligious Encounter: A Christian Response to Religious Plurality

by

James H. L. Friesen

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

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For

Alyosha and Katya

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Abstract

The question concerning the relationship between the many religions of our world is not a new question, but it has become a much more important question in recent times as changes in our world have brought people of different faiths closer together. As seen in John Hick's pluralism and Harold A. Netland's exclusivism, these two common Christian responses to the question have proved to be inadequate and have produced a sterile debate on the nature of Christianity's presence as one religion among the many world religions. The work of Paul J. Griffiths rises above the ineffectiveness of both pluralism and exclusivism, and provides a unique and ultimately beneficial Christian response to the question. By grounding himself within a contextual-narrative understanding of religion, Griffiths rejects the assumptions on which pluralism and exclusivism are based, and argues that both positions merely produce predetermined outcomes. In opposition to these common responses, Griffiths argues that Christians must apologetically defend their beliefs as they meet with people of other religions. In this way, many possible outcomes may occur, as the participants of an interreligious encounter have no idea where the encounter may lead. Griffiths specifically outlines the possibilities which become alive in the particular context of the Christian-Buddhist encounter. Through Griffiths' methodology, Christians can enter into a more honest and purposeful debate about truth with their neighbours.

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Abbreviations

I have used the following abbreviations in this thesis.

In Paul J. Griffiths' work:

Apology	*Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991.
"Doctrines"	"Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine: The Problematic of Religious Plurality." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXV, 1991, 29–44.
"Properly"	"The Properly Christian Response." *Anglican Theological Review* 79 (Winter 1997): 3-26.
"Uniqueness"	"The Uniqueness of the Christian Doctrine Defended." *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered.* Gavid D'Costa, ed. New York: Orbis Books, 1990, 157-173.
"Polemics"	"Why We Need Interreligious Polemics." *First Things* 44 (June/July 1994): 31-37.

In John Hick's work:

Theology	*A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
Interpretation	*An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. London: Macmillan Press, 1988.

In Harold Netland's work:

Voices	*Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.

By Way of an Introduction[1]

In present day North America, it would be difficult for a Christian to be unaware of the multitude of religious traditions that exist in the world. We cannot help but hear the cacophony of religious voices which mingle, sometimes blending harmoniously, sometimes clashing in discordance. Our media shows us devoted Muslims prostrating themselves in unison to the call of the *muezzin*, submitting their lives to the will of Allah. Our movies show us unbelievable pictures of Hindu ascetics, depriving themselves of the physical world so that their devotion to the ultimate truth can lead them to *moksa*. Our books open our eyes to images of mindful Zen Buddhists, committed to lives of searching for the elusive goal of emptiness, struggling with unswerving commitment to rid themselves of the self. But our connection with people of different faiths is not limited to outside sources. The very streets on which we walk and the very workplaces we inhabit are also the streets and workplaces for a multitude of devout religious people. The environment in which we live is one of many faiths, and our religious reality is fundamentally pluralistic.[2]

It is not a radical thing to say that this multi-religious world in which Christians find themselves today is a relatively recent phenomenon.[3] Whereas in the nineteenth

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[1] This way of entitling an introduction was taken from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, as translated by David Magarshack.

[2] The term pluralism is a dangerous term and it is important to distinguish between its two meanings which will be present in this thesis. When I say we are living in a pluralistic society, I simply mean that there is a plurality of religious traditions which occupies our communal horizon. When I talk about pluralism as a theological position, I am talking about the position which makes a claim about the equivalence of the many different world religions.

[3] In *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Gavin D'Costa explains that although "since the dawn of Christianity other major religions have existed and flourished," the difference now is that "Christians have both intellectual and experiential access to the religions of the world," p. 1-2. D'Costa notes the academic occurrence of this phenomena in his preface to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*: "In the West there was

century, a Christian could be relatively assured that he or she would not have contact with people who are not Christians, today it is almost certain that the opposite is the case. A Christian likely will have neighbours, social contacts, and colleagues who base their lives on a tradition other than Christianity.[4] Furthermore, recent developments in communication and in the media have made access to non-Christian beliefs and values around the world almost unlimited. It is now an inescapable fact that our world contains people of many religious traditions. With this being the case, the Christian response to the "religious other" has become an urgent issue of much consequence among contemporary theologians and lay people alike.[5] It is because of this new set of circumstances that questions have emerged regarding the Christian response to other religions. Theologians may ask whether it makes sense to think of God's revelation solely in terms of Christ, while lay Christians may ask questions regarding their interaction with Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Sikh neighbours and co-workers. Indeed, what were once questions solely for missionaries have become questions for Christians in every walk of life.

Such questions have caused Christians much grief. In George Lindbeck's words, "Churches and Christians are confused. They do not know what attitudes and policies to adopt in reference to non-Christians and to their religions and secular quasi-religions."[6] One reason for the confusion may be found behind the emergence of the questions

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a time when Eastern religions were accessible only to those who read Sanskrit and Pali and had travelled to distant continents. Today most public libraries contain English translations of the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* or the Buddhist collection of teachings, *The Dhammapada*," p. viii.

[4] In his preface to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, D'Costa notes that "to meet Hindus one need not travel to the banks of the sacred river Ganges – the Thames, the Rhine or the Mississippi will suffice," p. viii.

[5] Hendrik Vroom in *No Other Gods* states that "in a short time religious pluralism has developed into one of the most burning questions in society," p. viii.

[6] "*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians," p. 92.

themselves. When Christians lived in Christian societies, rarely seeing people of other faiths, it was not difficult for them make harsh judgments about the inferiority of non-Christian beliefs. Without a face, it is relatively easy to discriminate against those who are different. In the past, both Catholic and Protestant churches made clear statements that there can be no salvation "outside the church."[7] The difference today is that the non-Christian face cannot be avoided. A Christian who makes a statement denying salvation to non-Christians will likely come into contact with actual people who come under the judgment of such a statement.

Because of this situation, a pluralistic theology of religions has become attractive in the modern world.[8] This religious pluralism has become the dominant structure on the Christian theological landscape. The new multi-religious situation in which Christians find themselves has brought about a reinterpretation of Christian beliefs so that Christians can avoid making judgments against people who do not believe that Christ is essential for salvation.[9] Thus, pluralistic Christians relegate Christ to "one of many" salvific figures, or redefine uniqueness so that it does not exclude the possibility of other salvific

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[7] In "*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians," Lindbeck outlines the traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant positions on the salvation of non-Christians, p. 94ff.

[8] Here I am using the second definition of pluralism. In his preface to *Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Paul F. Knitter explains that it is this pluralistic theology that "more and more Christians . . . are experiencing," p. vii. He considers this birth of pluralism to be a new turn in Christian theology, in his words a "'paradigm shift' – in the efforts of Christian theologians . . . to understand the world of other religions and Christianity's place in that world," p. vi. In *No Other Name?* Knitter explains that one of the "most widespread and deeply engrained popular attitudes toward the diversity of religions in the world of today" is captured by the statement: "You can't say that one is better than another," p. 23. Lesslie Newbigin, in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, begins by stating the "pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of the secular society, a society in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct," p. 1. As the title states, his book is a discussion about how Christians ought to understand the Gospel in such a society.

[9] Harold A. Netland, in his book *Dissonant Voices*, explains that "until fairly recently Christians have generally held that the basic claims of Christianity are true, and that where the claims of other religions conflict with those of Christianity the former are to be rejected as false" but such a view has "fallen on hard times in recent decades," p. ix. Netland will be the theologian I will focus on when I attempt to outline the exclusivist position.

figures.[10] In this way, Christians feel they can be at ease around religious people who are not Christians: "They can believe in their beliefs, and we can believe in ours." Put simply, when we see Christ as no longer uniquely essential for salvation and all religions as being relatively true, we no longer run into the problem of having to tell other people with whom we live that they are wrong.

It follows that Christians who hold to pluralism no longer want to debate with others over the truth and falsity of religious doctrine. In the pluralistic agenda, debate and argument belong to a time when people of different faiths did not realize the importance of respecting each other in the quest for a better world. Instead of using these terms, pluralists speak of "interreligious dialogue." The reliance on interreligious dialogue, as opposed to debate and argument, highlights the understanding that all faiths have relative truths which they must share with others so that the world's people can live harmoniously and at peace. It is felt that interreligious dialogue is the only way in which humans can hope to achieve any long lasting peace. Pluralists seem to be riding a wave of excitement over the infinite possibilities which come from their discovery that truth in religion is relative.[11]

For the purposes of this thesis, I will draw out the assumptions and structure of pluralism by placing them within what I will call the unified-experience model of

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[10] A collection of works which aims at such attempts is *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter. In Knitter's preface to this book, he explains that "rather than intending to deny Christian uniqueness," the contributors to this book want "to interpret it anew," but this new interpretation may be "one so different that, perhaps, some will say that the word 'uniqueness' is no longer appropriate," p. vi. Another interesting discussion on this topic is *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, edited by Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, in which twenty theologians respond to Knitter's reinterpretation of uniqueness to allow for soteriological possibilities in other religious traditions.

[11] In *No Other Name?* Knitter captures this excitement in the pluralistic endeavour as he says, "The new perception of religious pluralism is pushing our cultural consciousness toward the simple but profound insight that *there is no one and only way*. The force of this realization applies not only to religions but also to cultures, philosophies, economic systems," p. 5.

religious understanding. From the standpoint of this model, a religion is understood to be the expressed part of the ineffable religious experience all human beings share as they come into contact with ultimate truth. Thus, those using the model see religious truth as experiential in that the structure of a religion is merely a tool which helps the adherent experience the truth. This experience is unified in that it is at the core of all true religious quests. The only way one can compare religious truth claims in this model is to judge how effective the religion leads its believers to the inner religious experience which is shared by all. In this kind of judgment, it is very probable that the many different articulations of religious experience are all true or effective.[12]

It *seems* that the only alternative to the unified-experience model in our society is the return to an authoritarian Christian view in which Christian claims are rigidly and dogmatically considered exclusivistically true.[13] Although such a "return" to a traditional Christian understanding would have been simply labeled as "Christian" in the past, theologians who hold to this understanding are known today as exclusivists. Exclusivistic theologians do recognize that in the present day, Christians find themselves in a different situation regarding their relationship with other faiths. However, in

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[12] I am indebted to Lindbeck for the characteristics of the unified-experience model for religious understanding. In *Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck labels this kind of religious thinking as "experiential-expressive." He explains the theory of this model: "Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience. It is this experience which identifies them as religions," p. 31. Because of my reliance on Lindbeck in this classification, and in my classification of the other categories, I will use his work again as a resource to make clear the importance of Griffiths' project for the present discussion.

[13] Some may argue that the inclusivistic stance is another accessible option for Christians dealing with the question of Christianity's place in a pluralistic world. Briefly, Christian inclusivists argue that Christ is essential for salvation, but Christ is somehow "included" in other religious doctrine. As such, inclusivism is very much like pluralism, as both positions argue for a shared universal truth which is foundational to all religious experience. In fact, well known pluralist John Hick claims that although inclusivism may seem different than pluralism, inclusivism is actually the same as pluralism. In *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Hick argues that inclusivism is "a vague conception which, when pressed to become clear, moves towards pluralism," p. 23. Even if this is stated too strongly, it is clear that both theological

Christian exclusivism, the fact that we now live in a multi-religious world does not change the fact that Christian claims are true for everyone and for all time.

To illuminate the assumptions on which the exclusivistic stance is based, I will call the basis of the Christian exclusivist understanding of religion the universal-rationality model. Those who use this model see religious truth as being a strictly rational enterprise; religious truth claims are seen to be propositional in nature. Each proposition corresponds, or does not correspond, to the truth. These propositions are universal in that they are seen to be universally comprehendible and universally binding. In this view, there can be no diversity of truth; if a certain proposition is true, then a contrary proposition must be considered false. Thus, judging between truth claims can go far beyond the unified-experience model, far beyond simply determining a claim's effectiveness. In a seemingly scientific way, those using the universal-rationality model of religion see it as their task to determine which religious propositions are true and which are false.[14]

It is into this divided exclusivist/pluralist theological climate that Paul J. Griffiths presents his vision of Christianity's place in a pluralistic world. It is a theological climate which has produced a debate between two rigid theological positions based on two radically different models of religion. Not only have these two theological positions set the tone of the debate; they have, in effect, restricted the possibilities of the debate itself, for it would appear that theologically, one must either be an exclusivist or a pluralist.

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understandings arise out of the unified-experience model of religious understanding. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, I will simply subsume inclusivism under the umbrella of pluralism.

[14] As with my unified-experience model, I am again indebted to Lindbeck for the characteristics of the universal-rationality model. In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck calls such religious thinking "cognitive-propositional" thinking. The importance of propositions in this understanding of religion make those within this model think of religion "as similar to philosophy or science as these were classically conceived," p. 16.

There seems to be no other option. What is needed is a new debate, and it is Griffiths who opens up this possibility, by refusing to accept this restriction. Instead of being a participant in this twofold typology, Griffiths rejects the debate itself, and moves into a unique way of looking at the Christian position regarding other religions. He rises above the typical dichotomized arguments by creating a unique interreligious polemic founded upon a notion of truth and an understanding of religion that is distinct from that found in either pluralism or exclusivism.

Griffiths does not work within either the unified-experience or universal-rationality model of religion. Although we generally assume that these are the only two models from which to work, Griffiths works from within what I will call the contextual-narrative model of religion. Thinkers of this model do not rely on experience or propositions to understand the nature of religious truth. Rather, they rely on tradition; they rely on the context of a particular history and community to give meaning to religious claims.[15] Whereas exclusivists speak of objective truth statements, and pluralists speak of ineffable encounters with the divine, Griffiths uses the subjective and cultural-specific language and story of Christianity in his search for truth. Thus, in Griffiths' formation of a response to Christianity's place in a pluralistic world, he bases himself within the Christian tradition, within the particular confines of the Christian community. By placing himself in such a way, Griffiths shows the inadequacies of both the pluralistic and exclusivistic agenda, and illuminates the hidden fallacious assumptions which lie beneath their respective projects. As such, his project frees us from the confines of the established debate, and creates exciting possibilities in the discussion

between Christians and members of other faiths, opening up the possibility for Christians to truly encounter members of other religions, and meet with them in love and respect.

In showing how Griffiths manages to make this turn away from the common dichotomy, this thesis will proceed in the following way. The first chapter will focus on the debate between the pluralists and exclusivists, and their respective models of religion on which the debate is based. We will look at two specific participants in the debate, John Hick and Harold Netland. In chapter two, Griffiths' project will be placed in relation to this twofold dichotomy, in order to draw out how Griffiths escapes the common responses to the question of Christianity's place in a multi-religious world, by working within the contextual-narrative model of religion. These two chapters, as a whole, will describe the unique narrative turn by which Griffiths begins his project. Following this, chapter three will focus on how, from what I have called the contextual-narrative model, Griffiths describes a proper Christian response to religious plurality. In so doing, we will look at the inadequacies of both pluralism and exclusivism from the standpoint of Griffiths' work. Chapter four will illustrate what Griffiths' Christian encounter with other religious traditions may look like in practice. A major part of this chapter will be devoted to outlining a hypothetical discussion between Buddhists and Christians within Griffiths' understanding. Whereas the first portion of this thesis sets the scene for Griffiths' project, the second describes what his new vision may look like as Christians interact with people of other religious traditions.

Within this structure, my method may resemble what many have called a "postmodern" project. However, I am hesitant to use this term as a label for my study

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[15] My characterization of this contextual-narrative model, like the unified-experience and universal-rationality models, stems from Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*. In this work, Lindbeck characterizes this

since such a term connotes an understanding of truth which is in contradiction with the central argument of my thesis. Although the meaning of postmodernism is highly debatable, the term is commonly understood to refer to a theory of truth which makes truth relative and inaccessible. As my attempt here is to uncover a *truthful* response to religious plurality, to say that truth is unattainable would defeat the purpose of my thesis. Still, my methodology is postmodern in that I reject modern assumptions of the nature of truth. Whereas the modern world considered the pursuit of truth to be a straightforward process, postmodernism has shown that the path to truth is far more obscure. In sensitivity to postmodern concerns in this regard, my methodology is based upon a refusal to assume that humans can have un-mediated access to a so-called objective truth. My rejection of this universal starting point forces me to ground my research within the mediated reality of a specific tradition, namely the Christian tradition. As such, I base my explication of Griffiths' project upon the cultural-narrative model of religious understanding. With Griffiths, I will begin the search for truth from within Christianity, and attempt to show that to engage in such an approach is to participate in a proper and coherent postmodern method. In this attempt, I will rely at times on Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, two thinkers who base their work on such an approach. It is within this tradition-based study that Griffiths' project successfully rises above both exclusivism and pluralism.

Before I begin, I must make an essential comment about this procedure. Because I am working from within the contextual-narrative model, thereby working from within the Christian tradition, my argument is specifically intended for the Christian community. This limitation does not make it impossible for those of other faiths to read and

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tradition-based thinking as being in the "cultural-linguistic" camp.

understand this thesis, but readers should realize that I am not attempting to form an objective all-encompassing theory about how religions ought to interact; such an attempt is to revert back to modern assumptions. Instead, I am attempting to form a *Christian* theory about how *Christians* ought to interact with members of other religious traditions. It may well be said that although people responding to this question from the context of a religion such as Buddhism will hopefully gain something from this reading, in the end, Buddhists will have to create their own argument for a proper interreligious encounter.

CHAPTER ONE:

Defining the Interreligious Landscape

All right you guys, pair up in threes.
- Yogi Berra[1]

Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.
- Polonius[2]

1.1 Tolstoy, the Orthodox Church, and the Contemporary Debate

At the turn of the twentieth century, Count Leo Nikalayevich Tolstoy passionately spoke out against what traditional Orthodox Christianity had become in Russia. In his novel *Resurrection*, Tolstoy artistically captured his frustration with the exclusivistic agenda of the church as he satirically depicted the piety of orthodox Christians. His revolutionary message in this work unfolds as the main character, Nekhlyudov, meets a wise yet uneducated old man on the ferry who rejects the uniqueness of Christianity. The man muses, "Many faiths there be but the Spirit is one. In you, an' in me, an' in 'im."[3] As Nekhlyudov crosses the river into a new life of religious experience, he finds the unity in which believers of different faiths can see the common Spirit they all share. In so doing, he rejects the exclusive claims of Christianity and becomes the disciple of the old man whose only message is: "Let everyone be 'imself, and us'll all be as one."[4] In Nekhlyudov's "resurrection" is Tolstoy's new vision for the future of Christianity as a faith based within the self, deep in the core of being which all humans share.

[1] As quoted in James David Duncan's *The Brothers K*, p. 339.
[2] Speaking to himself about Hamlet in *Hamlet* (II, ii, 205-206).
[3] *Resurrection*, p. 535.
[4] Ibid.

Clearly, this personal Christianity which Tolstoy tried to create was radically different than traditional Christian thought. For Tolstoy, the spirit of Jesus is within everyone; Christ is not part of the divine Trinity. In fact, Tolstoy considered it "the greatest of blasphemies to look on this man as God and to pray to Him."[5] It was during this time in his life that he wrote *Gospel in Brief*, a reinterpreted version of the gospels devoid of miracles and the resurrection. By rewriting Christianity in this way, Tolstoy felt he could find a harmonious world, a world in which people of different religious traditions would not exclude one another, but rather realize that all people believe in the same ultimate truth. In Tolstoy's vision, the meaning of one's life is not to be found in dogmatic religious claims, but rather in "increasing the store of love" within one's heart.[6] It makes sense, then, that in Tolstoy's understanding, the Kingdom of God is found within each person, and not dependent on corruptible institutions such as the church. He thus redefined the Kingdom of God from a religious reality only for Christians, into the ultimate depth of the religious experience which all people can hope to achieve.[7] In this experiential understanding of religion, Tolstoy proclaimed his vision for the future of Christianity and his hope for a unified religious world.

Unfortunately for Tolstoy, the religious leaders of the church did not see his vision as "unifying" or even "hopeful." As Tolstoy struggled to remove dogmatic and rigid claims from Christianity, the church could not help but grow uncomfortable. On February 22, 1901, the leaders of the church decided that they had had enough, and they excommunicated him. The church saw in Tolstoy's religious philosophy an attack

[5] Tolstoy, "Reply to the Synod's Edict," p. 129.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Tolstoy writes about this understanding of the Kingdom of God in his tellingly titled work *The Kingdom of God is Within You.*

against the irrefutable propositions which were held to be true by the Orthodox church. Therefore, Tolstoy was seen to deny "the living and personal God glorified in the Holy Trinity," and was seen to refute the "Lord Jesus Christ, God made Man [sic], Redeemer and Savior of the world."[8] Anthony stated, "the Church no longer recognizes [Tolstoy] among her children and cannot do so until he has repented and restored himself to communion with her."[9]

Tolstoy's response to this excommunication was not repentance. He continued to preach against traditional Christian claims which he felt were violent, oppressive, and inconsistent. In his response to his excommunication, "Reply to the Synod's Edict," he refused to accept the church's accusation. He still understood himself to be a Christian, and believed that truth resides in Christianity, but only in "Christianity as I understand it."[10] Like his old man on the ferry, he saw the Spirit of truth in his own soul. Here we see Tolstoy's reluctance to envision Christianity as a set of propositions dictated from an authoritative source, be that the Bible or the church. For Tolstoy, the experience of Christianity can be "true" even if it is not in full agreement with the accepted propositions of the church. In fact, Tolstoy would say that it is only those who do not see religious truth in this way who are being untruthful.

Almost a century later, we still find ourselves immersed in the same debate as the one between Tolstoy and the Orthodox Church. There are those who side with Tolstoy, seeing religious traditions as attempts to define the ineffable religious experience which is at the heart of all religions. These are the followers of the unified-experience model of

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[8] This is taken from Anthony's written position on Tolstoy which was "posted on the doors of every church," as quoted in Troyat's *Tolstoy*, p. 677.
[9] Anthony quoted in ibid., p. 678.
[10] "Reply to the Synod's Edict," p. 130.

religion. Within this model's framework, they argue for a pluralistic position in the understanding of the relationship between the world's religions, as each person's religious experience is real and true. In opposition to these thinkers are those who reject this experiential understanding of Christianity, seeing Christian truth as being a set of propositions which have no necessary connection to the religious experiences of non-Christians. Within this universal-rationality model of religion, these thinkers reject any religious propositions which contradict Christian ones, and thus see Christianity as being exclusivistically true.

It is this battle between the exclusivists and the pluralists which is the focus of this first chapter. In the following pages, I will describe exclusivism and pluralism, and the religious models on which they are based, the universal-rationality model and the unified-experience model respectively. To examine the exclusivist and pluralist models, I will look at the thought of two current Christian theologians, one belonging to each camp. Such a procedure requires me to make two important reservations and subsequent explanations. First of all, it is obvious that looking at one theologian to represent a position does not fully appreciate the wide scope of each position. However, I have chosen to proceed in this way because I can examine each position in more detail, without becoming entangled in the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, distinctions between the so-called "agreeing" theologians. Second, even though I will concentrate solely on one representative of each position, my outline of each thinker will be flawed in its economy. Each of these thinkers could be the subject of an entire thesis, and my use of them will necessarily fail to do justice to their projects. Recognizing these limitations,

this exposition of the two positions will provide a theological setting for the understanding of Griffiths' project.

1.2 Harold A. Netland: Exclusivism Defended

Although Christian exclusivism has been historically dominant, it is difficult to find contemporary theologians who describe their work as exclusivistic. Surely it is not hard to find Christian evangelicals who have exclusivistic leanings, but their work is usually not a defense of exclusivism, but rather an emotional plea for people to "accept Christ." Harold A. Netland is one of the few current theologians who has explicated a careful Christian exclusivistic approach. In his writings, Netland clearly places himself in the exclusivist camp, within the vision of the universal-rationality model. In order to look at his vision of exclusivism, I will focus on his book *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, as well as his articles "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," "Toward Contextualized Apologetics," and "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism."[11]

1.2.1 Exclusivism Defined

Netland defines the Christian exclusivism which he wants to defend as a position which "maintains that the central claims of Christianity are true, and that where the claims of Christianity conflict with those of other religions the latter are to be rejected as

[11] This book and three articles are the extent of Netland's contribution to the debate thus far. From the title of the last article listed, we can see that one of Netland's chief concerns is to combat the influence of pluralistic theologians such as John Hick.

false."[12] In terms of Christian doctrine regarding the relationship between Jesus and human salvation, Netland explains the exclusivist position as one which holds that:

> God has revealed himself definitively in the Bible and that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the only Lord and Saviour. Salvation is not to be found in the structures of other religious traditions.[13]

Not as a defense so much as a reflection, Netland shows that such a view of Christianity has been the most common position throughout Christian history. In *Dissonant Voices* he outlines the history of exclusivistic thought which started with early Christians who, according to Netland, "were strict monotheists who believed that the one eternal God had decisively revealed himself to humankind through the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth."[14] Netland argues that a form of this exclusivism was prominent in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches until the nineteenth century.

Moreover, Netland notes that an exclusivistic understanding of truth is not limited only to Christianity. He highlights the fact that like Christians, many other religious people have understood, and still do understand, their truth claims to be in conflict with religious claims from alien religions, and they have also concluded that "not all of the claims of the various traditions can be true."[15] Netland mentions that it is often overlooked that "most religious traditions (with the possible exception of Hinduism) are exclusivistic in this sense."[16] For Christians, this traditional exclusivism has been eroded

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[12] *Voices*, p. 9.

[13] Ibid. In "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," Netland mentions that this position is embodied in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, a covenant of evangelical theologians who want to perpetuate the traditional understanding of "The Great Commission." He quotes the covenant: "Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-[person], who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and [humanity]. There is no other name by which we must be saved," p. 78.

[14] *Voices*, p. 10. In this work, Netland mentions the one major exception to this history. He outlines the philosophy of Justin Martyr (ca. 100 – 165) who combined Greek thought with Christianity and believed that "the Logos is operative in all persons," not just Christians, p. 12-13.

[15] "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 77.

[16] Ibid., p. 78.

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Christians came to have more contact with people from different religious traditions. Netland explains that a host of questions emerged:

> Why are there so many diverse religions? If Christianity is the true religion, why is it that so much of the world rejects it in favor of diametrically opposing religious traditions? Is it theologically and morally acceptable to maintain that one religion is uniquely true and that the others are at best incomplete or even false? Is Jesus Christ really unique after all?[17]

In noting this progression in the history of Christianity, Netland's goal is not to simply reject the questions that have emerged in the last two centuries and fall back into the blind exclusivism of the past. Still, he does believe that an exclusivistic account is the only way Christians can hold Christian claims with integrity. Therefore, his goal is to rebuild Christian exclusivism from its eroded twentieth century state, and defend it from modern criticism.

1.2.2 Propositional Truth

Netland's starting point for his defence of exclusivism is an explicit formulation of the universal-rationality model of religious understanding. Netland argues that any coherent religious truth claim must be based on an understanding of propositional truth. When a religious person believes something, Netland maintains that *what* he or she believes is a proposition.[18] That is, the belief is true only if the reality to which the stated proposition refers is in fact true. Netland uses the following example to explain: the proposition "'John failed the math exam last Tuesday' is true if and only if John did in

[17] *Voices*, p. 8.
[18] See "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 91.

fact fail the math exam last Tuesday."[19] In this understanding of religious truth, we cannot simply say that a belief exists; it is essential to realize that by holding the belief, the believer is making a proposition about what is True. For Netland any adequate understanding of the truth found within a religious tradition must include this notion of propositional truth.[20]

From this standpoint of religious philosophy, Netland argues that when beliefs of different religious traditions conflict, they cannot both be true. Since a belief is a propositional statement about what is in fact true, it is illogical to assume that two contradictory propositions can both be true at the same time. Without this principle of noncontradiction, Netland contends that there cannot be "any coherent or meaningful position whatsoever."[21] To prove this, Netland looks at the following position which he labels as "P":

> P: In religion one should not be limited by the principle of noncontradiction but should go beyond it to recognize the 'unitive pluralism' of religious truth.[22]

Using his understanding of propositional truth, Netland explains that proposition P is true if the reality to which it refers actually obtains. Here he notes the absurdity of the position, since P makes a claim that the truth about religious claims is that one cannot make claims like P. Netland demonstrates that the principle of noncontradiction "is actually being presupposed in the very statement of the rejection of the principle."[23] Thus, for Netland, working within the universal-rationality model and seeing religious

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[19] *Voices*, p. 115.
[20] See "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 92. The notion of propositional truth to understand religious beliefs is a questionable practice according to many current theologians. In *Dissonant Voices*, Netland admits that "there are many in religious circles who reject it as inadequate and even misleading in religion," p. 115.
[21] "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 85.
[22] He goes through this argument in pages 84-85 of "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth." It is clear that his primary opponents in this regard are pluralistic theologians like John Hick.

beliefs as propositions, when making a meaningful religious truth claim, one must reject any truth claims which are contrary to that claim.

For Netland, then, the next important step is to find out if there are religious claims made by different religious traditions which are incompatible. If there are such claims, then the principle of noncontradiction logically leads us to the assumption that the conflicting propositions cannot both be true. Netland does not take this step lightly as he spends a whole chapter in his book *Dissonant Voices* outlining incompatible beliefs among Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Shinto, and Christianity. He finds that all of these religions differ sharply in their views about the relationship between humankind and the ultimate. For instance, he contrasts the pure monotheism of Islam with the varied conceptions of the ultimate in Buddhism:

> In the case of Theravada Buddhism [. . .] perhaps ultimacy should be identified with *nirvana*, since it alone is said to be unconditioned and permanent. But in doing so, of course, we must be careful not to think of *nirvana* as some kind of ultimate Being with personal characteristics. Mahayana Buddhists might prefer to speak of the *Dharmakaya*, the ultimate, all-inclusive Law Body of the Buddha essence, as the religious ultimate. Zen Buddhists might ascribe ultimacy to Emptiness or Suchness. [. . .] Obviously, there is not just one concept which functions as the religious ultimate for all Buddhists.[24]

Netland shows the Hindu understanding of the ultimate to be equally as varied, and he explains that "it is not clear the notion of religious ultimacy is even applicable in the case of Shinto."[25] Netland thus insists that it is impossible to assume that such contradictory statements are all true: "Since conflicting truth-claims are being made not all of the claims made by the major religions can be true."[26] Because these and other religious belief statements are propositions about the nature of reality, they must fall prey to the

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[23] Ibid., p. 85.
[24] *Voices*, p. 107.
[25] *Voices*, p. 108.

principle of noncontradiction, and therefore if one belief is true, the contradictory beliefs must be false.[27]

For Netland, this principle of noncontradiction translates into an exclusive understanding of truth, since when a certain belief statement is held to be true, it is exclusively true. He concludes:

> Any epistemologically acceptable theory of religious truth must recognize that beliefs are integral to religion and that truth in religion, just as in other domains, must include the notions of propositional and exclusive truth.[28]

Thus, Netland, within the framework of the universal-rationality model, argues that if Christians take their beliefs seriously, they must see incompatible beliefs as false. He argues that when non-Christian claims contradict Christian claims, there is no other choice but to stand by Christian propositions and reject the foreign ones. According to Netland, this is the only consistent conclusion. He says,

> If we are to take seriously the concepts and beliefs of the various religions and portray them accurately, and also have a view which is epistemologically sound, I do not see how we can avoid something very much like the traditional Christian exclusivist position.[29]

Netland insists that Christians who accept Christian truth claims must adopt an exclusivistic stance.

1.2.3 Christian Conclusions

From this understanding about the nature of religious truth, it would seem that Netland would step straightway into evangelism and even proselytism. After all, if

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[26] "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism," p. 250.

[27] Netland shows that even certain pluralists hold a similar position on religious truth. In "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," he quotes Raimundo Panikkar: "A believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his religion to be true. Now, the claim to truth has a certain built-in exclusivity. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true," p. 5.

Christians believe in their truth claims, it would seem that they must reject all other beliefs with extreme prejudice. However, unlike the rigid exclusivism of the past, Netland pauses here, a pause which is truly consistent with his argument. Although he has shown that there are major contradictions between other religions and Christianity, Netland does not want to jump to the conclusion that *everything* in the non-Christian world is false; other religions are not necessarily completely without value. He says that "it is perfectly consistent with exclusivism [. . .] to maintain that some of the claims of other traditions are true."[30] Surely the reality that there are some, or even many, contradictory truth claims does not make it impossible that there can be claims which are not contradictory. In fact, Netland contends that "a Christian exclusivist certainly can and should be willing to learn from other religious traditions."[31] For Netland, exclusivism is not a blind theological position, rejecting everything foreign.

However, although Netland allows for this possibility of "trans-traditional" learning, this reality is not enough for him to reject the foundation of the exclusivistic argument. He explains that although Christians do not have a monopoly on the truth, they must believe that there are certain scriptural truths which are unique and unalterable. One of those truths is that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ. Netland's exclusivism rests on the basic assumption that "adherents of other religions, no less than secularists and atheists, need humbly to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."[32] For Netland, we forget the principle of non-contradiction when we hold that other religious soteriological claims can be held at the same time as the Christian claim. It

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[28] *Voices*, p. 150.
[29] "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 92.
[30] *Voices*, p. 35.
[31] "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 84.

follows, then, that Netland's Christian exclusivism must be supported by Christian evangelism. He calls evangelism "exclusivism's corollary" and states that "involvement in evangelism with a view toward conversion of non-Christians is obligatory for all Christians."[33] If Christians believe that salvation is available only to Christians, it is clearly a fundamental mission for Christians to share their exclusive path to salvation.

However, Netland is not blind to the fact that Christian evangelism has been arrogant, intolerant, and violent in the past. In fact, Netland notes that history is full of shameful acts and brutal wars conducted in the name of religious truth. He reflects,

> Christians slaughtered Muslims and Jews. Muslims in turn massacred Christians and Jews. Muslims and Hindus fought bitterly in the Indian subcontinent. [. . .] Contemporary examples of religious persecution and intolerance are not hard to find.[34]

Still, Netland argues that it is not the exclusivistic or even the evangelistic stance which is to blame for all the atrocities in the history of religious interaction. He states: "There is no necessary connection between holding the beliefs of a particular group to be false and the radical mistreatment of members of that group."[35] In order to distance exclusivism and evangelism from coercion and violence, Netland makes the distinction between evangelism and proselytism. Christian evangelism is the morally sound proclamation of what a Christian believes to be true; it is the spreading of "the good news." When evangelism becomes morally unsound, it falls into proselytism. For Netland,

> Any means of evangelism including practices which are coercive, dishonest, manipulative, or otherwise infringe upon the dignity of the target audience must be rejected by Christians as morally unacceptable.[36]

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32 *Voices*, p. 294.
33 Ibid., p. 279.
34 Ibid., p. 304.
35 Ibid., p. 309. Griffiths makes a similar argument and it is worth noting that Netland footnotes Griffiths' article "On Grading Religions" in this section.
36 *Voices*, p. 311.

Thus, Netland argues that it is not exclusivism or even evangelism which causes hostility; rather, hostility is caused by proselytism, morally unsound evangelism.

However, we need to be careful not to read complete modern tolerance in Netland's understanding of evangelism. Evangelism is still evangelistic; it is not simply tolerant non-threatening interreligious dialogue in the pluralistic sense. Netland's understanding of exclusivism compels him to accept that Christians must undertake positive action to convince non-Christians to become Christians. Netland explicitly rejects interreligious dialogue because the assumptions of dialogue are in direct contradiction with exclusivism. Among other things, Netland explains that a notion of dialogue assumes that Christians "cannot claim to enter into dialogue with any definitive truth."[37] However, for Netland, this is exactly what Christians *can* and *must* do. In exclusivism, Christians enter into religious discussion with the understanding that the scriptures do in fact give definitive truth about the nature of the ultimate. In being mindful of the violence in the Christian past, Netland does not want to reject evangelism; he simply wants to make that evangelism into something morally sound.

In his article "Toward Contextualized Apologetics," Netland outlines this moral evangelistic approach. He states that because evangelism will engage in some degree of argument, the notion of apologetics is important.[38] This apologetical defense of Christianity will take three forms for Netland. First, it will clarify the Christian message or the Christian truth claims. Second, it will respond to the criticisms levied against Christianity; and third, it will attempt to make possible "a positive presentation of the

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[37] Ibid., p. 292-293.

gospel with the intent of eliciting a favorable response from an initially uncommitted target audience."[39] The way in which Netland hopes to make Christianity attractive to non-Christians may still seem violent or at least coercive to many modern thinkers. In "Toward Contextualized Apologetics" he argues that evangelism must work hand in hand with cultural-specific apologetics. In other words, Christians must actively work to elicit a positive response from the specific cultural audience they are targeting.[40] For instance, since Jesus' life, death, and resurrection take place within the sphere of empirical reality, Hindus cannot fully accept such events so long as Hinduism paints a worldview which rejects the possibility of ultimate reality existing on the level of empirical reality. Therefore, Netland argues that "certain fundamental assumptions about religious truth and history must be altered" so that Hindus can respond favourably to the gospel.[41] In order for evangelism to be effective, then, Netland contends that an incompatible worldview must be transformed into "one which is compatible with Scripture."[42] It is clear that although Netland wants to avoid the hostility of Christian proselytism, his goal in evangelism is still to change the minds of non-Christians in their understanding of Christianity. His stress on evangelism and contextualized apologetics shows the importance he places on convincing others about the truth of the Christian tradition.

Even though Netland's vision of Christian exclusivism is not the coercive exclusivism of the Christian past, it still has much in common with it. Fundamentally, Netland's project is based within the assumptions of the universal-ratioanlity model; it is

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[38] The notion of apologetics is extremely important in Griffiths' project. However, there are some very important differences between Griffiths' apologetics and Netland's, differences which I will explicate in the later chapters.
[39] "Toward Contextualized Apologetics," p. 290.
[40] Ibid., p. 294.
[41] Ibid., p. 297.
[42] Ibid.

founded upon a rigid propositional understanding of Christianity. In his work, there is no possibility of negotiation in dealing with the following four propositions:

> (a) Jesus Christ is the unique Incarnation of God, fully God and fully man; (b) only through the person and work of Jesus Christ is there the possibility of salvation; (c) the Bible is God's unique revelation written, and thus is true and authoritative, and (d) where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false.[43]

Still, even within this rigidity, Netland does not feel that simply saying these propositions is enough. His project is one which makes an argument for the consistency of such a position. In his writings, he attempts to show that the exclusivist position is both scripturally sound *and* philosophically sound. In so doing, Netland hopes to make Christian exclusivism a viable option for Christians in our modern world.

1.3 John Hick: Christian Pluralism

Unlike exclusivism, pluralism has many proponents in the modern age. Although Tolstoy's old ferry man may have been labeled a pluralist, pluralism as a philosophical position has come a long way since the turn of the century. In its development since Tolstoy, it has taken on a plethora of meanings and has been used to describe a wide range of differing theologies. Furthermore, instead of being a rebellious and dangerous theological position, it has become part of the mainstream. Pluralism has become the philosophy of the common person in the modern age. In fact, people who do not subscribe to a pluralistic outlook are often treated with suspicion.[44] It has become the religious philosophy which modern people all want to hear, the philosophy which sounds

[43] *Voices*, p. 34.
[44] Netland notes this at the outset of *Dissonant Voices*. He realizes that his exclusivism, which is directly opposed to pluralism, is not a philosophy which many people like. His first line in the book is a question

like the one which will allow all people to live peacefully with one another, the one which will blend the diversity of religious experience into a unified whole.

Therefore, my problem in finding a representative of pluralism was not due to a lack of possible sources, as was the case in the exclusivist section, but rather due to the abundance of workable resources. For instance, I could have looked at Huston Smith's breathtaking vision of a pluralistic world in which each religious adherent is part of the "wider company of God-seekers."[45] Or I could have developed Raimundo Panikkar's argument in which each religion "represents the whole of the human experience in a concrete way."[46] Or I could have explored Paul F. Knitter's reconstruction of Christian theology which allows for the possibility of pluralism.[47] These are just to name a few. Still, even though there are many options in the pluralistic theological world, I found that there is one name which stands above the rest. There is a pluralistic theologian who captures much of the scope of pluralism and who is arguably pluralism's most prominent voice. His name is John Hick.[48] Therefore, it is to him whom I will turn in order to outline the Christian pluralistic position.

As with pluralism itself, Hick has many writings and for economy I had to choose between them. I will limit my research to his two books *An Interpretation of Religion:*

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posed to a fictitious character sharing his viewpoint: "How can you possibly believe that one can be saved only by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?" p. 1.

[45] Smith's "breathtaking vision" is painted artistically in the introduction of his *The World Religions*, p. 1-11. His book *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* develops a similar picture.

[46] This argument is explained in his article "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 112. The book from which I found this article is a useful summary in the scope of the pluralistic vision. I found it to be an excellent point of departure both in my attempt to find a "pluralistic proponent" and in my research in general.

[47] One of Knitter's most well-known works is his book *No Other Name?* in which he gives an overview of pluralism and how Christianity can change to accommodate it.

[48] In *Dissonant Voices*, Netland calls Hick "without question [. . .] the most influential and articulate spokesman today for the view that all religions constitute, in their own culturally and historically conditioned manner, responses to the same ultimate reality," p. xi.

Human Responses to the Transcendent[49] and *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*[50], and his three articles "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," and "On Grading Religions."[51] It is clear that by limiting my research to these works, my characterization of Hick will be necessarily abbreviated. Still, his argument is very similar in all his works and by looking at this range of his writings I will cover his basic argument.[52] More importantly for my purposes, this succinct look at Hick will be a useful summary of the pluralistic position.

1.3.1 The Christian Pluralist Hypothesis

Hick's point of departure, or his "ground level starting point," is the investigation into the "great world religions" which have been in existence for "many centuries, affecting many millions of people."[53] He wishes to discuss these great faiths against a "common background of knowledge" thus developing "an appropriate Christian theology of religions for today."[54] Two important things must be noted here. First of all, Hick

[49] I decided to use this book because, according to Griffiths, it sums up Hick's argument. In *Dissonant Voices*, Netland holds that it is "difficult to find rigorous and responsible treatment of basic eptistemological issues in recent literature on religious pluralism," but admits that "the outstanding exception to [this] general pattern is John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*," p. x. Netland calls it, at the time of *Dissonant Voices*, the "most sophisticated and persuasive articulation of the pluralist position, p. 199. In *Theology*, Hick himself explains that *Interpretation* is a book in which "[his] version of the pluralistic hypothesis is presented," p. 15.

[50] My reason for choosing this book is simply because it is one of Hick's most recent.

[51] I picked these three articles for the following reasons. "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" is found in *Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and Griffiths refers to it in his article in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered.* Griffiths also responds directly to "On Grading Religions." My choice in using "Religious Pluralism" is not by design; it was simply one of the first articles I stumbled upon. Still, its concentration on Hick's philosophy of truth claims became invaluable to me as I did my research.

[52] In "One Jesus, Many Christs?" Griffiths notes that the pattern of Hick's argument has not changed from *Interpretation* to his more recent work, p. 161. In fact, one may make a case that Hick's pluralism has not changed substantially since Tolstoy.

[53] *Theology*, p. 11-12.

[54] *Theology*, p. 12.

sees himself as attempting to create a *Christian* response to other religions. His goal, at least at the outset, is the same as Netland's, in that both are building an argument for what it means to be a Christian in a world of many faiths.[55] However after stating this goal, Hick contends that he does not want to develop his Christian theology from the bias of Christian truth claims. Rather, he wants to develop his theology from truth claims that *all* people can accept. Hick argues that "today" we have a more reliable knowledge base than our biased and prejudiced tradition can give. He claims that since the Enlightenment, Christians have become aware that "Christendom is part of a much larger world."[56] In the modern world, according to Hick, we can rely on more reliable foundations of thought, foundations of rationality and logic to which all people can agree.

From such a starting point, Hick looks at the exclusive claims which are in all of the great faiths. He acknowledges that there are forms of absolutism present in Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.[57] Because Hick assumes to discuss such things from a common knowledge base, he then can use psychology, a so-called objective discipline, to assess the absolute claims among these faiths. According to Hick, psychologically, it is logical that there is some sense of pride for one's own religion, an "ingrained preference for one's own familiar group and its ways."[58] This pride is not a problem for Hick. Such "pride" is to be accepted; it is something natural

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[55] Netland, in fact, studied under Hick at Claremont Graduate School, and has much admiration and respect for his argument. In his article "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism," he thanks Hick and states that "although we disagree on some fundamental issues this in no way detracts from my appreciation and respect for him, both as a scholar and a person," p. 249.

[56] *Theology*, p. 12.

[57] In his article "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," he starts by giving examples of such absolutism in these faiths, p.195-196. For example, he explains that while in Hinduism there is "a general tolerance of other ways," there is still the assumption that "all will come to the fullness of the Vedic understanding," p. 195. Hick shows that even adherents of Buddhism, a religion renowned for its "tolerance," still hold that "the true appreciation of our human situation occurs most clearly and effectively in the teachings of Gautama Buddha," p. 195.

and not overly destructive. However, Hick warns that when this "natural pride" becomes "elevated to the level of dogma and is built into the belief system of a religious community," it necessarily becomes harmful and dangerous.[59] For instance, Hick reflects upon the immorality which becomes present when Christianity assumes itself to be superior. He explains that by seeing themselves as dogmatically superior to people of other religious traditions, "Chrsitians feel uniquely privileged [. . .] and free to patronise [non-Christians] accordingly, exploit them economically and dominate them politically."[60] Hick asserts that the modern world has realized the following fact:

> Christian absolutism, in collaboration with acquisitive and violent human nature, has done much to poison the relationships between the Christian minority and the non-Christian majority of the world's population by sanctifying exploitation and oppression on a gigantic scale.[61]

Furthermore, even beyond the physical violence, Hick contends that Christian exclusive claims are *spiritually* violent as they condemn *all* "pagans" to hell; he says, "It is a profoundly unhappy formulation."[62] Still, although Hick concentrates on illuminating the violence in Christian history, he holds that it is not only *Christian* exclusive claims which are problematic. Rather, *all* exclusive claims, when elevated to the position of dogma in any religion, are the basis of violence and discrimination. In fact, he says that "the claims of other religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority have likewise, given the same human nature, sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance."[63] For Hick, absolutism in any form is simply not appropriate in our modern world.

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[58] "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," p. 197.
[59] Ibid.
[60] *Interpretation*, p. 371-372.
[61] "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 17.
[62] *Theology*, p. 86.
[63] "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 17.

It is from this conclusion that Hick proposes his pluralist hypothesis. Upon seeing a connection between hostility and exclusivism, Hick claims that Christians must reform their theology of religions. Hick's renewed theology asserts that all of the claims of the great religions point to the "ultimate ineffable Reality which is the source and ground of everything."[64] Although it may seem that religious claims are in conflict, these traditions simply "involve different human conceptions of the Real, with correspondingly different forms of experience of the Real, and correspondingly different forms of life in response to the Real."[65] It is in this way that Hick believes Christianity can end its reign of violence and intolerance, since dogmatic exclusivism no longer can exist in this understanding of religion.

In Hick's project, then, holding exclusivistic claims simply does not work. From the Christian point of view, "there can be no longer any a priori assumption of overall superiority. For the Christian tradition is now seen as one of a plurality of contexts of salvation."[66] In order to stop the immorality Hick believes to be inherent in exclusivistic claims, he has suggested a hypothesis of religion which makes such claims impossible. Thus, it is important to note that pluralism, for Hick, is not a conclusion after looking at all religious claims. Rather, it is a hypothesis which is an attempt to create a more friendly and caring worldview, a vision in which members of differing religious traditions will view one another with mutual respect and toleration.

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[64] *Theology*, p. 27.
[65] Ibid.
[66] "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 23.

1.3.2 The Pluralistic Notion of Truth

Since the pluralist hypothesis is just that, a hypothesis, Hick's primary task is to prove that the hypothesis is in fact true. In doing this, his task is to show how it can be true that seemingly different religious claims are all pointing to the same reality. In order to develop Hick's argument, we must first look at his understanding of truth. Hick believes that we do not experience reality as passive objective viewers. Rather, we "experience-as."[67] What this means is that we recognize the things that we see because they have been given a meaning or purpose "within a given cultural context."[68] For instance, although we may experience a fork *as* a fork, a stone age person might not "be able to recognize it as a fork at all."[69] Hick's argument is that all experience of reality is imbued with cultural context and other "concept-laden forms of interpretation."[70] In this way, there is no pure unmediated experience of reality; we experience reality only through a certain framework which gives that reality meaning.

Using this understanding of experiencing, Hick argues that religious truth claims are not claims about the way things really are, but are merely ways of *seeing* reality. Herein we see Hick's formulation of the unified-experience model of religious understanding. Religions are simply different expressions of a common religious experience, expressions which are useful in that they provide a framework for that experience. In Hick's understanding, a religious tradition gives the adherent a context

[67] Hick's explanation of this phrase is found in *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 140-2, and the subsequent quotes on this topic in this section are all from here. A similar argument is found in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 23-7. He has taken the phrase from the Wittgensteinian notion of "seeing-as" which Wittgenstein used to explain the way in which we may see an ambiguous picture *as* different things. Wittgenstein's most famous example is that of Jastrow's duck-rabbit picture which looks like a duck facing left or a rabbit facing right, depending on how one looks at the picture.
[68] Ibid., p. 141.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 142.

from which to experience reality *as* something. Hick explains that it is as if the great religious traditions are like "linguistic maps," allowing religious people to experience the universe.[71] Such an understanding of religion demands that the religious context is always a "necessarily limited and mediated, awareness of the Real."[72] Even a good map is not a perfect representation of the area it is said to represent. Thus, Hick makes the distinction between "the Real *an sich*" and "the Real as variously experienced-and-thought by different human communities"[73] or the distinction between "a reality as it is in itself, unperceived, and as it is perceived by a particular form of consciousness."[74] For Hick, the ultimate reality, beyond all of our human conceptions of it, is something which cannot be humanly understood.[75] He explains that "none of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable ground of that realm."[76] Primarily using the example of Taoism, Hick adds that religious thought itself supports such a claim and argues that "all serious religious thought affirms that the Ultimate, in its infinite divine reality, is utterly beyond our comprehension."[77] For Hick, the truth of religion is not within the specific context of a religion, but rather is mysteriously beyond all religious thought and imagination. In this way, he captures the unified-experience model's essence of religion.

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[71] He uses this metaphor in "On Grading Religions," p. 461, and again in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 26-7.
[72] *Interpretation*, p. 162.
[73] Ibid., p. 236.
[74] *Theology*, p. 65.
[75] In *Interpretation*, Hick identifies the Real *an sich* as "the unique One without a second" explaining that it is "not one among others; and yet it cannot literally be numbered," p. 249.
[76] Ibid., p. 246.
[77] *Theology*, p. 58. In *An Interpretation of Religion,* Hick cites the beginning of the Tao Te Ching which reads: "The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao," p. 237. However, he also mentions Maimonides, the Kabbalist mystics, and even recent Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich.

Although this conception at first may seem to devalue religion, it in fact does just the opposite in Hick's view. Hick claims that even though the "maps" may be imperfect, they are the only things we have. We cannot experience the Real *an sich*; all we can do is experience the Real as it is experienced through a certain tradition. Hick maintains that "the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it."[78] By understanding religions as limited and imperfect contexts for experiencing the Real *an sich*, Hick renews the importance of religion in our modern age. Moreover, within this unified-experience model of religious understanding, Hick is able to support his pluralistic hypothesis and elevate *all* the different religious expressions. Hick's "experiencing-as" understanding of religion allows for the possibility that every religion is on equal footing, and that there is no religion that is superior. It is completely logical in such a framework to assume that two seemingly opposing religious claims *may*, in fact, be giving unique contexts through which people can see the Real *an sich*. The possibility to which Hick wants to point is that:

> The ultimate ineffable Reality is capable of being authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts, as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity, as Allah, as Shiva, as Vishnu, and again as Brahman, as the Dharmakaya, as theTao, and so on.[79]

In this way, the assumptions of the unified-experience model give Hick the foundation for his pluralism. Since for Hick, religious truth claims are not propositional statements about reality as they are in the universal-rationality model, but are rather conceptual frameworks which help us to experience something which otherwise would be impossible to experience, he opens the possibility for the pluralist hypothesis to be true.

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[78] *Interpretation*, p. 236.

1.3.3 The Possibility of Comparing Religious Traditions

Even though Hick's notion of truth allows for the possibility that different religions are equal, his argument does not make it necessary that they are. Theoretically, certain religions could be better maps, better contexts for experiencing the Real. Hick recognizes that simply allowing for the possibility of equality is not enough, and he works at looking into ways of comparing the great religious traditions to see if it is in fact true that they are equal. In keeping with the unifiied-experience model, the path Hick has chosen to attempt a comparison is to look at the way religious traditions function.[80] Hick claims that all of the great religions function in the same way. He writes:

> Each of the great post-axial streams of religious experience and belief has been shown to exhibit a soteriological structure: a recognition of our human moral weakness and failure or of the pervasive insecurity and liability-to-suffering of all life; the proclamation of a limitlessly better possibility arising from another reality, transcendent to our present selves; and the teaching of a way, whether by 'own-power' spiritual discipline or the 'other-power' of divine grace, to its realisation.[81]

According to Hick, all religions recognize a "lacking" in humans which can be transformed only by a person's turning to the Real.

Hick does not make this claim without evidence. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, he explains that each of the great religions function soteriologically for its adherents. For the Hindu, using either *jnana-marga* (spiritual insight), *karma-marga* (action), or *bhakti* (devotion to the divine Other), the self can be freed from the karmic cycle.[82] For the

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[79] *Theology*, p. 25.
[80] Remember that in the Tolstoy model, there can still be evaluation of religious experience as certain experiences can be more effective in religious transformation than others.
[81] *Interpretation*, p. 56. Hick also describes this soteriological structure of all religions in "On Grading Religions," p. 452-3. In this article he says that every religion "offers a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one," p. 452.
[82] Ibid., p. 37-39.

Buddhist, by ridding oneself of the illusion of the self, one can achieve enlightenment.[83] For the Christian, through a "self-giving in faith to God's limitless sovereignty and grace" a new reconciled relationship to God can emerge.[84] For the Jew, the hope for transformation moves beyond the individual into the hope for a restored community for the nation of Israel.[85] And finally, for the Muslim, by submitting oneself to the will of Allah, the individual can become a meaningful and important instrument of God on Earth.[86] Hick notes that all of these great religious traditions function to uplift the individual believer into a healthier existence "for they affirm the possibility of attaining a limitlessly better state."[87] In other words, each religion functions to help people attain salvation.

Furthermore, Hick argues that the similarity in function between religious traditions is even more specific; each religion attempts to transform people from "self-centeredness" to "reality-centeredness."[88] He explains that even though the diverse religions are offering different paths, or are portraying different maps, these differences are "all forms of a gradual transformation from self-centeredness to a new centering in the Real."[89] In more specific terms, Hick calls this transformation a shift from the self concentrating on its self, to the self concentrating on loving others. The egocentric point of view is replaced by "devotion to or concentration upon some manifestation of the

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[83] Ibid., p. 42-43.
[84] Ibid., p. 43-47.
[85] Ibid., p. 48.
[86] Ibid., p. 48-50.
[87] *Theology*, p. 105.
[88] This understanding of the transforming power of religion is expressed by Hick in *Theology*, p. 107 and in *Interpretation*, p. 50.
[89] *Theology*, p. 107.

Real, [. . .] which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life."[90] He lists some of the contextualized expressions:

> 'Let not any man do unto another any act that he wisheth not done to himself by others, knowing it to be painful to himself' (the Hindu *Mahabharata*, Shanti parva, cclx.21); 'Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you' (Confucius, *Analects*, Book XII, #2); 'Hurt not others with that which pains yourself' (The Buddhist *Udanavarga*, v. 18); 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise' (Jesus, *Luke* 6:31); 'No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself' (The Muslim *Hadith*, *Muslim*, *imam* 71-2).[91]

In essence, Hick claims that the Universal Golden Rule emerges, "a widespread expression of [the] principle that it is good to benefit others and evil to harm them."[92] For Hick, all of the great faiths compel their adherents to engage in acts of charity towards others.

For Hick, it is not surprising that this ethical standard has so many examples within different religious traditions. This finding is in direct agreement with his pluralist hypothesis. He notes,

> My reason to assume that the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated.[93]

It is here where Hick begins to give substantive proof for his argument. He is arguing that we can now see that each tradition is drawing a linguistic map of the same reality because of the parallelism of their moral structure.

However, even if all of the religions function in the same way, and even if they all seem to point to the same reality, they may still not be equal. Simply because they all

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[90] *Interpretation*, p. 301.
[91] This short list is taken from "Non-Absoluteness," p. 29. Hick makes a much more careful discussion of the similarity of the Golden Rule among different religious traditions in *Interpretation*, p. 316-40.
[92] *Interpretation*, p. 313.

hope to achieve a high moral standard, there is no guarantee that the formulation of this morality is effective in transforming individuals. Therefore, Hick maintains that the best criterion for judging is to ask the question: does the religion in fact save? In other words, Hick asks: does the religion actually do what it sets out to do in the lives of its followers, transforming them from "self-centeredness" to "reality-centeredness"? According to Hick, "the question is how effectively [the religion promotes] this salvific transformation."[94] When looking for an answer to this question, Hick argues that such a question can be answered objectively since the "'fruits of the spirit' are universally recognised and respected."[95] He contends that although many Christians believe the "fruits of the spirit" to be unique to Christianity, they are actually better stated in "the modern liberal ideals of human equality and freedom."[96] For Hick, it would seem, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is more carefully construed in the UN Declaration of Human Rights than in the Bible.

Hick's response to the question of effectiveness is to begin by saying that there are no compelling reasons to assume that Christianity produces more saints in proportion to population than any other religious tradition.[97] It is important to note here that Hick is not saying that it is a fact that the production of saints is equal; rather, he is saying that there is nothing to assume Christian superiority in this regard. Thus, he concludes that "we are not in a position to assert a greater power in Christianity than in any of the other great world faiths to bring about the kind of transformation in human beings that we all

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93 *Theology*, p. 69.
94 Ibid., p. 76.
95 *Interpretation*, p. 301.
96 "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 28.
97 Ibid., p. 23.

desire."[98] However, Hick cannot find any reason to believe that any of the other religions are more efficient in their salvific transformations either. When looking specifically at Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, he determines that each "exhibits its own distinctive mixture of virtues and vices. Each has a relatively good record in some respects but a bad record in others."[99] He concludes that "as vast complex totalities, the world traditions seem to be more or less on a par with each other. None can be singled out as manifestly superior."[100] Not only do the great world religions attempt to achieve the same soteriological goal for their followers, but they are more or less equal in their effectiveness. He concludes, "thus, the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological spaces within which, or ways along which, men and women can find salvation/ liberation/ fulfillment."[101] In basing himself within the unified-experience model, and thus judging religions solely on their effectiveness, Hick provides what he considers to be reliable evidence in support of the pluralist hypothesis.

1.3.4 Conflicting Truth Claims After the Pluralist Hypothesis

In Hick's philosophy of religion, then, we have a vision of different religious traditions which embody different experiential structures allowing religious people to experience the Real *an sich*, the ultimate reality, which is by itself "un-experiencable." Hick supports this theory by noting the commonalities between the great religious traditions in regards to their respective soteriological functions. As we have seen, Hick argues that there is not much difference in the salvation quests in the different religions,

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[98] Ibid., p. 24.
[99] "On Grading Religions," p. 466.
[100] "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 30.
[101] "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," p. 194.

and that it is impossible to detect any major difference in their respective effectiveness as judged by the impact on their followers. But what happens when the truth claims of different religions are not just different, but actually conflict? What happens when they seem to say inconsistent statements about ultimate reality? This is Netland's most prominent criticism of Hick as he demands that if Hick's theory is right, there ought to be some continuity between the unique expressions of the real found in the different faiths, and the Real *an sich*.[102] Netland says, "One way to put this is to say that the set of true propositions about a given image (Amida, Allah, *Nirvana*) must form a subset of the set of all true propositions about the Real *an sich*."[103]

Hick spends much effort defending his work from such critique. Although it may seem that the easiest way to support his pluralist hypothesis in this regard would be to dismiss the possibility of conflicting truth claims, Hick does no such thing. Hick fully accepts the fact that there are truth claims in different religions which are inconsistent. For Hick, there are two different kinds of contradicting religious truth claims.[104] The first kind is found when different religions have conflicting versions of historical events. For instance, traditional Christian views on Jesus are clearly in conflict with the Qur'anic teaching of Jesus, which states that it was not Jesus who was crucified, and the Ahmadiyya belief "that Jesus, having survived the crucifixion, subsequently died and is

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[102] He voices this and other criticisms of Hick in *Voices* p. 208-33.

[103] Ibid., p. 213. We note here that Netland is basing his critique on his understanding of truth claims as being propositional in nature. Although Hick would never speak in those terms, it is important to see that Netland's critique is at least somewhat valid since Hick does understand our relation to truth in a referential way, even if our ways of referring are not necessarily propositions. For the purposes of this thesis, this will become an essential component of the argument as I attempt to distance Griffiths from both of these thinkers.

[104] Hick outlines these two kinds of conflicting truth claims in *Interpretation*, p. 362-76. It should be noted that this is the last section of his argument in the book, i.e. responding to this criticism is how he ends his argument.

buried in Kashmir."[105] Hick contends that such disagreements can be settled only by objective historical evidence, and that this kind of evidence has generally proved "elusive."[106] But this is not problematic for Hick. His contention is that we no longer need historical truth claims in the modern religious world, and that these kind of conflicts do not amount to anything substantive. For Hick, we need to move with the growing number of religious people, who "no longer regard such questions as being of the essence of their faith."[107] He admits that for those who still hold rigidly to historical truth, the "pluralist vision may well at present be inaccessible."[108] However, Hick contends that even these religious people may find pluralism a possibility in the future if we find a more objective way to evaluate history.

The second kind of conflicting truth claim for Hick is the trans-historical truth claim. These are contradicting views on the nature of reality beyond history. For instance, Hick notes the dispute between Eastern and Western faiths about the nature of the universe. Whereas Eastern religions generally argue that there was no beginning to the universe, the Western religions argue that the universe began through the direct action of a divine being. Hick's first response to this conflict is that even scientific cosmology gives no definitive answer. Just as in historical conflicting truth claims, objective attempts at finding the truth are also "elusive." Ultimately, Hick contends that questions such as this will possibly never be answered conclusively. But the most important thing for Hick is that this does not really matter. He explains that such conflicts are "not

[105] Ibid., p. 364.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., p. 365.
[108] Ibid.

soteriologically vital."[109] Since, for Hick, the essence of a religion lies in its power to save, statements about the nature of trans-historical reality are simply unimportant. Here we see the stress the unified-experience model places on certain elements of religion. Statements about reality, either historical or trans-historical, are not important in this model; the essential foundation of religion is that which opens up the possibility for religious experience to occur. In this way, Hick argues that people holding conflicting views on trans-historical truth can agree to differ on such things since these views are not of ultimate importance. He believes that we should "learn to live with these differences, tolerating contrary convictions even when we suspect them to be mistaken."[110] Since we understand these kinds of beliefs to be an unnecessary element in the saving power of our religions, we can simply accept that people of other religious traditions may think differently.

1.3.5 The Rejection of Certain Religious Truth Claims?

Still, after showing how the pluralist hypothesis can be true even when conflicting truth claims are present, there are certain religious claims that Hick cannot dismiss with the above argument. The trans-historical truth claim which declares a particular religious tradition to be uniquely soteriologically effective is clearly not compatible with the pluralist hypothesis. For instance, Hick contends that the Christian belief that Jesus was God and is the sole saviour of humanity cannot be true in a pluralistic world.[111] He

[109] Ibid., p. 367. Hick also looks at disagreements over the trans-historical claim about life after death. He says, "Is belief, or disbelief, in reincarnation essential for salvation/liberation? The answer must surely be No," p. 368.
[110] Ibid., p. 370.
[111] For our later study, it is important to note here that pluralism is not tolerant of every belief. This is a common misunderstanding of pluralism, and Hick's work quite clearly shows that he is not attempting to be open to every kind of belief.

argues that it is this Christian claim, in its rigidity, which has been responsible for the violence of the Christian past. However, before discarding things like the divinity of Christ in favour of the pluralist hypothesis, Hick argues that we can look at such claims in a different way.

For Hick, the best way to understand claims which in some sense claim superiority of one religion over another is to see them as myths. Thus, we should not ask whether the statement "Jesus is divine" is a true proposition, as Netland would say. Rather, we should ask whether such a statement is a true myth.[112] A myth, for Hick, is a "developed story based on a metaphor" and a myth can be true if it metaphorically draws an appropriate picture of reality.[113] Since metaphorically Christians see God as father, it only makes sense that a myth about God's son would evolve to give God's reality more meaning. Within this understanding, Hick wants Christians to understand the divinity of Jesus mythologically, not literally.[114] For Hick, Jesus was not literally God's son, but was extraordinarily open to the Real *an sich*.[115] He then has no problem in saying that it is true that Jesus is divine; however, the way that this statement is true is that it is a true myth, a true metaphor to help humans understand the connection between this man and ultimate reality.[116] Hick comments that in the myth of the divinity "we see in the life of

[112] See *Interpretation*, p. 371. In order to develop Hick's position on these kind of claims, we will look specifically at the Christian claim of superiority mentioned above, but it should be noted that the same argument could be developed for other claims which position a religion to be superior. Because his pluralistic philosophy is an attempt at finding a Christian theology of other religions, Hick spends much time with the Christian claim to superiority in that salvation is only possible through Christ. It may be telling that the first time we see Hick's supposed basis in Christianity is when he is attempting to radically alter the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus.

[113] *Theology*, p. 102.

[114] Recall that this was the attempt of Tolstoy in his *Gospel in Brief*, and it was one of the main reasons for his excommunication. Troyat quotes Anthony: "[Tolstoy] refutes all the Mysteries of the Church," p. 678.

[115] *Interpretation*, p. 372.

[116] Hick spends a lot more time with this topic than my summary may indicate. His *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* is on this topic, and he has edited a collection of essays entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In

Christ a supreme instance of that fusion of divine grace and creaturely freedom that occurs in all authentic human response and obedience to God."[117] The divinity of Christ, then, becomes a true and revealing myth for Christians but is saved from being an intolerant and insensitive claim in regards to other religions. Hick says,

> Our pluralist hypothesis holds that whilst such beliefs may in a particular phase of history be mythologically true for the particular group whose religious life they support, they do not have the literal truth that would constitute them true for everyone.[118]

In this way, Hick believes Christians will move away from the violence of the past, and enter into an era which is open to the divine presence in other inspired people, not just Jesus.

In fact, for Hick, in this myth Jesus becomes one of *many* inspired people, allowing Christians to embrace the truth found in the founders and spiritual leaders of other religions. These exemplary people, like Jesus, can now be seen as inspired humans, "human beings who are markedly Reality-centered rather than self-centered."[119] However, Hick does not make the mistake of assuming that all people who profess to be inspired are full of divine presence. As with the soteriological function of the various religions, Hick argues that such figures must meet certain moral criteria; we must be able to see their "reality-centeredness." For Hick, in order for someone to be a "mediator of the divine," he or she must have a "tendency to bestow moral praise upon actions which benefit and blame upon those which harms others."[120] Furthermore, Hick adds that such

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The Metaphor of God Incarnate, he argues that Jesus himself did not claim to be divine, but rather this claim was a later construction of the church.

[117] "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," p. 210. Here Hick is using the term God to denote the Real *an sich.*

[118] *Interpretation*, p. 371.

[119] "Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims," p. 210.

[120] "On Grading Religions," p. 458.

a person must open up a "new, exciting and commanding vision of reality," a reality which has the power to be a transforming power in people's lives."[121]

Thus, trans-historical truth claims which seem to elevate one religion above another are not a problem for Hick. By seeing such claims as true myths, Hick argues that religious people can begin to see the Real's presence in people of diverse religious traditions. According to Hick, then, even the most seemingly closed and rigid religious truth claims do not have to falsify the pluralist hypothesis. He concludes:

> The differences between the root concepts and experiences of the different religions, their different and often conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs, their incommensurable mythologies, and the diverse and ramifying belief-systems into which all these are built, are compatible with the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perception of, and response to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.[122]

Within the unified-experience model, Hick maintains that all true religious belief is not only compatible, but is even enhanced by the pluralistic vision.

It is in such a framework of religious pluralism that Hick sees hope for religion in the modern world. According to Hick, by partaking in a pluralistic outlook, religious people will embrace their traditions, yet gradually filter out beliefs which are exclusive or point to their religion's superiority among others. Hick says that "eventually, we may hope, the relationship between the religions will be rather like that between most of the main sections of Christianity today."[123] Then, in effect, the human quest for meaning and truth will not be limited to one's tradition, but will be a "worldwide movement for human

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[121] Ibid., p. 459-460.
[122] *Interpretation*, p. 375-376.
[123] *Theology*, p. 123.

liberation."[124] It is fitting to end with Hick's vision of the image of Christian theology in the year 2056:

> The idea of the Trinity no longer involves three mysteriously inter-related centers of divine consciousness and will, but is a symbol for the three-fold character of our human awareness of God – as the creative source of all life, as the transforming salvific power, and as the divine spirit living within us. [. . .] Worship is explicitly directed to God, rather than to Jesus, or to the Virgin Mary or the saints. [. . .] The 'Apostles'' Creed is still generally used, not, however, as a literal expression of contemporary belief but as a symbol of the continuity of the church through the ages. [. . .] Relations with the other world religions are now generally good, being based on a formal acceptance of their independent validity.[125]

This is Hick's pluralistic vision. It is a vision that many people share in our modern society, but in Hick's case, it is a vision which has been systematically and carefully defended.

1.4 Paul J. Griffiths: Stepping Outside of the Debate

In Netland and Hick we see two particular formulations of the most prominent Christian responses to religious plurality. We see in Netland an exclusivism based upon the philosophical understanding of religion which I have labelled the universal-rationality model. We see in Hick a pluralism based upon the experiential understanding of religion which I have named the unified-experience model. These two extreme positions represent the basic dichotomy found presently in the Christian understanding of the interreligious encounter. It seems that all who respond to the question must situate themselves in one of the two camps. In so doing, all participants are forced into camps which cannot even understand each other due to their radically different understanding of religion. It is no wonder that the modern discussion of the relationship between religions

[124] "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 33.

has proved to be an exercise in futility as thinkers from both positions merely dig themselves more firmly into the security of their presuppositions.

It is within this theological climate that Paul J. Griffiths presents his vision of Christianity's place in a pluralistic world. Griffiths is able to step out of this sterile debate by way of placing his work within a different model of religious understanding, the contextual-narrative model. In this model, Griffiths leaves both exclusivism and pluralism behind. His alternative rises above the plane of the former twofold typology and creates a new structure for envisioning the form of religious belief and doctrine. Thus, without siding with either pluralism or exclusivism, Griffiths defends his vision of the Christian encounter with other world religions. And it is to his project that we now direct our attention in the second chapter. It will remain to be seen whether Tolstoy's old ferry man would be satisfied with Griffiths' efforts.

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[125] *Theology*, p. 136-138.

CHAPTER TWO:

Redefining the Landscape

How is it . . . that these gentlemen do not understand that even in the face of death, two and two still make four?
- Tolstoy[1]

I spit on 2 + 2 = 4.
- Dostoevsky [2]

For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.
- Hamlet [3]

2.1 Beyond the Contemporary Debate

Although Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky were literary contemporaries in nineteenth century Russia, the foundational philosophy of their writings is radically different.[4] The distinction between the two Russian writers manifests itself when we look at the fundamental difference between Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In both works, the life of the main character is transformed from a vile meaningless state into a life of religious value and significance. Again, on the surface, the two works appear similar. In both works, this character dies a spiritual death and is "resurrected" into a new life, into a Christian commitment to the betterment of the world. In fact, it would not be ludicrous to say that the title for both works could be a combination of the titles, "Crime, Punishment, and Resurrection," since it is through such

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1 As quoted in George Steiner's *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 261.
2 As quoted in A. Boyce Gibson's *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, p. 191.
3 Speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* (II, ii, 249-251).
4 This difference causes Steiner to conclude that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who like Tolstoy and those who like Dostoevsky. In *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, he quotes the Russian philosopher N. A. Berdiaev: "it would be possible to determine two patterns, two types among [people's] souls, the one inclined toward the spirit of Tolstoy, the other toward that of Dostoevsky," p. 10. It is interesting to note

a progression that Nekhlyudov and Raskolnikov, the two main characters, go through in *Resurrection* and in *Crime and Punishment* respectively. However, when we look closely at *how* Tolstoy and Dostoevsky relate this progression, we then find the duality of their assumptions. For Tolstoy, the story is superficial; it is a garment clothing the truths which lie underneath. As Nekhlyudov becomes resurrected in *Resurrection*, Tolstoy simply lists the eternal Biblical truths which form the basis of the spiritual turn.[5] After reading the Sermon on the Mount at the end of the story, Nekhlyudov asks, "And can that be the whole answer?" And he answers himself from an "inner voice of his whole being": "Yes, that is all."[6] Nekhlyudov's story was simply a means to get to the fundamental truth of Christianity, and at the end, when Nekhlyudov finds that truth, the story is no longer needed.[7]

But for Dostoevsky, the story itself holds the power. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky gives us no way to understand Raskolnikov's conversion to the truth without the context of his story. Whereas Tolstoy lists Jesus' commands from the Sermon on the Mount to show the change in Nekhlyudov, Dostoevsky can comment on Raskolnikov's change only by placing it side by side with the Easter story. Even where Dostoevsky does refer to the Bible, he does not look at statements or rules, but allows the story of Lazarus to give more meaning to the spiritual death and resurrection of Raskolnikov through the Christ-like Sonia. For Dostoevsky, Raskolnikov's story cannot be reduced to

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that although they lived at the same time, they never made a serious attempt to meet. Steiner states that the only contact they made "was a wary and at times suppressed recognition of each other's genius," p. 322.

[5] Steiner claims that in *Resurrection*, "the teacher and poet in [Tolstoy] did violence to the artist," p. 92. In addition, Steiner quotes George Orwell who saw Tolstoy's stories always leaning to "spiritual bullying," p. 273.

[6] *Resurrection*, p. 564.

[7] This may be why Tolstoy held *The House of the Dead* as Dostoevsky's most powerfully written work, as it is more of an essay than a story, and, as Steiner says, "it is the most Tolstoyean of Dostoevsky's works," p. 324.

a basic statement of beliefs. In fact, at the end he can say only that Raskolnikov's conversion is "the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual rebirth of a man."[8]

Thus, for Tolstoy, "the story" is merely a means to truth, while for Dostoevsky, the truth is inseparable from "the story." This distinction between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky reveals the unique direction found in the contextual-narrative model of religion. Both the universal-rationality and unified-experience models see a religious tradition as Tolstoy sees the story: a religious tradition is merely a conveyor of the truth, a truth which is beyond that tradition. The story is simply a way to truth; the story, itself, is unimportant. In the universal-rationality model, a religious tradition is the means to a set of universal propositions. In the unified-experience model, a religious tradition is the means to the pure religious experience which all humans share. From the standpoint of the contextual-narrative model, on the other hand, a religious tradition is seen as Dostoevsky sees the story. In the contextual-narrative model, a religious tradition is the only context in which a religious adherent's experience is intelligible. In this understanding, we cannot separate religious truth or even religious experience from the story or narrative of a particular religion. That narrative shapes and gives meaning to all that is believed and experienced. Without the religious context, religious beliefs and religious experiences are meaningless.

In placing himself within this contextual-narrative understanding of religion, Paul J. Griffiths radically departs from the common discussion of religious plurality. Griffiths rejects the fundamental assumptions of both the unified-experience and universal-rationality models and moves into a unique, and ultimately beneficial, understanding of religious truth. Griffiths refuses to reduce religious truth to something detached from

[8] *Crime and Punishment*, p. 559.

religious tradition. Rather, he sees a complicated connection between our traditions and truth: the context of truth claims is essential in order to make sense of those claims, and the context for the experience of a religious person moulds and shapes that experience uniquely. In Griffiths' understanding, what thinkers like Hick and Netland forget, is that the story of our experiences is not merely descriptive but is also prescriptive; the story is not simply a tale of our experiences, but it also determines what our experiences are like. To assume that a religion is merely expressing truth is to fail to notice the intricate reciprocal connection that a religion has with truth. This is the unique vision and starting point which the contextual-narrative model of religious thought brings to the discussion. It will be the goal of this chapter, then, to explicate this turn away from the assumptions of the pluralists and exclusivists, and outline the point of departure for Griffiths' discussion of the Christian response to religious plurality.

2.2 Redefining Religion: A Religion as an Account

In stepping out of the traditional realm of the debate within the contextual-narrative model, Griffiths redefines the nature of religion. In his unpublished work "Religious Reading," Griffiths outlines his argument for understanding a religion not merely as a referential agent of truth, but as an "account" of truth.[9] At first glance, such a distinction may seem inconsequential, but the implications of this move are far reaching for many issues including the Christian understanding of religious plurality. In calling a religion an account, Griffiths intends to show that being religious is a matter of being *held* by a certain account of truth. Being religious is not merely believing in certain

religious claims or using those claims to express ineffable experience. Rather, being religious is a matter of seeing and reading the world through those claims. Griffiths uses the example of the account of marriage:

> Being married [. . .] is an account given by spouses (principally to one another, but also to others) of the history and current state of their relations, an account that involves the weaving of narratives, the regular performance of actions, the possession and nurturing of beliefs and affective responses, and much more.[10]

In such a description, we can see that holding an account is far beyond simply using a certain framework or story to understand truth; it is something which blends a vision of truth with intentional and unintentional practice and skill.

However, before delving into this aspect of an account, Griffiths must clearly answer one important question: how does a *religious* account differ from other accounts? In explaining accounts, he uses the above example of marriage as well as other accounts, such as the account of mathematics, and even the account of baseball. How is it that we do not call such accounts religious accounts? In order to answer this question, and differentiate a religious account from other accounts, Griffiths maintains that a religious account has three properties: comprehensiveness, unsurpassibility, and centrality. When an account has these three properties, it can be seen as religious, and, subsequently, if a person holds an account which has these three properties, this person can be said to be a religious person.[11]

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[9] His argument in this work is a reshaping of an argument found in his earlier article "The Properly Christian Response." He also reiterates it in part in "One Jesus, Many Christs?" The pages I refer to in this section will be from "Religious Reading."
[10] "Religious Reading," p. 2.
[11] Ibid., p. 7.

2.2.1 A Comprehensive Account

For an account to fulfill the first of the three properties, comprehensiveness, it must "seem to those who offer it that it takes account of everything, that nothing is left unaccounted for by it."[12] In this way, most accounts people hold (or most accounts which hold people) are not comprehensive. Griffiths uses the example of the account of being a parent. Although a father's "parent account" is clearly an important account, it does not relate many of a father's other accounts. For instance, my being immersed in the account of a parent says nothing about the accounts which I hold as a Christian, a Canadian citizen, a teacher, a spouse, and many other things. Surely it relates to these other accounts but it does not subsume them. In fact, my parent account is subsumed by my Christian account. It is thus the Christian account which seems to be comprehensive in my life, as the other accounts in my life are comprehended through Christianity.

In discussing the notion of comprehensiveness, Griffiths makes three qualifications. First, Griffiths explains that not everyone offers an "explicit and articulable comprehensive account."[13] Not every father, for instance, would see himself as having an account which subsumes all others in the way it seems to work in my life. It follows, then, that it is not a necessary fact of human nature that humans are explicitly religious. Still, this conclusion does not deny that all humans may very well have implicit comprehensive accounts by which they structure their understanding of the world. For instance, most people have certain logical accounts which they consider to be comprehensive. After all, it would be difficult to find people who, when holding up a book, could say that it is not true that everything is either this book or not this book. The

[12] Ibid., p. 9.
[13] Ibid., p. 10.

person who actually could say that this is untrue, would likely be a person who holds an explicitly religious account denying such logic, maybe a religious worldview about the impermanence of all things. It is clear that although not everyone may hold an explicit comprehensive account, it is very likely that everyone may hold an implicit comprehensive account in order to see and make sense of the world.[14]

Second, Griffiths explains that although comprehensive accounts by definition have universal scope and subsume all other accounts, this does not mean that such accounts will provide the details found in the non-comprehensive accounts. He says,

> Offering the Christian account does not, for example, commit me to any particular view as to whether Goldbach's Conjecture (that every even number greater than two is expressible as the sum of two primes) is true or not.[15]

Still, the Christian account will subsume such an account by claiming that the truth or falsity of such a conjecture is in some sense known by God. Likewise, although the Christian account may not spell out explicitly the particular actions which I, as a father, ought to do, it most definitely gives me the basic structure for the obligations by which a Christian parent must live.

Third, it is possible, in fact likely, that a person can hold (or be held) by more than one comprehensive account at the same time. For instance, as a Christian, I hold both the Christian account and certain mathematical accounts to be comprehensive. Griffiths uses the example of the mathematical account of prime numbers, that everything is either a prime number or not. He says,

> This, like my Christian account, takes account of everything: of my being a parent (which is not a prime number), of my being a Christian (which is likewise not), of the number three (which is), and so forth to infinity.[16]

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[14] This will be an important point later as one of Griffiths' criticisms of Hick is that he is holding a certain religious account without acknowledging it.

[15] "Religious Reading," p. 11.

What distinguishes such a mathematical account from a religious account is that the mathematical account is trivial in nature; it clearly gives no basis on which to organize a life. In order for an account to be religious, then, it is not enough for it to be merely comprehensive of it. It needs to satisfy other properties, properties which Griffiths claims to be unsurpassibility and centrality.

2.2.2 An Unsurpassable Account

For an account to be considered unsurpassable, the holder of the account must assume that it cannot be replaced by another account. In the holder's eyes, there will be no other account which can better account for the objects in its domain. According to Griffiths, a religious account must possess this property because to be religious is a deep non-negotiable commitment to a particular vision of truth. However, unsurpassability is not enough for an account to be religious. After all, a mother's account of parenthood is often unsurpassable but it is surely not religious. It is when an account combines both unsurpassability and comprehensiveness that it likely becomes religious; it "enters sufficiently deeply into the souls of those who offer it that the abandonment of its essential features is scarcely conceivable, and if conceivable, not desirable."[17]

Still, even though a religious account is unsurpassable, this is not to say that such an account cannot change. As history has shown, it seems to be a property of religious accounts that they do, in fact, change. It could even be argued that they must change if they are to be long lasting traditions. Griffiths incorporates this notion into his definition of unsurpassibility. He says that religious accounts will be added to or changed over the

[16] Ibid., p. 9.

course of time even though they are *seen* to be unsurpassable by religious adherents. What makes these accounts unsurpassable is the fact that such changes will not involve abandoning or significantly altering the central components of the account. At the very least, even at a time of great change, a person who sees an account as unsurpassable will not *see* the change as involving a complete rejection of the essential nature of the account.[18]

Again, more needs to be clarified here because people *do* abandon religious accounts just as they do come to accept them. In Christian terms, people convert to Christianity or conversely lose their faith. For Griffiths, what makes an account unsurpassable to its holders is not the finality of its claims, but rather how those claims are viewed *at the present time*. In other words, to the holder of an unsurpassable account, the beliefs which constitute the account cannot be seen to be surpassed; "its offerer regards its essential elements as incapable of loss, supersession, or abandonment."[19] It may well be that in a certain amount of time, this situation will change, but this does not dismiss the fact that the account is held to be unsurpassable as it is viewed by the religious person *now*.

2.2.3 A Central Account

Even when an account is both comprehensive and unsurpassable, it may still be a trivial account, and thus may not be a religious one. For instance, for a mathematics

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[17] Ibid., p. 14.

[18] The example comes to mind of the current debate within Christianity on the historical Jesus. There are a growing number of Christians who see it possible for Christianity to be truthful (and even more consistent) if Jesus is no longer thought to be divine (for example, see John D. Crossan's *Who Killed Jesus?*). Clearly, many Christians see such a step as changing the essence of Christianity. Later in this chapter we will see how this debate becomes important in Griffiths' project.

[19] "Religious Reading," p. 15.

teacher, an account of prime numbers, which clearly is not religious, has properties of comprehensiveness and unsurpassability. As a result, Griffiths adds one more property to the list which makes up the necessary conditions for an account to be religious. This property is centrality. For an account to be central, it must "seem to be directly relevant to what [the holder of the account] takes to be the central questions of her life, the questions around which that life is oriented."[20] Note that as with the two prior definitions, it is not important that the account *actually* is directly relevant, but rather that it at least *seems* to be so at the present time.

The addition of the property of centrality brings up two important additions to the understanding of religious accounts. First, without this property, it could be said that everyone, at least implicitly, holds a religious account. But Griffiths argues the property of centrality makes it impossible to assume that every human holds something which resembles an account with all three properties. He explains that "one can fail to offer a central account with relative ease."[21] There is a realistic probability, especially in our modern society, that human beings can become or already are "profoundly fragmented"; their desires and goals central to their lives can be so dispersed that there is no one account which can account for all of the central questions in their lives.[22]

Second, since a religious account must be central, there is no possibility of offering two religious accounts simultaneously. It is possible, of course, to offer two accounts which are comprehensive and unsurpassable at the same time, but when we add the property of centrality, only one such account can exist at one time. Griffiths explains

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[20] Ibid., p. 16.
[21] Ibid., p. 18.
[22] In "Moral Philosophy: What Next?" Alastair MacIntyre argues that our moral language is incomprehensible because it does not have a specific account to give it meaning.

this by saying, "I cannot offer, simultaneously and with conviction, different answers to what seem to me life-orienting questions."[23] It is possible that one may create a hybrid account based on two different accounts, but that person could not be said to be a holder of either account; rather, he or she would simply hold the new account. It is also possible that one may use certain aspects of one account, and certain aspects of another. But again, such a person is not holding both accounts simultaneously. For example, Griffiths uses the example of a person who claims to be a "Jewish Buddhist." He says to this person:

> You typically mean that you offer a religious account some elements of which are historically Buddhist and some historically Jewish. You do not mean, because you cannot, that you simultaneously offer two religious accounts.[24]

When we see religious belief in terms of an account which is central, there are only two possibilities: one holds a certain religious account, or one holds no religious account.

2.2.4 Account as a Practice

In describing religious traditions as comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central accounts, Griffiths moves away from both the universal-rationality model of religion (as embodied in Netland) and the unified-experience model (as defended by Hick), and into the contextual-narrative model. Since Griffiths claims that a religion is an account, it is not merely the embodiment of propositional statements of truth, nor is it simply the expression of communally shared experiences. Rather, as human beings give religious accounts, they are involved in a particular practice, "learned in a particular social,

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[23] "Religious Reading," p. 19-20.
[24] Ibid., p. 21.

linguistic, and institutional context."[25] We cannot understand the beliefs which are found in a certain account apart from that account, nor can we experience the religious experience on which an account is based outside of the context of that account. The story itself is not unimportant.

Hence, Griffiths, within his formulation of the contextual-narrative model, maintains that "unless we are placed in a social and institutional context [. . .] we shall not, because we cannot, become religious."[26] He makes the analogy of learning a language: although we may be able to learn something about a language on our own, we cannot become fluent unless we are placed within a community of people who use the language. In the same way, in order to become religious we must be trained by and within a community of believers. Griffiths admits that there are certain things about a religious account that one must simply know, that do not require this kind of training, that are not a matter of skill and activity. Just as with learning a language, there are certain grammatical rules and parts of speech which one can learn apart from native speakers. However, learning such things is clearly not the same as being fluent in the language. Likewise, knowing the "grammatical content" of a religion does not mean that I am a religious person. I can know details about the five pillars of Islam, but this clearly does not make me a Muslim. Until I immerse myself within a particular Muslim community and partake of its practices, I will not truly understand what it means to be a part of the religion of Islam, and I will not have fully grasped its account.[27]

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[25] Ibid., p. 22.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Lindbeck's explanation of his cultural-linguistic model can help clarify Griffiths' point here. Lindbeck stresses the influence that a religion has in shaping the beliefs and experiences of religious adherents. In this way, a religious person has found him or herself immersed within a particular contextual system by which he or she experiences the world. Lindbeck notes in *Nature of Doctrine*, "Like a culture or language, [a religion] is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being

To clarify this aspect of a religious account, Griffiths uses Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin's distinction between "knowing how" (possessing a skill) and "knowing that" (possessing some information).[28] Becoming religious is not simply a matter of possessing some information, of knowing that such and such is the case. For instance, believing in the proposition that Jesus is divine does not make one a Christian. Such things are not unimportant; one must know the claims which a religion makes. But far more important than simply knowing the claims is how to *use* these claims in a particular setting, i.e. "knowing how." For Griffiths,

> [A religious person needs] to possess the skills required to elucidate the account, to instantiate it into your life, to develop the capacities and proclivities that will make it possible for [the person] to act in accord with what is prescribed or recommended by the account.[29]

A religious account, then, is a skill. The holder of a religious account does not merely know certain truths; such knowledge is secondary. The essence of a religious account is found only by learning and coming to know the skill of partaking in the account.[30]

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primarily a manifestation of them," p. 33. It is not that our beliefs and experiences are explained by our religious accounts. Rather, our religious accounts give us a framework by which we can have particular religious experiences, and hold certain religious beliefs. It follows, for Lindbeck, that becoming religious involves learning a certain language and story, and finding oneself fluent in the language and a part of the story. For example, Lindbeck explains, "to become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms," p. 34. Becoming religious is not simply believing certain things, or *using* a religion to explain one's own unique experiences. Rather, it involves the training required to internalize the activity of accounting for truth in a particular way.

[28] Griffiths refers to Ryle's work *The Concept of Mind* and Austin's *Philosophical Papers* on p. 25 of "Religious Reading."

[29] Ibid., p. 25-26.

[30] However, this is not to say that a religious account is simply a matter of forming certain habits. In "Religious Reading," Griffiths maintains that it is rather like a disposition. In saying this, he makes the distinction between learning habits like drinking coffee, and learning a disposition like being sarcastic. Someone who has a "sarcastic account" will show his or her skill in such an account in many different ways. Unlike the habitual coffee drinker who simply drinks coffee, a sarcastic person will use: "the bitter put-down, the abrasive parody, and the self-aggrandizing critique," among others, p. 26. The point is that when someone becomes skillful in a religious account, there is no single set of actions which can describe the skill. For instance, being a Christian according to Griffiths, "issues in context-specific behaviors such as acting charitably in response to a particular need, responding with forgiveness to an act of hostility, or meeting an act of injustice with denunciation," p. 27. Being religious, then, is like being a hockey player, a

Thus, Griffiths argues that it is possible to be either good or bad at the skill embodied within a specific religious account: "You're not, then, simply religious or not; you're more or less religious."[31] Concurrently, a religious person is not simply a Christian or not a Christian; he or she is a good Christian or a bad Christian, becoming better or becoming worse at the skill of being a Christian. In this way, the goal of someone who holds a religious account will be to become more proficient in that account. If the account is valuable, he or she will want to become a better Hindu or Muslim, a better Christian or Jew. Hence, like any other skill, being religious requires training. Griffiths quotes Ryle: "Learning how or improving in ability is not like learning that or acquiring information. Truths can be imparted, procedures can only be inculcated."[32] Such inculcation can only happen in a community of shared practice, where skillful participants of the account train those less skilled.

In seeing a religious account as a practice, then, Griffiths has two main conclusions which distance his project from both the unified-experience and universal-rationality models. First, a religious account is not simply a container housing information which must be believed by those who hold the account. Although there are components of religious accounts which might fit this description, Griffiths argues that when a person becomes religious, he or she is essentially acquiring a skill. Second, Griffiths maintains that in seeing a religious account as a skill, it is a practice which must be learned through training, and this training is possible only within a particular community of believers in the account. In this way, a religious account cannot be

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pianist, or even a carpenter; it involves the competence in a skill which contains a multitude of specific, contextual actions.

[31] "Religious Reading," p. 27.

[32] Ibid.

understood by simply looking at its beliefs; rather, the only way to truly understand a religious account is by undertaking the training to learn the skill of the religion. The only way to be religious is to participate in a particular religious story, partaking in the religious skill as a competent believer.

2.3 Initial Implications for Religious Plurality

In defining a religion as a comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central account, Griffiths turns away from the common understanding of religion and offers a unique framework by which to look at the question of Christianity's place in a pluralistic world. Because of this, implicit in Griffiths' work is a strong rejection of both pluralism and exclusivism. He sees both their starting points as ultimately flawed. For Griffiths, neither the unified-experience model nor the universal-rationality model is a proper place to begin the discussion. This section, then, will outline Griffiths' initial critique of both theories. His model of religion as account puts into question the foundations for both pluralism and exclusivism, and supplies a contextual-narrative starting point for a Christian theology of religions.

2.3.1 Experience, Propositions, and Religious Belief

With his "religion as account" starting point, Griffiths shows that the unified-experience model does not take into account what is really happening in the relationship between religious beliefs and truth. In his article "Response," he criticizes this aspect of the unified-experience model as he finds it in John P. Keenan's "Mahayana Theology." Griffiths explains that most of the discussion of interreligious interaction is like Keenan's

in that it "almost always rests on an attempt to separate the religious individual's affective life from her theoretical commitments and to postulate a one-way causal connection between the former and the latter."[33] Stated more simply, theologians like Keenan who work within the unified-experience model assume that a person's pre-linguistic experience is independent from his or her religious beliefs, and that that experience causes that person to believe certain truths about reality. For Griffiths, "this is not defensible."[34] He argues that there is a much more complex relationship between experience and belief. The relationship is not simply one way, flowing out of ineffable experience into religious belief. Rather, Griffiths argues that it is a reciprocal relationship; "religious doctrines are both shaped by and formative of the spiritual experience of the communities that profess them."[35] He explains that both experience and doctrine condition each other "but, if there is a dominant direction of influence, it is from doctrine to experience, not vice versa."[36] It is then the religious account which, through a certain kind of practice, gives the conditions for the religious believer to have certain kinds of experiences. Doctrine does not flow out of experience, but rather creates experience and then, in turn, is recreated by it.

In practicing a particular account, then, one becomes immersed in it and actually *sees* the world in accordance with it. In Griffiths' understanding of religion as account, religious experience is not a personal thing, isolated within an individual, but it is primarily a shared thing, created by the beliefs of a religious community. In other words, there is no such thing as experience *qua* experience; religious experience does not exist

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33 "Mahayana Theology," p. 50.
34 Ibid.
35 "Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," p. 165.
36 "Mahayana Theology," p. 50.

apart from the particular framework which gives it meaning.[37] A religious community shapes the experience of an individual who is a part of that community. For example, the Buddhist experience and understanding of "love" is not the same as the Christian experience and understanding of "love."[38] Not only are they not the same, we cannot even say that they refer to the same thing, as even points of reference are different between different traditions.[39]

Steven T. Katz has done much work on this topic in the area of religious mysticism.[40] In his introduction to *Mysticism and Language*, Katz explains that most people "argue that ultimate objects/subjects and ecstatic moments transcend linguistic description."[41] For the purposes of this thesis, we could say that Katz is alluding to the fact that most people work from within the unified-experience model of religion. However, what Katz has found in his research is that mystics from different religious traditions have different religious experiences largely in part to the linguistic realities which their respective religions create. Katz explains,

> The Christian mystic does not experience some unidentified reality which he [sic] then conveniently labels 'God', but rather has the at least partially, prefigured Christian experiences of God, or Jesus, and so forth.[42]

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[37] George Lindbeck's work supports this as he says in *Nature of Doctrine*, "it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience," p. 37.
[38] Newbigin, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, mimics MacIntyre as he notes, "one always has to ask 'Whose justice? What kind of love?'" p. 166. He explains that "the difficulty of words like justice and love is that their context has to be given them in particular situations where action has to be taken," p. 166.
[39] In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck explains: "Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience; rather they have different experiences," p. 40.
[40] Griffiths makes reference to Katz's work in "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism,"
[41] *Mysticism and Language*, p. v.
[42] "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," p. 4 – 5.

Specifically, he argues that the "Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are not the same."[43] In conclusion, Katz shows the diversity of religious experience:

> Christians 'experience' Jesus, Buddhists the Buddha, Hindus Krishna or his colleagues in the Hindu pantheon, and Muslims Muhammed. Jesus is not 'met' by Hindus or Krishna by Christians.[44]

Ironically, John Hick's work based within the unified-experience model seems to be in keeping with Katz's findings. Remember that for Hick, we can see the Real *an sich* only from the standpoint of a particular religious framework; we experience *as*. The question we must ask is: what does it mean to talk about the Real *an sich* as a common religious experience, when religious experience is an experience entirely dependent upon the religion which gives rise to that experience? More succinctly, we can question why we should even talk about a Real *an sich*. If the "common core" at the centre of all religions is not possible to be experienced or attained, is it meaningful to talk about it?[45] It is thus from a contextual-narrative understanding of experience, either mystical or otherwise, that we can begin to question the assumptions of the unified-experience model. The unified-experience model's foundational assumption of a common religious experience is put into question as such a pure unmediated experience cannot be said to exist.

But it is not only the pluralists who come under criticism from the standpoint of the contextual-narrative model. A similar critique could be levied against followers of

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[43] Ibid., p. 5.
[44] Ibid., p. 51.
[45] The expression "common core" as an explanation of pluralistic assumptions comes from Katz's work. As editor in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Katz says that he was "struck by the variety of insights and accounts which have been advanced both intentionally and indirectly against the 'common core' thesis," p. 8. In showing the diversity of religious experience, the book makes an argument for the uniqueness of mystical experience.

the universal-rationality model.[46] In this case, it is not that experience is understood incorrectly, but rather that propositions are. Thinkers such as Netland fail to acknowledge that, like experiences, propositions can be understood only from within a certain context. When a Christian claims that "God exists," such a claim is properly understood only from within the Christian cultural-linguistic framework. It will not, because it can not, mean the same to a Buddhist as it does to a Christian. Such a conclusion lies at the heart of Alasdair MacIntyre's project, and the work of MacIntyre does much to complement Griffiths' claims. MacIntyre's philosophy rejects the modern philosophical view that we can view truth objectively. Throughout his many works, he has attempted to show that there is no tradition-free, foundational rationality by which we can judge truth claims. He explains that the conclusions of the Enlightenment have blinded us; we think that rationality transcends our particular traditions, that we have a way to truth which can escape the limitations of our historical contexts. MacIntyre states that "there is no standing ground [. . .] apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other."[47] We do not simply think about that which is true; we always do this thinking from within a specific tradition, existing at a specific time and place. Foundational rationality, then, does not exist apart from a particular context; a rationality is, in a sense, only "foundational" from within a tradition.[48] Truth and falsity are found within the confines of a tradition and its history. In other words, what we see

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[46] As I mentioned earlier, Griffiths concentrates on critiquing pluralism because of its prominence in our society. He therefore makes no such claim explicitly, but it will become clear that the claim is implicit in his work.

[47] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 350.

[48] In *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, MacIntyre attacks the modern assumption of the accessibility to pure rationality. He explains that foundational principles "can have a place only within a universe characterized in terms of certain determinate, fixed and unalterable ends, ends which provide a standard by reference to which our individual purposes desires, interests and decisions can be evaluated as well or badly directed, p. 7.

as true and false is created by the tradition which we inhabit.[49] When we accept something as true, we do not accept it from a tradition-independent position, because there is no such position; rather, we accept it because it makes sense in terms of the ends and purposes of the tradition. There is no neutral starting point for claims of truth.

In this way, Griffiths makes the important claim that religious beliefs, even one's own, are complex notions embedded in a particular religious framework. For Griffiths, a religion gives people the framework by which to understand what is true and what is false. Within this understanding, the importance of doctrine is highlighted as "doctrines" are the artifacts used by a religious community to express what that community believes to be true. In *On Being Buddha*, he carefully spells out the nature of doctrine.[50] He shows religious claims to be much more than merely the expressions of our experiences, and much more complex than objective propositions.

Griffiths begins his exposition on doctrine by making the distinction between primary and secondary doctrines, a distinction credited to William Christian.[51] Primary doctrines are sentences which a religious community "uses to describe the setting of human life and to recommend as desirable or attribute value to certain patterns of conducting that life."[52] Simply put, these are doctrines which a religious community uses to describe truth. Griffiths then lists three properties which primary doctrines must

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[49] For MacIntyre, even disciplines like science, which *seem* to make truth claims from an objective frame of reference are actually making these claims only from within the context of the scientific tradition. In "The Magic in the Pronoun 'My'", MacIntyre states that "the reasons which have in fact influenced the acceptance of the best moral or scientific beliefs defended in [a certain] time and place have been good reasons relative to a certain context of understanding and not good reasons in terms of some timeless standards of truth or right, p. 115.

[50] His argument in this book's first chapter is a reworking of his argument in "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," and "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine." In "Uniqueness," Griffiths outlines five dimensions of Doctrine. In *On Being Buddha*, he does not mention these five dimensions, but rather incorporates them into the theory which I will outline in the next pages.

[51] He speaks specifically of Christian's distinction in *On Being Buddha*, p. 6-25.

possess. First, they must seem to the religious community to be more acceptable than other doctrines. Second, they must seem to be significant for the community's religious life. Third, they must be taken to be "binding" upon the members of the religious community, and as such, the community which holds a certain statement of doctrine will feel obliged "(1) to teach it to its members; (2) to defend it against perceived competitors; (3) to explain why it is to be preferred to those competitors."[53] As doctrines are expressive statements of an account, it is no accident that the properties Griffiths claims to characterize a religious account are in harmony with the properties of a religious account.

Secondary doctrines, on the other hand, are not sentences which describe the setting of human life for a religious account. Rather, these doctrines could be thought of as "meta-doctrines," describing the setting of the doctrines of the community. Griffiths explains, "such doctrines are generally intended to state rules governing how the community's primary doctrines are to be ordered."[54] He argues that such ordering is done in two different ways. First, secondary doctrines can act as rules of recognition, answering questions such as: "Is this doctrine-candidate expressive of doctrine for the community?"[55] The answer may be found by matching the candidate with existing primary doctrine, or by reference to an authoritative text, or even by consonance with established doctrinal claims.[56] It should be noted that this goes directly against the basis of the unified-experience model in which the primary authority for ordering doctrine is experience. Since Griffiths' model disputes the understanding of religious experience as

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[52] *On Being Buddha*, p. 6.
[53] Ibid., p. 11.
[54] Ibid., p. 12.
[55] Ibid.

prior to doctrine, it follows that experience cannot be the foremost authority.[57] Griffiths explains, "doctrine-expressing sentences can therefore, never be said to be straightforwardly derived from pre- or non-doctrinal experience."[58] Thus, in seeing that primary doctrines are validated by secondary doctrines, we once again see the importance of the particular context by which we evaluate doctrinal claims.

The second way secondary doctrines operate, according to Griffiths, is by providing "guidelines for interpreting and understanding doctrine-expressing sentences already acknowledged as such by application of the proper rules of recognition."[59] Thus, not only do we recognize doctrine-expressing sentences internally, through other doctrinal claims, the actual interpretation and meaning of these claims can become apparent only by seeing these doctrines through the lens of other doctrines. Here we see the important distinction, to which we already alluded, between Griffiths' starting point and an approach like Netland's based on the universal-rationality model. A doctrinal claim does not mean anything in a vacuum; it can mean something only from within a particular community which is practicing a particular religious account. Hence, with Griffiths' understanding of secondary doctrines, we can see more clearly the importance of a context for the meaning of both experiences and propositions as they relate to religious belief.

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[56] Ibid., p. 14-15.
[57] In *On Being Buddha*, Griffiths reiterates some earlier comments on the experiential-expressive model found in "Response." I already mentioned these earlier in this chapter, but it is worth recalling them: he says that thinking of experience as prior to doctrine is "not successfully defensible" and "conceptually complex theory-laden claims such as those found in most doctrine-expressing sentences simply do not flow straightforwardly from preconceptual or prelinguistic experience (even if it is allowed that there is any such thing): rather, there is an exceedingly complex symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between religious experience and doctrine-expressing sentences. Each conditions the other, but if there is a dominant direction of influence it is from doctrine to experience and not vice-versa, p. 18.
[58] Ibid., p. 19.
[59] Ibid., p. 20.

2.3.2 A Fideistic Account?

Here we must pause and look carefully at what Griffiths' project is not. For many people immersed in the modern world, religion is simply a matter of taste, as inconsequential as one's choice of ice cream. Whereas political convictions and human rights are thought to be matters of importance which affect everyone, religious beliefs are simply private matters in which people ought not to meddle. In his article "Why We Need Interreligious Polemics," Griffiths responds to this trivialization of religion in North America. He reflects:

> For most Americans, religion is probably more like golf or football than anything else: an activity that happens mostly on the weekends, that may arouse strong passions, but that is very much a matter of personal taste.[60]

After all, how often do we hear things like: "Everyone can believe what he or she wants to believe" or "Your own religion is your business and my religion is mine." Griffiths explains that the message that such a trivialized understanding of religion gives is that the different religions are "really all the same, it doesn't matter which you have."[61]

Although such a trivialization is clearly not a scholarly view, it has reared its head in scholarly circles under the guise of "fideism." A fideist begins, like Griffiths, in the understanding that a religious tradition is the context by which one understands religious beliefs to be true, and that apart from that context, these beliefs may become meaningless. From this claim, a fideist concludes that every religion is true from within its own context, and there is no external way to judge between them. All that is required is that a religion is consistent with its own internal framework. To use Lindbeck's words,

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[60] "Polemics," p. 34.
[61] Ibid.

a fideist worries only about the "intrasystematic" truth, and not about ontological truth.[62] According to this understanding, Christians should simply worry about their own tradition, and encourage Buddhists and Hindus to be the best Buddhists and Hindus that they can be.[63]

On the surface, this seems to be a plausible conclusion when we work from within the contextual-narrative model. When the story is seen as primary, we might conclude that we should simply worry about *our* story and let others worry about their own. More specifically, when we reject objective rationality, and place rationality within individual traditions, it seems that we must simply talk from within our own tradition and accept other traditions as they are with their own realities. Griffiths seems to be leaning this way as he explains that the primary purpose for Christian claims is "to explain how *Christians* do (and ought to) order their beliefs, not to provide a universal epistemic principle."[64] One may argue that by way of the contextual-narrative model, Griffiths has taken away the authority of Christian claims and created a relativistic theology in which the Christian account is not ontologically true, but true only for Christians.[65] Theology,

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[62] See *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 63-9.

[63] Lindbeck seems to lean towards fidesim at times within his "cultural-linguistic" model; for instance, in *Nature of Doctrine*, he says "one of the ways in which Christians can serve their neighbors may be through helping adherents of other religions to purify and enrich their heritages, to make them better speakers of the languages they have," p. 60-61. Hick also leans this way in some of his writings, when he says that we all have been born into a particular understanding of truth; who can then argue for or against a certain version of truth when one's beliefs are simply a matter of fate? However, we have seen that Hick clearly does compare different faiths, although he has already determined what he will find beforehand. A better example of a fideistic outlook is the work of Raimundo Panikkar (see his article "The Jordan, The Tiber, and the Ganges"). For Panikkar, pluralism is true because each religion *adds* to the ultimate reality. Note here that he differs from Hick's argument that each religion *refers* to the ultimate reality. Thus, for Panikkar, religions should work within their own frameworks to understand the truth as best as possible. Here we see the fideism in Panikkar's project, since a particular religious tradition has nothing to say to other traditions. The members of a tradition are concerned only about the consistency of their own system.

[64] "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," p. 17.

[65] In "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord," contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas mentions that "to do theology with no other foundation that Jesus is Christ strikes many as dangerous if not irresponsible. Such a theology it is claimed, surely must be relativistic and fideistic since it lacks any 'rational' basis," p. 128.

then, is simply a discourse on how Christians can speak "intrasystematically"; it has nothing to do with the truth.[66]

However, Griffiths rejects this conclusion completely. For Griffiths, a religious account is not an isolated belief system, concerned only with truths about a particular religious community. Rather, a religious account is considered to be comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central. Therefore, to begin with, a religious belief is in no way a trivial belief. For the holder of a religious account, "religious commitments are the most important thing there is."[67] A religion provides a context for everything, gives meaning to one's life, and subsumes all other accounts. Griffiths explains,

> To treat them as though they were less serious and less interesting than this is to misunderstand and mistreat them, as interreligious dialogue and much of the academic study of religion typically do.[68]

In Griffiths' project, religious beliefs are serious and fundamentally essential views.

Furthermore, and more importantly, according to Griffiths, religious doctrine is not simply a functional system; it is a description of reality, both the reality of the nature of the universe and the true way humans are to respond to the natural reality. For Griffiths, religious claims are not simply contextual statements which say nothing about that which is true. By seeing religious accounts as being bound up in the practices of a community, he clearly does not want to reduce them to nothing but those practices.

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[66] It is in this vein that Ludwig Wittgestein speaks of "theology as grammar": theology is an attempt to understand how we ought to talk about God and Jesus, how we ought to use "God" and "Jesus" in our religious language. Peter Winch in his article "Meaning and Religious Language" explains this Wittgensteinian notion by claiming that the meaning of the expression "god" is not found in referring to a fact, but rather "found in the conditions of its application," p. 210. In this way, theology is not seen as an attempt to describe God; there is no such object to describe. In the fideistic vision, Christianity is not about facts, but simply about word usage within a particular language game. See Fergus Kerr's *Theology After Wittgenstein*, p. 145. Although I am using Wittgenstein as an example of fideism, there are many different interpretations of his work and even his statements like "theology as grammar."

[67] "Polemics," p. 35.

[68] "Why We Need Interreligious Polemics," p. 35.

Griffiths unabashedly states that "there is always the question of truth."[69] In his article "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," Griffiths argues that the doctrines which a religious community uses are not merely internal truths; rather, they "have cognitive content" and are "expressive of salvifically significant truths."[70] People who participate in religious communities will "almost always take their doctrines, even the most apparently exclusivist ones, to be, simply, true."[71] In "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," Griffiths explains that one of the uses of doctrine for religious communities is to "describe the world, to describe human persons, and to describe whatever is taken by the community to be of salvific value."[72] According to Griffiths, then, even though the claims of a religion can be understood only from within the context of that religion, these claims still make a powerful and soteriologically important claim about the way things *really are*.[73] The "intrasystematic" truth is still ontologically true or false.[74]

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[69] "Religious Reading," p. 23. Newbigin seems to echo Griffiths in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* as he says that in religious claims "the question of truth must be faced," p. 183. In the *Kinesis* interview with MacIntyre, MacIntyre states that the claims of a religion are concerned deeply with truth: "if their claims were true, it would be clear that we would have to give to the authority through whom God speaks unquestioning allegiance. It therefore matters desperately whether or not these claims are true or false," p. 43.

[70] "Uniqueness," p. 167.

[71] Ibid., p. 168.

[72] "Doctrines," p. 39. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin explains that "in Christ we have been shown the road. We cannot treat knowledge as a private matter for ourselves. It concerns the whole human family," p. 183.

[73] MacIntyre makes the same claim about moral beliefs in "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification." He says that "what is being claimed on behalf of each particular moral standpoint in its conflicts with its rivals is that its rivals is that its distinctive account [. . .] of the nature, status and content of morality [. . .] is *true*," p. 10.

[74] In *Apology for Apologetics*, Griffiths argues against theologians who have discarded ontology in the name of intrasystematic truth, reaching the extreme of fideism. He devotes a section to this project in this book, p. 39-44. He is concerned that rule theory emerges, a theory which, according to Griffiths, states that all truth claims ought to be thought of as rules and therefore must be judged only according to their internal consistency, or "intrasystematic" truth. Instead, he argues, although religious accounts are based in a particular context, the doctrine which emerges "can still (and should still) be seen as capable of bearing truth," p. 43. The truth claims which we hold within the context of our tradition still make ontological statements about reality, and thus can be said to be true or false.

Moreover, for the religious believer, the truth found within the context of his or her tradition is not important only for believers, but rather, it is vital for all human beings. About his Christian beliefs, Griffiths explains, "I take my beliefs to be not merely true, but of profound importance for all human persons. This is because they are religious beliefs, and so are properly universal in their scope."[75] Griffiths notes that it is this fact which "makes religious commitments so interesting, and so dangerous."[76] It is this interesting and dangerous "stuff" that Griffiths does not want to discard as Christians encounter other religions. Although fideism removes that which is potentially volatile, it destroys the meaning of religious claims, and for Griffiths, such a starting point would devalue religions and essentially make the encounter between religions impossible.

2.3.3 Beginning Inside and Moving Outwards

It is from within the contextual-narrative model, through this non-fideistic understanding of religious accounts and their doctrines, that Griffiths makes his departure from pluralism and exclusivism, and steps radically outside the typical pluralistic-exclusivistic typology. To understand this foundational step, let us review some of the implications above. In Griffiths' formulation, religious belief is inseparable from the context which gives it meaning; religious doctrine cannot be seen as consisting of objective statements which every person will understand similarly. However, people holding these religious beliefs within a particular context are still making ontological

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[75] "Polemics," p. 35. In "Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," Griffiths gives a Buddhist example of the universal nature of religious truth claims: "For Buddhists, to let go of the idea that the *buddhadharma* is the supreme expression of truth, that the Buddha is superior to men and gods, and that all other religious communities (when they are not simply abominations) are partial reflections of and preparations for the real truth (which is Buddhism), means much more than simply tinkering with the system. It means an abandonment of almost everything that has been of key importance for Buddhist spirituality, intellectual life, ritual and ethical practice, and the rest," p. 168.

truth claims. Therefore, the model which Griffiths uses forces us to begin the discussion from within our own tradition, and take that tradition as a serious basis of truth.[77] For Griffiths, Christians cannot make a universal theory of the nature of religious plurality; Christians must make a *Christian* theology of plurality.[78]

We can see the importance of this starting point when we see that the scope and framework of religious plurality itself will be different in different traditions, both religious and secular. The question of religious plurality itself is a different question for a Buddhist or a Hindu than for a Christian. Christians, at least in the past, have generally questioned what is to be said about people of other religions who do not believe in Jesus as saviour. This is clearly different from a Muslim account which may be more concerned about "the possibilities of salvation for those who are not peoples of the book."[79] The perspectives of Hinduism and Buddhism would be even more different. It could be said that in the Hindu account, religious pluralism is not even something which needs to be questioned; it is simply the reality of the many faces of Brahma in the world. Furthermore, secular society, in this question, has its own agenda, namely, how can we best get along without offending anyone. Griffiths, without apology, says that he is "concerned only with the questions of religious plurality as these arise for us

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Griffiths tackles this issue in many of his writings. His most recent discussion is in "One Jesus, Many Christs?"

[78] The Wittgensteinian notion of a "language game" may be helpful here. For Wittgenstein, there is no metaphysical reality behind the words we use. The agreements that we have on their usage gives them their meaning. Words are only meaningful in the context of particular language-games. For example, we, as speakers of English, normally understand what we mean when we talk about "games." However, Wittgenstein notes that there is no way to find some essence of "gameness" in every thing which we call a "game." In *Philosophical Investigations*, he says, "you will not see something that is common to all," p. 293. According to Wittgenstein, we understand what we mean by "game" because of the way we use the word within our particular language game. Likewise, religious accounts can be thought of as language games which give the context required for the meaning of doctrinal claims. Thus, all we can do is begin "within."

[79] "One Jesus, Many Christs?" p. 157.

Christians."[80] This is not to say that the question is not important in other traditions. In fact, it may be that as people of different traditions work through the question as it applies in their own setting, we can come to a better understanding of what it means to communicate extra-traditionally. However, there is no assurance that as members of alien traditions hypothesize on the nature of religious plurality we will come to an agreement on what even the question should be. Griffiths explains,

> I can't decide, as a Christian, what to say about my Buddhist interlocutors unless and until I decide what the fact that I offer a Christian account of things makes it possible for me to say in general about religious aliens.[81]

Thus, as Christians work to explicate a Christian theology of religious plurality, Griffiths contends that we should do just that: we should offer a *Christian* account.

Contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas' work is helpful here. For Hauerwas, the starting point for any Christian theology must be the church, the specific manifestation of the Christian community. He says, "in a world without foundations all we have is the church. That such is the case is no deficiency since that is all we have ever had or could ever want."[82] Hauerwas is making the claim that in order to have a truthful starting point for theological debate, we must understand ourselves as part of a particular Christian community and its tradition, not merely as isolated individuals. It is for this reason that Hauerwas makes the seemingly outrageous claim that we must make sure that we are Christians before we read the Bible. He says that "the Bible is not and should not be accessible to merely anyone, but rather it should be made available to those

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[80] Ibid., p. 157. In "Religious Reading" he says, "I shall take the Christian account as my example because it is the one I try to offer, and as a result the only one upon which I am qualified to pronounce as a native. It is for Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and so forth, to say what the elements of their account might be," p. 29.

[81] "One Jesus, Many Christs?" p. 158.

[82] "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord," p. 143.

who have undergone the hard discipline of existing as part of God's people."[83] In Griffiths' understanding, in order to understand the Bible, one must be trained in the particular practice of what it means to be held by the Christian account. For both Griffiths and Hauerwas, theology must begin with the interpretative community of the church; it must begin *within* Christianity.[84]

The problem in contemporary theological circles is that there is much disagreement about what it means to begin "within" Christianity. For Griffiths, however, the "inside" of Christianity is clear. In "Religious Reading" he explains the Christian account's most fundamental essential feature, as it appears to those who call themselves Christian:

> The account itself is seen as a response to the actions of a divine agent who is other than those offering it. God, it seems to us Christians, has acted as creator, as guide of human history, and as redeemer of fallen and sinful humanity by becoming incarnate, dying, and rising from the dead.[85]

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[83] *Unleashing the Scripture*, p.9. This, of course, brings up interesting questions about the hermeneutic circle which develops. However, the point is that there is no objective interpretation of the Bible, and a truthful interpretation of it must be based from within the Christian tradition. In *Unleashing the Scripture*, Hauerwas looks at Stanley Fish's question which he asks his students upon entering his university course: "Is there a text in this class?" p. 19. Fish explains that the question itself is misleading as it assumes that there are only two entities in question: the reader and the text. Rather, as Hauerwas explains, "strategies of interpretation are not those of an independent agent facing an independent autonomous text, but those of an interpretative community of which the reader is but a member," p. 21. Newbigin, in his *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, also cautions against interpreting the Bible as if it were a pure objective text. He notes that it must be recognized that "every interpretation of the gospel is embodied in some cultural form," p. 144. For Newbigin, to forget this is to forget that "God's universal purpose or blessing has to be wrought out through specific acts at specific times and places and involving particular people," p. 145. Thus, Newbigin explains that "the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it," p. 232.

[84] It is for this reason that Lindbeck, in his article "The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture," argues that Christians have lost the ability to understand Christianity because they no longer use the language of Christianity, but rather use the language of secular society. Therefore, he argues that Christians need to relearn the Biblical imagination so that they can recover the ability to *see* the world as Christians.

[85] "Religious Reading," p. 29.

Griffiths notes that "a strong and interesting doctrinal claim is being made here, a claim as to the singularity and salvific centrality of a particular historical event."[86] Thus, according to Griffiths, the simple claim "Jesus is Christ" is something which cannot be abandoned if we want to begin from within the Christian account. By saying "Jesus is Christ," Griffiths explains that he is using a "shorthand version" of the following Christian claim:

> Jesus is the Christ, the only Christ, the only one who either could be or is the Christ; and this means that he, and he alone, is related to God in such a way that he can make salvation available to humans.[87]

In explaining this, Christians have used the grammar of the trinity, that Jesus is the son of God, that the historical man of Nazareth is the second person of the trinity. For Griffiths, this "grammar of faith" is the basis of Christianity; he calls it the "blood, bone, and marrow of the Christian life."[88] To reject it is to reject the Christian account altogether.

Griffiths explains that the claim "Jesus is Christ" has been questioned for many reasons, but the most common foundation for its rejection is the "tendency to take conclusions of some argument offered on grounds external to the faith more seriously than the affirmation that *Jesus is the Christ*, and to reject this affirmation on the basis of such conclusions."[89] He explains that theologically, such a movement can be considered to be idolatry, because it gives primary homage to intellectual arguments which are not

[86] Griffiths makes this comment in "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," p. 169, in response to "the Christological hymn in Colossians 1:11-20, which is part of the liturgy in the Anglican tradition during the feast of Christ the King. It reads: "Fór in him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell. Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross – to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone."

[87] "One Jesus, Many Christs?" p. 154.

[88] Ibid., p. 155.

[89] Ibid., p. 155. Much popular Christian literature follows this tendency. A contemporary example of such a project is John Shelby Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. As one can tell from the title, Spong assumes that the Christian account must change because of the assumed truth of modern society.

necessarily a part of the Christian account; "the idol here then is (or may be) the argumentative faculty itself and the conclusions produced by it."[90] Looking more specifically at the Christian response to other religions, many contemporary pluralistic thinkers, like Hick, have rejected the claim of Jesus' unique connection with God on grounds external to Christianity. Thus, instead of beginning "inside" of Christianity, such projects begin "outside" Christianity and then move to reform the "inside." Griffiths labels projects like these simply as "outside-in" arguments. He outlines the schematic of a common "outside-in" pluralistic argument:

> 1) There are many alien religions.
>
> 2) Faithful adherents of these religions do not, for a variety of reasons, acknowledge Jesus as the Christ.
>
> 3) Thinking that Jesus is the Christ is true and important entails the judgment that those who do not assent to it are either mistaken or lacking an important truth.
>
> 4) The judgment that religious aliens are either mistaken or lacking an important truth is dubious ethically (perhaps it leads to, or is implicated with, treating religious aliens badly) and indefensible epistemologically (perhaps we can't give an account of why we are warranted in thinking that it will carry conviction to anyone but Christians).
>
> 5) Christians ought not give their assent to any claim that is dubious ethically and indefensible epistemologically.
>
> Therefore, (6) Christians ought not think that Jesus is the Christ is both true and important.[91]

It hardly needs to be said that such a formulation is very consistent with the pluralism which we saw in John Hick's work. When seen in this way, many questions emerge. For example, by what foundation are we calling something ethically dubious or epistemologically indefensible? One may here recall MacIntyre's work which puts into

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[90] "One Jesus, Many Christs?" p. 155.
[91] Ibid., p. 159-160.

question a neutral standpoint for morality and rationality. However, Griffiths says that even with such inconsistencies, "it is surprising how often such arguments are offered with apparent nonchalance."[92] The main problem with the "outside-in" argument according to Griffiths is that Christian claims, which are understood and interpreted only from within a particular community, are being rejected because of criteria existing apart from that community, and that these "outside" criteria are assumed to be objective and essentially more reliable than Christian claims. When we see that such so-called objective claims are merely the claims of another account, in this case the secular account, it is unclear why Christian claims must change when confronting them. Griffiths asks, if a community of people have decided to be held by the Christian account, why would they reject central claims of that account simply because they do not seem to comply with an alien account? Griffiths reasons,

> If coming to know that there are many religious aliens who do not make this confession [that Jesus is Christ], and who, indeed, confess others as of ultimate and unsurpassable significance, provides us Christians with reason to abandon our confession, this is the same as to say that the facts of religious plurality require the abandonment of Christianity.[93]

For Griffiths, then, Hick, and pluralists like him, in reducing Jesus to a "spirit-filled man" from "the Christ," have abandoned the gospel, "and the possibility of preaching it"[94]; they have created a new gospel, one which elevates the assumptions of modern society to doctrinal standing.

This topic is Griffiths' theme in "How Epistemology Matters to Theology." In this article, Griffiths claims that for people in the modern world, secular epistemology is seen to be a more reliable path to truth than Christian theology. He explains that the

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[92] Ibid., p. 159.
[93] Ibid., p. 169.

effect of this, "in extreme cases," has been "the abandonment of theology."[95] He looks at the work of Schubert Ogden, an influential Protestant theologian, who, according to Griffiths, has made secular epistemology into an idol; he has elevated secular epistemological principles above Christian ones.[96] Still, Griffiths wants to proceed with much care here. It is not that Griffiths wants to completely disregard any non-Christian modes of thought. He explicitly states that secular epistemology has "essential elucidatory and apologetic functions."[97] Therefore, Griffiths' conclusion is that "epistemology is [. . .] the servant of theology, not its master."[98] In other words, when Griffiths states that he is beginning within the Christian tradition he is making two important claims. He is stating that he does not want to be ruled by non-Christian traditions, but he is also stating that he does not want to be oblivious of them.

Thus, by beginning the Christian response to religious plurality from within Christianity, Griffiths does not want to disregard religious claims outside Christianity. He does not claim that it is the role of Christians to adopt an *a priori* stance to the religiously alien, and implement this stance without looking at the particular claims of other religions. Although a Christian response to religious plurality must begin with the *a priori* part, i.e. begin "inside," it must extend to the *a posteriori* part, i.e. continue "outside" to look at the particular claims made by foreign religious traditions. Griffiths claims that the proper response must bring these two parts together. According to

94 Ibid., p. 162.
95 "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," p. 1.
96 In his review of Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing*, Griffiths commends Pickstock on being one of the few theologians who actually is doing "genuine theology," p. 149. According to Griffiths, she begins with theology, not with epistemology. Griffiths states that her work is "an example of what might be done were Christian theologians to abandon idolatry and take seriously the reality of the triune God to whom their work is supposed to be subject," p. 149.
97 "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," p. 16.
98 Ibid., p. 17.

Griffiths, the proper Christian response, then, must be an "inside out" theology, in which claims such as "Jesus is Christ" are taken seriously and then applied to a specific encounter with an alien religious tradition. Griffiths notes that in the past, most of Christian thought about religious plurality has been done solely in the *a priori* mode: "We have thought and said much more about the religiously alien as such than about particular instances of it."[99] Griffiths is clearly criticizing the exclusivist position as he says this. Although we saw that Netland did mention that there could be certain particulars in other religions which were true, his argument was fundamentally an "inside-only" argument, in which the *a priori* part could not be influenced in any way by the *a posteriori* part.[100] In this way, Griffiths wants to begin a Christian response to plurality within Christianity, but does not want to end the discussion there, without actually encountering the particular claims of alien religions.

In naming the proper Christian theological movement to be inside out, Griffiths argues for a radically different point of departure than found in either exclusivism or pluralism. The Christian response to religious plurality does not consist of in making outside-in arguments, which, in effect, destroy the Christian account, nor does it consist solely in the inside-only, or *a priori* part of the question. Griffiths does not want to engage in what has come to be known as "interreligious dialogue," nor does he want to create a rigid Christian response to other religions. Rather, he wants to create a Christian theology of response to the particular claims of other religions. For Griffiths, this

[99] "One Jesus, Many Christs?" p. 158.

[100] The "inside-only" category is my own invention, but it is clearly in accordance with Griffiths' theology. Because of the popularity of pluralism, Griffiths is more concerned with the rejection of pluralism than exclusivism. I have a feeling that if he were to see exclusivism as more of a threat, he would categorize the "inside-only" people in a similar way. Later, when we look closely at Griffiths' understanding of what it means to argue, we will see more specific problems with the rigid "*a-priori*-ness" of exclusivism.

Christian response requires a working together of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* modes of a Christian theology:

> It lies in thinking through the details of a properly Christian response to the particular facts of religious plurality and the questions raised by them from within the bounds of a confession that *Jesus is the Christ*."[101]

In Hauerwas' words, as Christians, all we have is the church. And it is through the church, through the particular practices and beliefs of the Christian community, that we can approach a truthful and meaningful understanding of the world and its people.[102] Within the assumptions of the contextual-narrative model, Griffiths does not want to forget the story, as the story is the only way one can see truth. The Christian response will begin with Christ; where it continues is the subject of the next chapter; and where it ends is to be seen.

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[101] "Uniqueness," p. 169.

[102] Thinking of the future of such a theology in "Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," Griffiths reflects that "giving a Christian account of what Buddhists, for example, actually say and do and believe, has scarcely yet been attempted," p. 169. And it is this type of encounter which Griffiths desires as he intends to begin the engagement from Christian doctrine and seriously engage people of an alien religion with "their equally (though very different) universalistic and exclusivistic doctrinal claims," p. 169.

CHAPTER THREE:

Encountering Possibilities

Once you're where you think you want to be you're not there anymore.
- Tony Gwynn[1]

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
- Hamlet[2]

3.1 The Critical Hero

There are many great heroes in literature. There are valiant warriors who have been victorious in battle, or who have died noble deaths in fighting for their just cause. There are courageous thinkers who have changed the way people see and think during times of hopelessness and apathy. There are stubborn idealists who have remained faithful to their beliefs in the midst of powerful oppression. Reading about these heroes moves us to dream about the possibilities of human life, and gives us the desire to seek justice and equality in our world. The consistency of these heroes shows us what we lack. The nobility of these heroes challenges us to pursue the full potential of what we can be. And then there is Alyosha. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky specifically refers to Alyosha as his hero, but after reading this novel it is not obvious as to what makes Alyosha heroic. He is seemingly an average character, who lives a life of mediocrity. Certainly he is not victorious in battle, nor does he change the world with his ideals. Even as the murder plot develops, he is frustratingly apathetic, finding no explicit

[1] As quoted in Duncan's *The Brothers K*, p. 275.
[2] Speaking to Horatio in *Hamlet* (I, v, 166-167).

way to save his brother Dmitri from being acquitted and imprisoned. Clearly, the Dostoevskian hero is not a typical literary hero.

It is only when we look at Alyosha's Christian response to the world that we can begin to see why he is Dostoevsky's hero. At the beginning of the novel, Alyosha is sent into the world by his master Zosima. He must leave the seclusion and comfort of the monastery in which he is undergoing his Christian training. Alyosha questions this at first. He is like a naïve child who suddenly has to face the real world. He laments having to leave the monastery: "Why had his elder sent him into the world? Here was peace. Here was holiness. But there was confusion, there was darkness."[3] But it is in encountering the world outside of his secluded monastery that Alyosha becomes heroic. His childlike Christianity is put to the test. As he confronts others with differing ideas, he is tempted to run back to the monastery and live a sectarian life. However, Alyosha stays in the world, confronting others with his Christian vision of truth. His master Zosima knows that he is not meant to stay inside the monastery; rather, he is to "bless life" and "make others bless it."[4] He will help others rediscover their connection with God.[5]

Alyosha, then, is heroic precisely because of his encounter with others, specifically with those who disagree with his understanding of truth. He does not assume that everyone fundamentally believes the same thing, nor does he assume that he must reject without question all views which differ from his own. Rather, Alyosha actually encounters others by standing behind his beliefs and recognizing that his interlocutor's

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[3] *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 117.

[4] Ibid., p. 216.

[5] Valentina A. Vetlovskaya, in "Alyosha Karamazov and the Hagiographic Hero," compares Alyosha to the historical saint Aleksey. Vetlovskaya explains that both go into the world and rise above it. Alyosha, like Aleksey, "joyfully takes into his soul the entire world [. . .] without exception, accepting all people in spite of their 'stinking sin'," p. 226.

beliefs are more than just preferences, but are, like his own, beliefs about the nature of reality. In the definitive scene of the novel, Alyosha meets his brother Ivan, the secular atheist, and they argue about the existence of God and the reality of Jesus Christ. Ivan relates the famous Grand Inquisitor story in an attempt to show that God is no longer needed in modern society. However, although Ivan's story may be an attempt to denounce Christianity, it actually reaffirms it and Alyosha recognizes this. He says, "that's absurd! [. . .] Your poem is in praise of Jesus."[6] Throughout the section, Alyosha continues to unabashedly attempt to convince Ivan about the power and truth of Christianity. But, at the end of the discussion, although Ivan recognizes that Alyosha is trying to "save" him, Ivan remains steadfast to his atheistic ideals, and so, parodying Jesus' action in Ivan's story, "Alyosha got up, went to him and gently kissed him on the lips."[7] Throughout the scene, Alyosha does not stop arguing against Ivan's beliefs, but throughout their argument, he loves his brother and embodies this love in a Christlike kiss.

Herein lies Alyosha's heroism, as he encounters Ivan in Christian love while remaining faithfully committed to his Christian beliefs. He is not afraid to argue with his brother, and he spends much effort and energy attempting to convince Ivan to see the error in his beliefs and the "sense" of Christianity. Although Alyosha has little success with Ivan, Dostoevsky shows the fruition of his heroism in his relationship with a group of boys who, with Alyosha's help, learn to see the importance of Christianity in their lives. After being affected by Alyosha's words and actions, this group of boys not only begin to love a boy whom they once tormented, they begin to see Christianity as an

[6] *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 198.
[7] Ibid., p. 200.

expression of the nature of reality. At the end of the novel, they lament the death of "the poor boy at whom [they] once threw stones," and rejoice in the fact that "we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again."[8] They were able to come to such an understanding of life only through the certainty of Alyosha's beliefs, as he confessed and argued his Christianity with all whom he met. Thus, the last words of Dostoevsky's story are in praise of Alyosha, as the group of boys together sing: "Hurrah for Karamazov."[9]

This heroism of Alyosha embodies the direction in Paul Griffiths' understanding of the nature of the Christian's encounter with people of other religious traditions. As we have seen, Griffiths distances himself from the assumptions of pluralism and exclusivism by arguing that the starting point for any honest Christian encounter must be founded within the Christian story, accepting Christian beliefs as fundamentally true for all people; it must work "inside-out." From this point of departure, Griffiths claims that if Christians want to seriously engage others about religious doctrine, they must be prepared to argue with people who believe differently. For Griffiths, Christians are called to attempt to convince others about the truth of Christianity, knowing full well that others will attempt to convince Christians about the errors of Christianity. This chapter will outline Griffiths' vision of the form that this argument takes in the Christian encounter with others. In so doing, it will become evident how Griffiths' work diverges even further from both exclusivism and pluralism, and the models on which they are based, as he creates an independent understanding of the proper Christian response to religious plurality.

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[8] Ibid., p. 602-603.
[9] Ibid., p. 604.

3.2 Being "Seriously" Critical

The heroism of Alyosha is generally not accepted in modern society. In fact, an Alyosha-like response to differing beliefs is often looked upon with suspicion. Rather, we are called to tolerate alien beliefs and to avoid any criticism of them so as to not risk offending others. It would seem that Alyosha should simply commend Ivan on his beliefs, instead of confronting his atheism and reinterpreting his story to be one in praise of Jesus. Griffiths' project, however, gives us another way to see Alyosha. Alyosha becomes a character who takes his religious views so seriously, that he feels it is his duty to debate with others about the truth of his beliefs. It is Griffiths' goal to outline a Christian response to religious plurality that takes religious belief just as seriously. Since religions are unsurpassable, comprehensive, and central accounts which deal with truth, he wants to treat them as such. Therefore, after beginning within the Christian account, and thereby accepting Christian doctrine as true, Christians must be prepared to be critical of other claims to truth which at least seem to be contradictory to Christian beliefs. In saying this, Griffiths is stating something which our modern society generally does not want to hear, that is "the search for truth will, inevitably, involve the rejection of some world-views as false."[10] Thus, Griffiths argues that serious engagement between Christianity and other religions should be polemical in nature, that is, it should, through argument and criticism, attempt to arrive at the truth. Griffiths explains that if we are truly engaging others in questions of truth, "you will be interested in arriving at a position on whatever it is that interests you [. . .] that is preferable to any other that you know of

[10] "On Grading Religions," p. 80. Although it may seem that Griffiths is agreeing with Netland here, we must remember the different model of religion on which Griffiths is basing his project. This different starting point changes the discussion radically, and we will look closely at the implications of this change in section 3.4.

on that question."[11] In other words, if as Christians, we actually encounter people of other faiths, we will not simply accept all beliefs, nor will we refuse to listen to beliefs which differ from our own. Rather, we will, like Alyosha, attempt to find the truth.

3.2.1 The Duty of Apologetics

In the contextual-narrative model, the heroism of Alyosha finds its place in Christian "apologetics." For Griffiths, the notion of apologetics captures the essence of the proper Christian understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other religions; it embodies the proper way Christians ought to stand behind Christian claims to truth, and challenge others who hold beliefs which seem to be in conflict with Christian doctrine. Griffiths defines apologetics as the "reasoned argument in defense of what one takes to be true against views that one takes to be false."[12] It takes two forms.[13] Negative apologetics is the formal discourse intended to rebuke specific critiques of religious claims to truth. Griffiths cites standard Christian responses to the problem of evil to be in this form, where the attempt is to show that "there is no incompatibility between sentences such as *there is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God* and *there is a lot of evil in the world*."[14] Positive apologetics, on the other hand, is argument which intends to show that a certain religion's doctrine is superior to another religion's doctrine. Whereas negative apologetics is defensive in nature, positive apologetics is aggressive and offensive: "where negative apologetics mans [sic] the barricades, positive apologetics

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[11] "Polemics," p. 31.
[12] Ibid., p. 35.
[13] Griffiths explains these two forms in *Apology for Apologetics*, p. 14-5.
[14] *Apology*, p. 14.

takes the battle to the enemy's camp."[15] Griffiths writes that a Christian example which takes this form could be any of the many attempts at creating an ontological argument for the existence of God.[16]

It is in describing this notion that Griffiths has produced one of his most ambitious publications, *An Apology for Apologetics*. As the title suggests, this book is an attempt to make a cognitive argument for the claim that apologetical discourse is the way in which serious Christians will engage people of other religions. In fact, Griffiths argues that Christians, and possibly members of other religious communities, have the *duty* to engage each other apologetically. In his words:

> Since religious communities characteristically assert the ordered sets of sentences that express their doctrines because they take them to be true, it is part of their epistemic duty to consider whether a challenging sentence or set of such makes it improper to continue asserting what the community asserts.[17]

Note that the epistemic duty is not merely a duty to reject alternative beliefs, but rather it is a duty to engage in rational discourse in such a way as to determine the truth.[18] Griffiths explains that this apologetical engagement will be negative ("an attempt to see whether the competing assertion fails in its claims"), but also positive ("the attempt to show not only that the attack fails, but that the doctrines of the community under attack are cognitively superior to those of its challenger").[19] Thus, when it appears that a claim made by a person of another tradition is contradictory to the claims made by one's own

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[15] Ibid. Although such a statement clearly has many negative connotations, Griffiths here is simply making the distinction between positive and negative apologetics. As we shall see, there is an explicit attempt on his part to make apologetics a non-violent endeavour in all respects.

[16] Ibid., p. 15.

[17] Ibid. He bases this on the basic axiom: "every human being is placed under the epistemic obligation to avoid knowing assent to false propositions. [. . .] If one assents to the claim the planet earth is not more than six thousand years old while knowing this claim to be false, one is [. . .] a liar," p. 68.

[18] We will look more closely at this aspect later in this chapter when we look at the fundamental differences between Griffiths' project and exclusivism.

[19] *Apology*, p. 15-6.

tradition, it is an epistemic duty for that person to attempt to construct arguments for the rational superiority of his or her own claims.[20]

In his article "Why We Need Interreligious Polemics," Griffiths maintains that it is even more than an epistemic duty; it is also an ethical duty. Because people of religious traditions believe that the claims made in their account are soteriologically important, it would be ethically dubious to do anything but engage in apologetic discourse. Remember that a member of a religious account will not simply take his or her beliefs to be true, "but of profound importance for all human persons."[21] Therefore, we would be engaging in morally unsound practice if we would not attempt to show others why our claims to religious truth are superior. Griffiths notes that this kind of moral failure would be "analogous to refusing the offer of help and correction to a person whose beliefs and practices appear to be leading him straight into dire physical danger."[22] Griffiths shows how this engagement looks from the first person:

> If I take my religious beliefs to be both properly universal in scope and properly salvific in effect, and it comes to seem to me (as in fact it does) that my Buddhist interlocutor has beliefs that he also takes to be properly universal in scope and properly salvific in effect, and that his beliefs are not compatible with mine, then his beliefs [. . .] act as potential defeators to mine. They, if they are true, appear to make mine false in at least some respects – as mine in turn do them. In such a situation one cannot remain epistemically justified in having the beliefs one has without engaging the alien claims as potential defeators and seeing, to the best of one's ability, whether they do in fact defeat.[23]

It is essential to note here that the person whom we are engaging is under a similar ethical duty as we are; the Buddhist in the above example is also attempting to "defeat" the

[20] Ibid., p. 69-70.
[21] "Polemics," p. 35.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 36.

Christian claims. Proper engagement, then, will recognize that both sides of the debate will be dutifully attempting to defend their own position and attack the foreign one.

It is thus that Griffiths speaks of the "necessity of interreligious apologetics" which he has given the shortened name: "the NOIA principle."[24] Simply put, Griffiths maintains that if "I am to preserve ethical and epistemic respectability, I am required to engage in interreligious apologetics."[25] However, Griffiths notes that even though apologetics is the duty of the Christian community, it is not a necessary part of every person who is a part of that community. He notes that after hearing the importance he places on apologetics, "the reader might have been led to think that all seriously religious persons ought never to be doing anything else."[26] This is not what he wants to say. A religious person who is serious about his or her religion may not need to fulfill every duty that is a duty of the community as a whole. For instance, Griffiths uses the example of a nation. Surely the fact that one of a nation's duties to its citizens is to provide educational institutions does not mean that every citizen in that nation must be involved in part of the provision of education.[27] It is clearly not paradoxical for Griffiths to highlight the duty of apologetics in the Christian response to religious plurality, yet maintain it is not required that all Christians partake in it.

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[24] See *Apology*, p. 1. Also see "Polemics," p. 36.
[25] "Polemics," p. 36.
[26] Ibid., p.37.
[27] Ibid. In *Apology*, Griffiths mentions that "many sincere religious believers in all religious communities simply lack the intellectual capacity to construct arguments in support of any of their beliefs, or even to bring their beliefs to full awareness, much less to enter upon the very demanding discipline of positive apologetics. When such is the case, it would surely be an undue and improper burden upon the belief-forming and belief-maintenance practices of such individuals to require that they engage in an intellectual practice for which they are not equipped," p. 70. It should be noted here that Griffiths is speaking about apologetical discourse at a highly sophisticated level. Surely, by the nature of our multi-cultural and multi-religious world, most Christians will come into contact with people of other religions, and they must

3.2.2 Revising Apologetical Connotations

In his review of Griffiths' *Apology for Apologetics*, Hans Ucko claims that "apology came too prompt."[28] Ucko briefly looks back at the history of the Christian encounter with other religions, a history which has been violent and exclusive. He maintains that we are finally beginning to be more sensitive to other beliefs. Thus he asks, "Why is it then in the beginning of interfaith dialogue so necessary to 'correct' those who now in sensitivity to the other shun criticism?"[29] Ucko is surely not alone in this criticism for a renewed call for apologetics. The connotations of apologetics in modern society are mainly negative. Griffiths himself knows that to be an apologist is, "in certain circles, seen as not far short of being a racist"; it has become a term which in "popular currency" has become "a simple label for argument in the service of a predetermined orthodoxy, argument concerned not to demonstrate but to convince, and, if conviction should fail, to browbeat into submission."[30] Even if the apologist is not seen to be a coercive "browbeater," he or she is seen to be a person insensitive to the beliefs of others, a person who fails to respect other human beings. Griffiths admits that apologetics, by its very definition, is a form of discourse which is an attempt to show superiority of certain claims over and against others; it is an attempt to be victorious. As such, it is looked upon as an understanding of discourse which is vindictive and domineering.

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interact with them. Still, they are not bound to engage in the demands of apologetical discourse as Griffiths has described.

[28] In his review, Ucko alludes to John Milton's words: "In her face excuse Came prologue, and apology too prompt," p. 315.

[29] Ibid.

[30] *Apology*, p. 2.

Such an understanding of apologetics stems from the scholarly assumption in interreligious activity, which has become the common assumption, that the only way in which we can speak with other people is in an attempt to understand, never in an attempt to criticize. Griffiths explains that this "orthodoxy" maintains that "judgement and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than one's own community is always inappropriate"; the only legitimate goal is understanding.[31] Griffiths admits that it is clear that religious believers typically do not and will not react favourably when they are told that their beliefs are false. He notes that seriously committed believers may well react with "profound anxiety, uneasiness, and fear" to critical attacks upon their beliefs.[32] For some, this is reason enough to reject apologetics as a possible framework for engagement. Griffiths cites the Dalai Lama as one who makes this claim. For the Dalai Lama, in different religions,

> There are great differences [. . .] if we go into the differences in philosophy and argue with and criticize each other, it is useless. There will be endless argument; the result will mainly be that we irritate each other – accomplishing nothing.[33]

However, the question we must ask is whether the polemical discourse itself, as it manifests itself in an apologetical outlook, is responsible for this negative reaction, and furthermore, could apologetics actually accomplish something?

Griffiths gives a straightforward answer to this question. He argues that apologetical discourse does not necessarily have to be violent or even vindictive.

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[31] Ibid., p. xi. In "Polemics," Griffiths mentions the World Council of Churches' "Sub-Unit on Dialogue with Peoples of Living Faiths and Ideologies." He explains that the discussions which come out of this organization and others like it characteristically are of "a single rhetorical kind and have a single effective goal. The rhetoric is always irenic, never argumentative; the goal is always understanding, never refutation. Certain topics and themes are, de facto, ruled out of court, most especially awkward questions about truth, and about the universalistic aspirations of most religious communities," p. 32-33.

[32] *Apology*, p. 61. He mentions that one of the reasons for this fear is the "absoluteness possessed by the doctrine-expressing sentences of many religious communities."

[33] Griffiths quotes the Dalai Lama. Ibid.

Moreover, if the apologetical encounter is done properly, it *must* be non-coercive and the people who engage in it *must* be respectful of their opponents. He makes the claim that there is an implicit assumption in modern society that it is not "possible to regard views integral to a particular tradition as clearly false and still appreciate what is of value in that tradition and respect and love its practitioners."[34] Griffiths clearly rejects this assumption. Instead of assuming that the apologetical stance itself is to blame for violence and lack of respect in the dialogue between religious believers, Griffiths sees no connection between apologetics and poor relationships among religious opponents. People can respect others and be critical of them at the same time; there is no obvious reason why people *must* dislike those whom they argue with, nor is there an obvious reason why people *must* react negatively to criticism.[35] Surely, opponents in debate must be careful that their desire for victory does not prevent them from respecting each other, but there is no necessity that this loss of respect must happen.[36] In his words, "we can disagree with people and still be nice to them, even if historically we have not always done so."[37] It is possible that Christians can fully respect members of different religious traditions while believing that their world-view is in some way mistaken.[38]

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[34] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 13.

[35] He makes this argument in *Apology*, p. 62.

[36] In *Apology* Griffiths comments that the desire for victory sometimes is "hard to separate from the urge to grind one's opponents' faces into dust" and that "these motivations and desires are felt even more strongly by religious apologists," p. 80. Griffiths is clearly against such motivations and does not believe that they can be a part of proper apologetic discourse.

[37] "On Grading Religions," p. 77. This article is in response to Hick's pluralistic theology. Griffiths notes that pluralism makes the assumption that "you can only be nice to people if you agree with them," p. 77, which clearly is consistent with, and maybe even a factor in the creation of, the modern assumption in this regard.

[38] In his discussion with members of the Japanese Buddhist community documented in *Japanese Buddhism*, Griffiths is quoted to ask "whether there is any contradiction between loving someone or offering them humble service and feeling that they hold false views. He himself could see none," p. 191. In "On Grading Religions" Griffiths uses an example on "a less exalted level": "we can trust and respect, even have a friend who can be relied on, a member of the Flat Earth Society, even though we know that his cosmological views are less than accurate," p. 77.

In fact, Griffiths claims that it is only through argument and apologetics that we are truly respecting those with whom we disagree. According to Griffiths, by being uncritical and blindly tolerant, we are refusing to take seriously the truth claims made by people of other religious traditions. In short, Christians must be prepared to argue with others if we want to treat them as people who want to know that which is true. It is on this theme which Griffiths writes his article "Philosophizing Across Cultures: Or, How to Argue with a Buddhist." In this article, he names the modern desire to remain completely uncritical as "reverse cultural imperialism," where we treat "the philosophical views of another culture with kid gloves because we don't want to upset people"; for Griffiths, this stance "is every bit as intellectually disreputable as the old kind in which we assumed from the outset that all views that disagreed with ours were false."[39] Put simply, "if Buddhists can be right then Buddhists can be wrong."[40] Thus, Griffiths makes the important claim that in order to truly respect a Buddhist's claim of truth, the Christian must be ready to argue with a Buddhist.

In making this claim, Griffiths is not blind to the fact that, historically, there has been much disrespect and even violence committed by religious groups who see their beliefs as superior. There have been atrocities committed by religious people against one another in the past, and many of these atrocities have been as a consequence of a blind and uncritical devotion to the idea of religious superiority over another group. However, this does not make Griffiths want to avoid apologetics. Griffiths explains that the "unsavoury episodes in the history of Christianity, as well as in the history of other traditions" do not make us conclude that there is a necessary connection between

[39] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 14.
[40] Ibid., p. 12.

"judging that a given individual's or group's world-view is in some important respect mistaken, and the radical mistreatment of that individual or group."[41] Still, he argues that we must be extremely careful and sensitive so that apologetics does not become the agressive superiority struggle that we see historically.

Speaking specifically of the apologetical dialogue that Christians must engage in with Jewish people, Griffiths argues that "it must always be done in careful and clear awareness of the unpleasant uses to which such polemics have often been put by Christians in the past."[42] In his reply to Elonnore Stump and Norman Kretzmann on this topic, Griffiths claims that the "classical Christian understanding of the Jews and Judaism is potently antisemitic" and that without this classical understanding "and without its deep effects upon the tacit assumptions and actions of faithful Christians, the holocaust could not have happened."[43] He argues that Stump and Kretzmann in their desire to acquit Christianity from the charge of anti-semitism have forgotten this historical darkness of Christianity. Their work assumes that Christianity is merely a set of doctrines which can be detached from its historical and communal context. Clearly, Griffiths' understanding of a religion as an account puts this assumption into question, and thus Griffiths argues that information about the anti-semitic history of Christianity must be taken into account in questioning whether Christianity itself is an anti-semitic tradition. Still, Griffiths concludes by saying that "it does not follow from anything I've said [. . .] that being a Christian entails being an antisemite. I, like Stump and

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[41] "On Grading Religions," p. 77.

[42] "Polemics," p. 37.

[43] "Stump, Kretzmann, and Historical Blindness," p. 81-82. To show this, Griffiths looks at St. John Chrysostom (349-407 C.E.) who preached the blood guilt of the Jews as a theological necessity, and Martin Luther who advised that Christians should "set fire to their synagogues" and raze and destroy their houses; "this is to be done in the honor of our Lord and Christendom," p. 83.

Kretzmann, am the former and try not to be the latter."[44] The problem arises when we assume beforehand that Christianity is an anti-semitic tradition or that it is not. Griffiths explains, "any attempt to deal with it in a purely *a priori* manner will fail, both ethically and, in the end, conceptually."[45] The importance that we gain in our discussion from this debate, then, is that for Christians to say that they will not be coercive in their apologetics is not good enough. Christians must carefully look at the violence toward other religions that has been committed in the past and even in the present, and continue to critically evaluate the Christian tradition as a whole in this regard.

It is for this reason that Griffiths edits the collection of essays entitled *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*. He explains that the book is meant to be an educational tool for Christians:

> Christians must learn, if they are to reappropriate and give new voice to their gospel in such a way that it can be heard by faithful members of non-Christian religious communities, to think about these faithful in ways that are not corrupted by ethnocentricity and which are sensitive to the complex realities of interreligious communication. If the essays included in this book do nothing else, they should make Christians aware of how lamentably and profoundly they have failed to do this during the present century.[46]

Again looking at the Jewish-Christian interaction, Griffiths notes:

> [Jewish people] tend to see Christians as fundamentally anti-Semitic, as significantly theologically mistaken about the nature and significance of Jesus of Nazareth, and as having an inappropriately suppressionist view of the relations between Judaism and Christianity.[47]

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[44] "Coda," p. 288.

[45] Ibid., p. 289. The importance of the non *a priori* dealing with issues will become even more important as we look at Griffiths' criticism of pluralism later in this chapter. Although we will concentrate on the importance of the rejection of an *a priori* stance as Christians look at other religions, it is essential to note here that Christians must not take an *a priori* stance even with their own tradition.

[46] *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, p. 4.

[47] Ibid., p. 17. In this book, Griffiths also comments on Christianity's relationship with other major world religions.

Again, because of this, it is not enough for Christians to merely reject this view of themselves which has come from the Christian history of violence towards Jewish people. Christians, in engaging apologetically with people of the Jewish tradition and other religious people, must understand the preconceptions which these people have toward Christians mainly because of past Christian interaction with them.

Thus, for Griffiths, an essential part of Christian apologetics is that its participants must be mindful of the violent past of Christianity and seek to avoid reenacting that past in any way. Therefore, in *Apology for Apologetics* Griffiths explains that there are certain situations which make apologetics not only "inadvisable but actually reprehensible."[48] Simply put, apologetics is not *always* the appropriate way for people of different faiths to converse. Griffiths lists three specific situations which make apologetics a potentially violent enterprise, and thus make apologetics improper.[49] First, if apologetics is a part of a military campaign or is imperialistic in nature, it is improper.[50] Second, if there is any threat of violence accompanying the arguments, it is improper.[51] And third, if it is based upon an assumption of cultural superiority or any kind of superiority which cannot be altered, it is improper.[52] In engaging in Christian apologetics, then, we must remember that our opponents "should be objects of our love

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[48] *Apology*, p. 77.
[49] He explains these three factors in ibid., p. 78-79.
[50] We will later see how Griffiths shows that it is pluralism, ironically, which is the real imperialism of our day.
[51] Griffiths echoes the importance of the problem of such a situation in "Polemics" as he says that polemical discourse "is proper, morally speaking, only in situations where no other threats are present," p. 37. He gives examples of torture or forced conversions which was the case for many European Jews.
[52] We will look more closely at the second part of this situation when we look at how Griffiths' project is fundamentally different than exclusivism.

and our witness," and follow the example of Jesus by avoiding coercion in our arguments.[53]

But are there really such situations in which neither opponents are in any of the above situations? Do we really have political situations which are not in some way violent or coercive? Griffiths notes sadly that most of the interreligious conversations in the past have taken place in situations where at least one of the above three conditions have been present. However, he argues that in the modern world, situations appropriate for apologetics are very common. He highlights the institutional academies in the Western world which attempt to avoid coercive activities and even shelter intellectuals of religious communities; "they make the perfect location for the development of a proper apologetic."[54] More generally, Griffiths notes that the connection between the religious world and the political world has become distant, thus making the link between religious communities and military power tenuous at best; religious opponents simply have fewer means to be violent to one another, at least on a large scale. Still, Griffiths realistically understands that there will be no situation which is entirely free of any kind of oppression. Universities, for example, are "not value-free or free from oppressive uses of power and money."[55] However, Griffiths is not attempting to find the perfect situation for apologetics. Rather, he wants to highlight the importance of recognizing the potential of violence which can accompany apologetics; he wants to emphasize the fact that those who enter apologetical discourse with one another must keep in mind the potential of oppression and coercion which has been such an ugly part of interreligious interaction in

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[53] See "Properly" p. 24.
[54] *Apology*, p. 79.
[55] Ibid., p. 80.

the past. By remaining clear about what apologetics ought not to be, committed believers who engage in it can potentially have a positive and successful encounter.

3.2.3 A Quick Note on Salvation

We need to pause here to mention an aspect of the interreligious encounter which has been an important notion in the Christian response to other religions. This notion is the Christian understanding of salvation. As noted in the second chapter, there is a soteriological function present in all of the major world religions. Doctrinal beliefs of religions are seen to be salvifically significant, and every religion has a particular goal or end to which its adherents are aiming. In the pluralistic response, this goal has been combined into a common goal which has been called different names by different religions. Christians call their goal "salvation" while Buddhists prefer Nirvana or *moksha.* But recall that for Griffiths, working within the contextual-narrative model, the goals of the different religions are actually different goals set within different accounts. Christian salvation is not identical to Buddhist Nirvana; both ideals become understood only from within their respective unique religious settings.

In this understanding of the soteriological function of religion, one may question whether it is possible for Griffiths to do what he is attempting to do with apologetics. One of the essential claims of the Christian tradition (a claim which Griffiths accepts) is that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, or in Griffiths' words, "humans can learn what they are for and receive the capacity to become what they should be only by attending to Christ."[56] If one holds such a Christian view of salvation, it seems highly

[56] "Properly," p. 21. Griffiths mentions that the classical way of understanding this claim has been through the axiom: "*extra ecclesiam nulla salusest* [sic] (outside the Church there is no salvation)," p. 21-

likely that one will act negatively towards others who do not share that view. It would seem that even though Griffiths argues that proper Christian apologetics can and must be based in a loving attitude, such an exclusivistic Christian claim makes it impossible for Christians to avoid disrespectfully judging non-Christians who do not share the Christian view of salvation. Surely, such *a priori* judgments make it extremely difficult for Christians to treat non-Christians with a positive attitude.

Some Christians have tried to avoid this dilemma by constructing theological theories to explain the possibility of salvation outside the church to those who have not heard about Christ. Griffiths notes that there are two main types of theories in this vein.[57] First, some argue that non-Christians may be "evangelized" after death in a purgatorial place.[58] Second, others claim that God knows how non-Christians would have responded had they heard about Christ when they were living. A person could then attain salvation even if that person did not actually attain it in his or her lifetime. However, Griffiths does not believe such theories are helpful as they "have a low possibility of being true and do not form part of the essential structure of Christian belief."[59] Furthermore, such theories say nothing about non-Christians who have come into contact with Christians during their lives.

For Griffiths, a better way to understand the Christian response to the claim of unique salvation is in remembering another key element in the Christian account: that the

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22. In Griffiths' words: "We cannot talk about salvation without talking about Christ and his Church. Abandoning this connection is abandoning our account and replacing it with another," p. 22. For a worthwhile discussion on the differing positions on the Christian position on salvation and those outside the church, see Lindbeck's "*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of Non-Christians: Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Positions."

[57] "Properly," p. 22.

[58] In ibid., p. 23, Griffiths notes that examples of this kind are illustrated in Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 55-63.

[59] "Properly," p. 24.

knowledge of salvation "is available only to God."[60] Therefore, although the essential claim about the connection between salvation and Christ must be affirmed, Christians must also realize that there are many things about this connection that are inaccessible to human beings. In proper apologetics, then, there can be no final judgment on the salvation of individuals or groups; such judgments must be left to God. Still, it is essential that Christians come to the discussion ready to argue for a Christian view on salvation, that religious aliens, "in so far as they do not attend to Christ [. . .] cannot become what God wishes them to be, which is to say that they cannot be saved."[61] In Griffiths' understanding of apologetics, it is not the apologist's duty to judge; it is the apologist's duty to argue and defend a position. It is the duty of Christians, then, to argue about the truth of Christian belief, and it is the duty of Christians to make these arguments in a climate of respect and Christian love for other people.

3.3 Pluralistic Imperialism

In his review of Ross N. Reat and Edmund F. Perry's *A World Theology*, Griffiths explains that the book's purpose is to demonstrate the major religious traditions are "different expressions of the same valid ultimate reality."[62] It would be no offence to label such a purpose as pluralistic in its intent, and thus it is no surprise that Griffiths is highly critical of Reat and Perry's project. In his criticism, Griffiths maintains that he is uncertain for whom the book can be useful as he sees it "useless for serious Christians,

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[60] Ibid., p. 22. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin explains that the question about the salvation of non-Christians is not a valid question because it "is a question to which God alone has the right to give an answer," p. 177.

[61] "Properly," p. 22.

[62] "Review of *A World Theology*," p. 439. Griffiths quotes from page one of Reat and Perry's book.

Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, or Hindus."[63] Such a purpose, according to Griffiths, makes it impossible to take seriously one's own beliefs or the beliefs of the other. Put simply, according to Griffiths, pluralism is of no use for committed religious people. He mentions that the conclusions found from pluralism to which every religious person can agree "are about as useful to a serious Christian or a serious Buddhist as a pacifier is to anyone over the age of four."[64] To illustrate, Griffiths describes the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, which attempted to make a "declaration of the ethical principles supposedly common to all religions"; this discussion created "claims of such vagueness and generality that it would be hard for anyone to disagree about them, but equally hard for anyone to get excited about them."[65] Griffiths thus claims that pluralism has not been a very fruitful enterprise.

However, pluralism is not problematic merely because of its lack of substance, and its failure to grapple with truth. After emerging from Griffiths' contextual-narrative point of departure and developing his defense of apologetics, it becomes clear that pluralism is not the tolerant and unbiased philosophy that it purports to be. In *Apology for Apologetics*, Griffiths refuses to use the term "pluralism" to label thinkers of the so-called pluralistic philosophy. Rather, he uses the term "universalist perspectivalism" which brings to light the philosophical assumptions on which pluralism is founded.[66] It is "perspectivalist" because it claims that individual religions offer unique perceptions of

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[63] Ibid., p. 440.
[64] "Polemics," p. 33. In this article he also states that such attempts to find common ground lead to the "systematic evisceration of religious claims," p. 33.
[65] Ibid. Griffiths gives an example from the parliament: "To say that all religious communities recognize the right of people not to be tortured, or that all religious communities support the self-determination of indigenous peoples is not very exciting," p. 33.
[66] *Apology*, p. 46.

the ultimate.[67] It is "universalist" because it holds that it is improper to judge between these different perceptions; pluralism is a philosophy which "applies an equivalence principle to all doctrine-expressing sentences."[68] In an earlier article, "On Grading Religions," Griffiths calls members of the pluralistic camp "non-judgmental inclusivists." Again, note that the title draws out the fact that in the pluralistic outlook, all religions have the same soteriological goal, "inclusive" in all religions, and to judge between them is improper.

After explaining the basis of pluralism, Griffiths argues that this basis is fundamentally flawed: the equivalence principle simply does not work. There is no rational way that a pluralist can hold the principle and still be a pluralist. A pluralist must, at a foundational level, reject the equivalence principle. He or she must engage in apologetics and judge between conflicting doctrines. In *Apology for Apologetics*, Griffiths asks the reader to consider the case of the Jonestown massacre.[69] He then hypothesizes what pluralists would do with such a case:

> They would presumably want to exclude a sentence of the form *God is such that God wants God's followers to drink cyanide now* as being properly descriptive of the ultimate reality. Presumably, also, this sentence is not to be regarded as on a par with *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself* as a means of

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[67] Recall in chapter one that Hick claims that each religion is an expression of the Real *an sich*. It is also important to remember that in chapter two we saw that such a conclusion is highly suspicious when we see the complexity and diversity of religious experience.

[68] Griffiths explains the equivalence principle in *Apology*: "the view requires that there actually is a single religiously ultimate reality, and that it is of a kind capable of being effectively mediated through a wide variety of incompatible doctrine-expressing sentences. It means, to take an example from Buddhism and Christianity, that ultimate reality must be such that it can be characterized *both* as a set of evanescent instantaneous events connected to one another by specifiable causes but without any substantial independent existence, *and* as an eternal changeless divine personal substance," p. 47. It is obvious in such a description that Griffiths is unclear as to how such a characterization could be done. We will look more at the apologetical discussion between Christianity and Buddhism in chapter four.

[69] Griffiths summarizes the situation in *Apology*: "the reverend Jim Jones built up a devoted following in California in the 1970's, and then led the faithful off to await the coming of the kingdom in Guiana. While there the community appears to have degenerated into paranoia and fear, and ended with the founder instructing his followers to drink cyanide. Some complied willingly; others were forced. The end result was the agonizing death of hundreds," p. 49.

> mediating the ultimate reality to human beings and transforming the quality of their lives.[70]

Note what is happening here. The pluralist must distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate descriptions about ultimate reality, and thus the pluralist must have certain criteria by which to judge. One may argue that a case such as the Jonestown case is clearly outside truthful religious practice, and clearly it is. However, in making this statement, we are making a *judgment* about what is good religious practice and what is evil religious practice. Looking specifically at John Hick's argument, the movement from "ego-centeredness" to "reality-centeredness" is not without substance; there are external criteria by which one can determine whether this movement is actually happening, and Hick fails to draw attention to these criteria.[71]

Of course, there is another option. The pluralist can honestly refuse to call any religious doctrine inappropriate, thus holding up the equivalence principle consistently. Clearly, this would be an option that few committed religious people would want to accept, as "those followers of Jim Jones who died at Jonestown, are being salvifically transformed by their membership to just the same extent as are devout Sunni Muslims or Hasidic Jews."[72] To avoid this undesirable conclusion, the pluralist must determine and defend certain criteria for religious truth to be truthfully expressive of ultimate reality. Remember that for Hick, the great post-axial world religions are the ones which can be seen to transform people to "reality-consciousness." In such a statement, Griffiths argues that without realizing it, Hick is making an apologetical argument for the inclusion of

[70] Ibid.

[71] Newbigin criticizes W. C. Smith similarly in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Newbigin explains that although it seems that Smith wants to equate *all* religious experiences, since "God reveals himself everywhere to every human being," Smith "certainly does not in practice accept all [forms of God's

specific religious claims in his formulation of pluralistic truth. Therefore, we can see that holders of pluralism do, in fact, make certain metaphysical claims which they hold to be true for all people. It is not a position which has no beliefs; it is a position which makes truth claims that are true for all people at all times. At the very least, then, pluralism does not make apologetics improper. Rather, pluralism highlights the importance of apologetics in the determination of religious truth.

Still, for Griffiths, the main problem in the pluralistic outlook is not the fact that pluralists hold certain metaphysical claims and reject others. After all, Griffiths argues that Christians should renew their strength in their own metaphysical claims and enter into apologetical discourse. To criticize others on this ground would be inconsistent. Rather, the main problem in pluralism is that pluralists refuse to admit that they are metaphysicians, yet they can reject other metaphysical beliefs with rigid confidence from a seemingly objective perspective.[73] The presupposition of pluralism is that any religious belief which is not in keeping with pluralism must be rejected. Griffiths notes that because of the assured metaphysical position of pluralism, the pluralist can do "what only the most assured of traditionally exclusivistic apologists is able to do; that is, to judge that certain key doctrines of major religious communities are clearly false."[74] Any religious philosophy or religious belief which argues for the superiority of any belief is false

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revelation] as equally valid," p. 165. For example, Newbigin notes that Smith would reject Hitler's "divine mission." But the question remains: "on what grounds do we reject [Hitler's] claim?" p. 165.

[72] *Apology*, p. 49.

[73] In "Polemics," Griffiths criticizes those engaged in the quest for "interreligious dialogue" as "metaphysicians who don't know themselves as such; or (worse) metaphysicians who do know themselves but haven't the courage of their convictions," p. 35.

[74] "Uniqueness," p. 161.

according to pluralism.[75] Thus, in what is said to be an unbiased philosophy, pluralism makes substantial and subjective judgments on religious beliefs.

Moreover, this judgment is a judgment which does not take into account anything but the already predetermined beliefs of pluralism. Griffiths argues that pluralism has become "mostly sterile" because it is a philosophy which has determined beforehand the outcome of the religious encounter.[76] Metaphysical claims are considered false by the pluralist simply because they are not in keeping with pluralism on that ground alone.[77] In Griffiths' argument, then, pluralism is revealed to be an *a priori* philosophy as it is "constructed without much interest in the empirical details of what religious communities actually tend to assert, value, and practice."[78] In effect, a pluralistic outlook leads to an encounter which is not actually an encounter; the pluralist refuses to listen to any beliefs which contradict pluralistic assumptions. Ironically, this is the same problem which pluralism has of the many exclusivistic claims found in the different religions. As such, pluralism does exactly what it finds problematic in exclusivism: it categorically rejects all other claims of the nature of religious truth without even listening to arguments in

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[75] See *Apology*, p. 50.

[76] In "Doctrines," Griffiths notes that thinkers such as John Hick have turned the Christian response to religious plurality into a "mostly sterile" exercise, p. 29. He goes on to say that the discussion is an "*a priori*" discussion which pays no "attention to actual data about non-Christian communities," p. 29.

[77] In "On Grading Religions," Griffiths gives the following example: "the view held by most Christian intellectuals throughout most of Christian history, that the world-views of other religions are either straightforwardly false or anyway less true than that of Christianity, is seen by the non-judgmental inclusivist as fostering intolerance, hatred, violence, and even genocide," p. 77.

[78] *Apology*, p. 48. Katz in his work on mysticism also comes to this conclusion as he rejects pluralism in his article, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." He explains that it is meaningless to find a "common core" of mystical experience by using "*a priori* assumptions on the matter which prove their case in what is essentially circular fashion," p. 65. In his introduction to *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, he regrets that "many of the best known accounts of mysticism are indeed the product of *a priori* metaphysical and theological requirements, and not the result of any close encounter with the mystical sources of the world's religions," p. ix. As the editor of this book, then, he has attempted to find contributors who actually "engage the texts."

support of them.[79] Furthermore, pluralism denies the reality of any religious belief which claims superiority, without hearing any apologetical defense for that claim. A religious belief which is in contradiction with pluralism is rejected simply because of the contradiction. Before beginning the encounter, the pluralist has already determined what will be found: we all believe the same thing.

For this reason Griffiths argues that pluralism is actually an exclusivism of its own, and as such, is fundamentally hostile, maybe even more hostile than historical Christian exclusivism, because it is acting under the guise of tolerance and good will.[80] In a seemingly respectful way, pluralism intolerantly rejects any exclusivistic claims, or even any philosophies which contradict with pluralism. Griffiths even goes as far as to call pluralism "traditional Christian imperialism with a new twist."[81] We can see this imperialistic aspect of pluralism as it seeks to indoctrinate people the world over to its way of thinking. Griffiths explains, "[pluralism] wants and intends that its rules and modes of procedure should be the dominant (even the only) ones in play when the game has to do with intercourse among different religious communities."[82] It must be recognized that if pluralism were accepted by all religious people, the changes that would

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[79] Recall that for Hick, pluralism is a hypothesis which is set out to be true before the encounter begins.
[80] Gavin D'Costa speaks similarly of pluralism in his article "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions." D'Costa labels pluralists as "anonymous exclusivists," p. 232 (the parody of Rahner's "anonymous Christians" is clearly intended). D'Costa's argument in the article is that "pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists," p. 225.
[81] "Uniqueness," p. 158. It is worth noting that there are pluralistic visions which evolve out of other religious traditions as well. But again, these visions end up being imperialistic, or at least exclusivistic, in their own way as well. In her article "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions," Jane Compson argues that beneath the seemingly tolerant views of the Dalai Lama on religious plurality, his methodology "arises from prioritizing Buddhist ideas over those of other faiths, and in this respect [his] apparent pluralism is deceptive," p. 271. Moreover, the Dalai Lama's pluralism is "made possible by faithful adherence to – or rather, practice of – ideas which are exclusive to Buddhism," p. 278. In his article "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," D'Costa agrees: "In the Dalai Lama's tolerant pluralism we find traditional Tibetan Buddhist doctrine being exclusively affirmed and grounding the apparent pluralism," p. 232.
[82] "Polemics," p. 32.

have to be made in religious doctrine would be enormous. It is not only the Christians who have what pluralists would call exclusivistic claims. Griffiths lists a few examples:

> (1) the standard Islamic position on the revelatory status of the Qur'an vis-à-vis other sacred books;
>
> (2) the usual Buddhist judgments as to the salvific inefficacy of Hindu doctrine and practice – and, by extension, of all non-Buddhist doctrine and practice;
>
> (3) the traditional Jewish morning prayer, which includes a heartfelt expression of thanks to God for not having been made a non-Jew.[83]

All of these beliefs, and many others, would have to be reshaped in the pluralistic crucible, and it is unclear in what state they would emerge. What is clear is that if pluralism has its way, the destruction levelled against these beliefs would be unprecedented. One may even wonder if religions could survive such a reconstruction. Although pluralism seems to argue that all religious beliefs, even the seemingly conflicting ones, are actually in agreement, we can see that pluralism is saying something much more destructive: all religious beliefs which can be seen to agree are accepted as true *prior to any engagement*; those beliefs which make pluralism impossible are rejected as false *prior to any engagement*. Griffiths' project illuminates this hidden agenda of pluralism as it determines *a priori* the result of a so-called interreligious dialogue.

3.4 Avoiding Exclusivistic Imperialism: The Possibility of Being Wrong

To make a connection between Christian exclusivism and imperialism would not be a daring move. It is well documented that Christianity has been, and still may be, responsible for much hostility and even violence in the world. Therefore, in order to show the truth in Griffiths' argument, it is not enough to show that his project is

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[83] "Uniqueness," p. 158.

rationally superior to pluralism; it is also essential to show how his apologetical approach differs from exclusivism. We already drew attention to Griffiths' claim that people can differ in their beliefs and still "be nice" to one another, and in "Philosophizing Across Cultures," he notes that "the model to be avoided, for an historian of religion, is the old-style missionary confrontational approach, the aggressive desire to convert and disprove."[84] However, it must be noted that Netland, in his understanding of exclusivism founded within the rigidity of the universal-rationality model, is also skeptical of such a hostile approach. How, then, is Griffiths' project substantially different from exclusivism? Recall that in chapter two, we saw that Griffiths' point of departure within the contextual-narrative model is much different than the starting point of exclusivism which is solely propositional. However, as with pluralism, the differences between Griffiths' project and exclusivism are far deeper.

Ironically, in Griffiths' criticism, the main problem with exclusivism is the same as the main problem with pluralism. Before the interreligious discussion has even begun, the exclusivist already knows how the discussion will end. Just as the pluralist *knows* the other person is simply saying the same thing differently, the exclusivist *knows* the other person is fundamentally wrong. According to Griffiths, such an *a priori* position cannot lead to anything fruitful. Exclusivism, like pluralism, turns any hope of a meaningful debate into a sterile discussion. In his article presented at a discussion on the relationship between Japanese Buddhism and Western Christianity, Griffiths labels one who engages in exclusivistic thinking as a "triumphalist."[85] A triumphalist rightly believes that there are major differences between the beliefs of rival religious traditions. However, he or she

[84] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 13.
[85] "On the Possible Future of the Buddhist-Christian Interaction," p. 154.

is convinced that his or her tradition has "the complete set of true propositions."[86] In other words, before beginning any encounter, the triumphalist is already in a position which is self-guaranteeing of his or her truth, and as such, will not be open to any rational discussion since there is nothing which could convince him or her to change any beliefs. Griffiths is highly critical of this approach since "the inevitable result will be an end to conversation."[87] As with pluralism, exclusivism fails to bring about a true encounter because of its *a priori* determination of the truth. What the exclusivist and the pluralist forget is that the reason for the encounter is not simply to make a statement of truth; rather, the reason for the encounter is to *find* the truth.

This is not to say that a Christian encountering people of other faiths should not have a passion for his or her beliefs. Remember that the Christian response must begin with a firm belief in fundamental Christian claims. Griffiths states in no uncertain terms that the Christian apologist will begin "with a powerful trust in the truth and efficacy of the doctrine-expressing sentences" of Christianity.[88] However, he clarifies this to make sure he is not creating an exclusivistic response. According to Griffiths, in this "powerful trust," there must also be a realization that after encountering people of other religious traditions, those same doctrine-expressing sentences may have to be modified or even abandoned.[89] In no uncertain terms, Griffiths argues that if the apologetical encounter is to be heuristically valuable, then "obviously revision, alternation, and abandonment of passionately held religious views must be a possibility."[90] Recognizing this aspect of the encounter in no way forces one to reduce the passion one feels for his or her beliefs.

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 *Apology*, p. 81.
89 Ibid., p. 82.

Griffiths explains that just as we need to dispose of the pluralistic idea that all religious truths are the same, we also need to "dispose of the idea that one needs to be right in order to properly engage in interreligious apologetics."[91] We can still argue strongly for our beliefs, yet allow for the possibility that someone may show those arguments to be inconsistent. In fact, including this allowance in our arguments makes them more meaningful.

Alasdair MacIntyre has spent much work looking at this notion of remaining open to the possibility of error in a particular tradition. For MacIntyre, a tradition which is self-guaranteeing cannot hope to find truth. If a tradition allows no room to be proven false, it is a degenerate tradition which has "contrived a set of epistemological defences which enable it to avoid recognising that it is being put in question."[92] In effect, such a tradition is not saying anything meaningful since nothing could ever show its beliefs to be false.[93] A truthful tradition, for MacIntyre, must admit that there is a possibility that "at some future time it will fall into a state of epistemological crisis."[94] In other words, a tradition must remain falsifiable. Note two important things here for Griffiths' project. First of all, the only way that a religious tradition can be critical or engage in apologetics is if it leaves itself open to be proven false. If the engagement comes from a self-guaranteeing tradition, that tradition is, in effect, meaningless. Exclusivism, then, makes

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[90] "Polemics," p. 36.

[91] *Apology*, p. 82.

[92] "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," p. 147. In this article, MacIntyre explains what happens to a tradition when it cannot supply adequate reasons for its claims, a time of epistemological crisis. It is only a truthful tradition which allows for the possibility that such epistemological crises will occur; a tradition which is not interested in truth will never question itself.

[93] The common example to show the meaninglessness of self-guaranteeing claims is the claim: there is an invisible, elephant in this room, which cannot be perceived in any way. There would be no way to show that such a claim is false, but there would be no value to such a claim since it would not change anything about the room, i.e. there would be no difference between a room containing this "elephant" and one which does not.

the Christian tradition into a meaningless set of unrefutable claims. Thus, as exclusivists, and as pluralists for that matter, enter into an interreligious discussion knowing the outcome of the encounter, they are making the encounter meaningless, or, in other words, it is as if there was no encounter.

Second, a religious tradition is actually undertaking a great risk in the engagement with people of other religions, because, in MacIntyre's words, a tradition "cannot know in advance, whatever their own convictions or pretensions may be, how and in what condition their tradition will emerge."[95] A Christian apologist coming to the table of an apologetical discussion is putting his or her beliefs in a position to be critically analyzed and possibly destroyed. Such is not the case for the exclusivist or the pluralist, as they already know that nothing substantial will change. Still, Griffiths admits that the chance of drastic change is often not a great one. As an example he says,

> Catharine MacKinnen [. . .] is extremely unlikely to become a conservative Baptist as a result of apologetical engagement with Billy Graham; and I am rather unlikely to decide that I have no mental life and that disembodied existence is not a possibility for me as a result of polemical engagement with Patricia Churchland.[96]

But, in the end, both these things are at least *possible* if the encounter is truly engaging. The Christian who enters into a polemical debate with a person who holds a different religious account must come to this discussion with a strong and passionate faith in Christian doctrine. However, the strength of this faith will not rely on irreversible supporting arguments; there must be the possibility of this faith being challenged.

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[94] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 364.
[95] Ibid., p. 327.
[96] "Polemics," p. 36. To make sense of this quote, it may be helpful to note that Griffiths explains that Catherine MacKinnon is a spokesperson for legal rights of women, who abhors conservative Christian views as she sees them to be oppressive to women, p. 31; and Patricia Churchland argues for "a science that would demonstrate mental events to be either strictly identical with physical events or epiphenomena of them," p. 32.

Griffiths thus argues that true apologetics must be entered with this possibility in mind so that the apologist is aware of the risks, and in order for the encounter to be a fruitful enterprise.

3.5 Possibilities

Once the Christian response to religious plurality is no longer confined to ending in a predetermined way, the many possibilities which become present make the discussion very interesting and exciting. Griffiths explains:

> Christian theologizing about non-Christians has far too long been focussed upon the abstract *a priori* to the detriment of theological thinking about concrete examples of non-Christian religious phenomena.[97]

In his contextual-narrative turn, this futility can cease. Griffiths argues that once we abandon an *a priori* method, the interreligious encounter can become "enormously fruitful and endlessly fascinating, largely because one does not know in advance what one will find."[98] The discussion will not necessarily end up as the pluralists have already predetermined, with all parties agreeing that their respective doctrines are equal. Nor will the discussion necessarily end up as the exclusivists have predetermined, in a conclusion of the superiority of Christian doctrine. Because the proper interreligious discussion will be an honest open debate between holders of particular religious accounts, it is uncertain how those who partake in the discussion will emerge from it.[99]

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[97] "Encountering Buddha Theologically," p. 40.

[98] "Doctrines," p. 41.

[99] In his article "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," a review of Schubert Ogden's *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* and Joseph DiNoia's *The Diversity of Religions*, Griffisths commends Ogden and DiNoia on leaving behind the common Christian *a priori* method of theologizing about non-Christian people. Although he has problems with some parts of their respective arguments, Griffiths states that their achievement is in modalizing the crude *a priori* claims of exclusivism and pluralism, and recasting them in terms of possibility and necessity. Thus, instead of making the pluralistic claim that "all religions are true," we have the speculative question asking whether "it is possible that there is more than

In this way, by engaging in apologetics, the Christian apologist can uncover many different things about the nature of the rival religious tradition. To begin with, the apologist may find that after coming to an understanding of a certain belief, apologetics are not really needed. The apologist may come to the same conclusion as the pluralist: a certain belief held by the other account may in fact be very similar to a Christian belief, and thus, there is no need for polemical discourse. Griffiths explains that "these beliefs may extend to claims about the nature of God, of human persons, and of the patterns of action in which people ought to engage."[100] Thus, it is important to note that the pluralist is not necessarily wrong; it is possible, and even likely, that certain beliefs, can and will be found to be similar between different religious traditions. Still, Griffiths cautions us here and notes an important limitation which must be placed on this aspect of the discussion:

> No alien account will, or can, contain explicit beliefs about the nature and significance of Jesus of Nazareth that are substantively identical with those held by Christians. If it did, it would simply be the Christian account and not an alien one.[101]

Christians can therefore be joyful in the recognition of similar claims in other religions, but should not attempt to read the fundamental claims of Christianity into other religions.

Another possibility which makes apologetics unimportant is when beliefs are found in the rival tradition that are not incompatible with Christian claims but are not identical with them.[102] Griffiths notes that "there may be true beliefs of religious significance to Christians that are not yet explicitly part of our account; and [. . .] that

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one true religion," p. 382. In other words, these thinkers have opened themselves up to the many possibilities which may come from the encounter, changing the debate from an *a priori* one into an *a posteriori* one.

[100] "Properly," p. 20.

[101] Ibid.

some such beliefs may be explicitly part of some alien account."[103] Again we see that after emerging from an investigation of another's beliefs, we can agree in a limited extent with pluralistic claims. However, here we need to note that in Griffiths' project, beliefs which are found to possibly add to the Christian account cannot be left as they are. In order for these beliefs to become important for Christians, they must "be appropriated by us into our religious account, baptized, read in Christ, and written into the margins of our account."[104] Ironically, after this is done, these beliefs may be somewhat unrecognizable to those who hold them. Some may even say that there is an inherent destruction in such an act, and it is clear that Griffiths is not attempting to mask the agitation such an activity may seem to cause as he says that these beliefs must be "wrenched from the alien account, removed from their metaphysical, ritual, and epistemological moorings, and transferred to a new, Christian harbour."[105] However, this "wrenching" is appropriate considering the nature of religious beliefs as understood within the contextual-narrative model. If these beliefs are to become meaningful in the Christian account, they must be given the context which makes other Christian beliefs possible. Recall that for Griffiths, a belief is not an isolated piece of doctrine; it can become meaningful only as it becomes situated within a specific context. It is thus the apologist's job to give these newly found beliefs an appropriate context for Christians.

Still, more than likely, upon coming to an understanding of a different religious account's doctrinal statement, a Christian engaging in an interreligious discussion will find that some degree of polemics are needed. The Christian apologist may find what the

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[102] Griffiths calls this a "more interesting" case in ibid.
[103] Ibid. Recall that even in exclusivism, Netland did not deny that this is a possibility.
[104] Ibid., p. 21.
[105] Ibid.

exclusivists have already predetermined: certain beliefs appear to be incompatible with the Christian account. Note here that again Griffiths adamantly avoids an *a priori* conclusion about the incompatibility of religious beliefs. The incompatibility between beliefs may not be actual; it may only appear to be true, or, in Griffiths' words, the recognition of conflicting beliefs does not "require that the beliefs held by the people involved actually be incompatible one with another; it requires only that this seem to them to be the case."[106] Thus, even as beliefs are seen and understood to be in conflict, there is no predetermined understanding of how the discussion will end.

Griffiths explains that there are two basic possibilities after looking at seemingly conflicting beliefs with a person of a different religious tradition. The first possibility, upon engaging in such apologetical discourse, is that the Christian apologist may discover that beliefs which seemed to be conflicting may in fact turn out to be similar. Hence, even after initially understanding beliefs to be in contradiction, the apologetical encounter may show that there is, in fact, no contradiction between the beliefs. Griffiths gives an example:

> It might turn out, for instance, that after an apologetical engagement has begun – I might offer my Buddhist interlocuter what I take to be six conclusive arguments, say, as to why he should abandon his view that all existents are impermanent – I discover that the incompatibility that had seemed to me so profound, deep-going, and unavoidable turns out to be merely apparent. The differences, perhaps, were rhetorical rather than real, and the conclusion of our debate is that we learn that we are fundamentally at one on important metaphysical questions.[107]

Griffiths calls what would happen in such a discovery "a shock of recognition," as the Christian may find that an alternate account may be "substantively identical" in its

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[106] "Polemics," p. 36.

[107] Ibid. We will look at Griffiths' attempt to deal with such possibilities in chapter four.

description of certain truths.[108] Moreover, this recognition could be one of recognizing that an alternate account has a similar religious goal in a certain aspect and that it fulfills this goal more consistently than the Christian account.[109]

However, the second possibility must also be considered. That is, as the debate progresses, the Christian apologist may find that the seemingly inconsistent beliefs are in fact inconsistent, and may be even more importantly so than were thought to be at the outset.[110] We cannot assume beforehand that all apparent inconsistencies are merely superfluous as the pluralist presupposes.[111] Griffiths mentions that because the Christian apologist is committed to his or her doctrinal beliefs and is taking those beliefs seriously, the engagement will quite possibly lead to the thoughtful rejection of the rival beliefs: "alien doctrinal commitments will seem to be comprehensible, relevant, interesting, but finally incompatible with one's own, and so unacceptable."[112] Therefore, in an attitude of respect, what may in the end emerge from the polemical discussion is a judgment that the

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[108] "Doctrines," p. 42.

[109] In ibid., Griffiths explains that "it seems to me that some parts of some Buddhist doctrines about the nature of Buddha's omniscience provide a better account of what omniscience is than many – perhaps any – Christian accounts of the same manner," p. 42. Historically, it is clear that certain Jewish and Muslim thinkers have influenced Christian belief to a large extent, because Christian thinkers were open to the possibility that the goals shared by the three "religions of the book" may be better explained in what seems to be conflicting theologies.

[110] In "Polemics," p. 36, Griffiths explains that this would be the likely result in the Buddhist-Christian example which I cited in the previous paragraph.

[111] In his response to Hick in "On Grading Religions," Griffiths notes that Hick bases his claim about the commonality of all religious beliefs on the basis that "it would be rather nice if it were so because then no one would be wrong and we could all happily spend our time congratulating one another on our mutual rightness," p. 79. He goes on to say that "the uncomfortable fact remains that religious world-views do have explicit truth-claims associated with them; that these truth-claims are in many cases simply incompatible with one another; and that the incompatibility of truth-claims, coupled with significant differences in stated religious goals, leaves absolutely no good reason to believe either that all religions are aimed at the same goal or that all conflicts between religious truth-claims are merely apparent," p. 79. In Jacques Dupuis' review of *Apology for Apologetics*, Dupuis explains that Griffiths is "right in affirming that doctrinal differences between the various religious traditions must be dealt with seriously; and that the eventual contradictions existing between them must be assumed responsibly on every side, without being either disguised or glossed over," p. 175.

[112] "Doctrines," p. 42. We will look more closely at how these doctrinal commitments can become comprehensible in chapter four.

other's beliefs are "mistaken," "improper," or even "damnable."[113] According to Griffiths, then, the search for truth will often call for the rejection of certain beliefs.[114]

But again, such a possibility is not predetermined to be the only one when beliefs are found to be actually inconsistent. There is the serious possibility that after recognizing the inconsistencies between beliefs, the Christian will realize that his or her beliefs are lacking as compared to the other's beliefs. Thus, in the search for truth, there can be "a joyful learning of something we do not already know."[115] Using Christian terminology, Griffiths explains that Christian doctrine itself shows that this is a possibility as we must engage in "a humble and interested listening for the *logos spermatikos*, the traces of the divine word sown in all human hearts."[116] Serious engagement with a holder of a different religious account can therefore lead to the revision or even the abandonment of Christian beliefs. As we noted before, without this possibility present, Christian beliefs become meaningless, and the interreligious discussion is not a true encounter.

Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain. However those involved in the discussion emerge from the debate, the encounter will be immensely effective in increasing the knowledge of religious beliefs. Griffiths explains that "by trying to disprove Buddhist metaphysics and having kind Buddhist friends argue back, I might, for instance, have come to understand the subject much better than I otherwise would have"; furthermore, "I am likely to learn a great deal about the inner logic and systematic

[113] "Properly," p. 25.
[114] Remember that such a rejection does not have to be done in disrespect, and that, proper apologetics will respectfully judge other's beliefs. In "On Grading Religions," Griffiths mentions that "such an enterprise need have no deleterious effect upon our capacity for being nice to those whom we disagree," p. 80.
[115] "Properly," p. 25
[116] Ibid., p. 24.

connections among my own religious beliefs."[117] Griffiths thus labels apologetics as a "heuristic tool of great power" which can help all participants gain greater understandings of the intimate workings of the rival positions.

Griffiths' understanding of a proper response to religious plurality is thus based in an apologetical discussion, leaving room for many different possibilities to occur. In such a way, the interreligious encounter becomes a powerful tool of learning, as holders of rival religious accounts grapple with seemingly inconsistent beliefs and struggle to make sense of them. According to Griffiths, engaging apologetically and basing oneself passionately in one's tradition will lead the discussion between religions "to the crossing of new frontiers in interreligious dialogue," frontiers which pluralism and exclusivism cannot hope to access.[118] In a project which attempts to rid the search for religious truth from predetermined conclusions, Griffiths sees an exciting polemical discussion which has unlimited possibilities. His hope is that committed believers will argue seriously in support of their beliefs and thus engage in fruitful dialogue with one another. Griffiths sees a future of interreligious discussion in which members of rival religious traditions passionately put forth their arguments in a fervent desire to find the truth. Within the contextual-narrative model, beginning with Christ, the Christian apologist cannot even imagine where the debate may lead. It is this impossible imagining to which we turn our focus in the next chapter, as we look at what Griffiths' understanding of the proper Christian encounter may look like in practice.

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[117] "Polemics," p. 36.
[118] "Uniqueness," p. 170.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Playing the Game

We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are.
- David Zindell[1]

When you say, 'words are of no account,' you negate your own assertion through your words. If words are of no account, why do we hear you say that words are of no account? After all, you are saying this in words.
- Rumi[2]

Words, words, words.
- Hamlet[3]

4.1 Strangers

For Dostoevsky, the "argument" is an essential literary device; in his works, he brings in the formative conditions of the plot through the polemical engagement between his characters. More importantly, by forming arguments between his characters, Dostoevsky allows the reader to see his own arguments in everything from political concerns to religious beliefs. For example, Dostoevsky's belief in the saving power of Christianity lives in Sonia's refusal to accept Raskolnikov's rational reasons for the murder in *Crime and Punishment*, and, as we have seen, Dostoevsky's belief of the place of God in this world is found as Alyosha debates with his brother Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, both of these engagements, and the many others found in Dostoevsky's novels, have a key difference when we compare them to the interreligious engagement: the interlocutors in all of these debates speak out of a common tradition as

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1 In his novel *Neverness*, p. 371..
2 Quoted in Katz's *Mysticism and Language*, p. 3.
3 Speaking to Polonius in *Hamlet* (II, ii, 192).

they debate, and as such, they can all fundamentally understand the arguments of one another. Even Ivan, as he argues for his rejection of God uses Christian language which Alyosha has no problem deciphering.

In his classic science fiction novel, *Stranger In a Strange Land*, Robert A. Heinlein deals with arguments which are not like Dostoevsky's. Heinlein's arguments are different in that they are not based within a common tradition. The premise of his novel is outlandish and unbelievable, but even so, as the action progresses, Heinlein forces the reader to think about the problems of translatability and commensurability across the boundaries of tradition and culture. In the novel, a human being, Valentine Michael Smith, is found on Mars. Smith has had no contact with other human beings and has been completely immersed in the Martian tradition. The captain of the expedition to find him comments: "Until we came along he had never laid eyes on a man. He thinks like a Martian, feels like a Martian. He's been brought up by a race which has *nothing* in common with us."[4] By growing up in this alien society, his "thoughts, abstractions from half a million years of wildly alien culture, traveled so far from human experience as to be untranslatable."[5] Even his understanding of so-called objective structures like time and mathematics are seen by him to be completely different:

> 'It is later than you think' could not be expressed in Martian – nor could 'Haste makes waste,' though for a different reason: the first notion was inconceivable while the latter was an unexpressed Martian basic, as unnecessary as telling a fish to bathe. But 'As it was in the Beginning, is now and ever shall be' was so Martian in mood that it could be translated more easily than 'two plus two makes four' – which was not a truism on Mars.[6]

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[4] *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 12.
[5] Ibid., p. 14.
[6] Ibid., p. 59.

Smith even has trouble in understanding what it means to think, as he, and the other members of his Martian society, do not think; they "grok."

However, over time (as understood by human beings) Smith does learn to translate human language structures into his Martian system of thought. Moreover, as he becomes the reverend of "the Church of All Worlds," he finds ways to communicate his Martian truths to human beings. As he is brutally killed at the end, his followers do not show any emotion because they have all come to understand that death is not something evil but is rather, as those on Mars understand it, a "discorporation" at the "time of fullness." It is only Jubal, who has not been "converted" to the Martian way of thought, who is saddened by Smith's death, because he has not grasped the Martian axiom that one cannot "be dead when no one can be killed."[7] It is in this way that Heinlein shows that members of seemingly incommensurable traditions have the potential to understand one another. But we must ask whether Heinlein is giving a true account of the situation. We can see his novel either as a hopeful rendition of communication between radically different cultures, or we can see it as an unfortunate misrepresentation of the possibilities of dialogue.[8] Either way, Heinlein's novel does highlight the fact that there is no guarantee that beliefs and truths found within one culture can be expressed in another. After all, even by the end of the novel, as Smith has amassed a following of humans

[7] Ibid., p. 408. Slusser explains this frustration in Jubal by the fact that he has not learned Martian, as "learning Martian is the key to salvation," p. 35.

[8] The assumption in the novel may be rather pluralistic in that all people know the Martiain truths; they just do not realize it, or, as Pielke says, grokking is "an ability which all people shared but which they had not yet actualized," p. 163. In this way, one could argue that it is an inclusivistic pluralism at work in Heinlein's understanding. However, Slusser says that the Martian tongue "poses an insurmountable barrier to all but the fortunate few who possess some mysterious insight into its workings," p. 33. Seen in this way, the understanding of Martian truths is not something all humans share; rather, these truths can be understood only from within the unique standpoint of the Martian tradition.

believing in his Martian ideals, they all must still use the word "grok," because there simply is no human equivalent.

In looking at such a fantastic situation, many questions emerge. Are earthly traditions such as Hinduism and Christianity so radically different that there is no possibility that a member of one can understand a member of another? Can a Muslim and a Buddhist communicate while they remain a part of their respective traditions, or can understanding come about only through a conversion to the other's tradition? Have we failed in our apologetical attempt at defending our beliefs and critically analyzing others even before we have begun the discourse itself? For Griffiths, the answer is not simple, but he does make the claim that although we cannot assume pure translatability between traditions, there are ways in which people of rival traditions can engage in the type of argument which we outlined in chapter three. In this chapter, then, we will develop his formulation of how the Christian response to other religious traditions actually takes place, and show the embodiment of Griffiths' hope in the interreligious encounter.

4.2 The Problem of Translatability

In the modern understanding of religion, there is thought to be no question as to the possibility of communication between members of different religious traditions. Religious claims are seen to be accessible to all people. We see this in Hick's pluralistic work as he argues that all religions are actually saying the same thing; we must simply translate the disguised truth into the common language which we can all understand. However, in the contextual-narrative model, we see that religious claims reside within a

particular religious framework which gives those claims meaning. Therefore, there can be no *a priori* assumption that such claims can be translated into another context; the meaning which they embody within their own particular context may not survive the translation.[9] Translatability cannot be assumed.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre explains this problem of translatability and the incommensurability which exists between different traditions. He explains that a central claim of modernity is that there is a common objective language, a "language-as-such," to which all people have access, and that every claim made within a tradition can be translated into that common language and thus be understood by every person.[10] MacIntyre argues that what modern thinkers fail to realize is that each tradition "is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture."[11] Recall that in the contextual-

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[9] In explaining the cultural-linguistic understanding of the nature of religious claims, Lindbeck notes in *The Nature of Doctrine* that "religions, like languages, can be understood only in their own terms, not by transposing them into alien speech," p. 129.

[10] Hauerwas speaks about this claim of modernity in his article "On Witnessing Our Story: Christian Education in Liberal Societies." He argues that our modern education system is perpetuating the lie that we can translate any language into a language-as-such which needs no particular time and place. He explains that "schools are the place where we legitimate the assumption that we basically share the same language that makes communication possible between diverse and different peoples," p. 217. He goes on to say that our schools "underwrite the story that underneath all of our differences we all share the same story, and through increasing enlightenment by way of education we will discover that we all want the same thing," p. 228-229. Because of our modern outlook, "we simply assume that it is always possible to communicate with another linguistic community [. . .] that one language is always, in principle, translatable into another," p. 214-215. We think that "we are able to understand everything from human culture and history, no matter how alien," p. 217.

[11] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 371. It is for this reason that MacIntyre claims that modern society is a fragmented society. We have been seduced into believing that we have been able to shed ourselves of the particularity of our traditions and have come into contact with foundational truth through a so-called objective language. However, because this language does not exist, we have become confused, thinking that we speak with the same language yet in actuality we are speaking from the standpoint of many different traditions and communities. We have concepts and facts stemming from different contexts and have no basis to determine which ones are true. MacIntyre describes this situation creatively in the first chapter of *After Virtue* in which he compares our modern society to a society which has abolished scientific enquiry in its past and is now trying to recreate science from the bits and pieces which have survived. MacIntyre notes that in this allegorical situation, "Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all," p. 1. Likewise, we can say that modern

narrative model, there is no story of stories which resides behind all traditions; there is only the story of a particular tradition within a particular history. Thus, we can no longer assume that "all cultural phenomena must be potentially translucent to understanding, that all texts must be capable of being translated into the language which the adherents of modernity speak to each other."[12] Traditions may have hopelessly incommensurable notions of truth, and there is no fundamental language to make these notions of truth comprehensible outside of their frameworks.[13] Any translation is ultimately flawed.[14]

It is within this uncertain potential for communication and this unpredictable understanding of interreligious discourse that Griffiths argues for apologetics. Immediately we see problems. Is this apologetical discourse even possible when there can be no assumption of understanding? Griffiths cannot rule out the possibility that the

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thinkers fail to realize that individuals have forgotten the importance of tradition in the formulation of their truth claims.

[12] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 327.

[13] In "Memory in Classical Indian Yogacara," Griffiths notes an important problem in translation between the Buddhist concept of memory and the Western notion of memory. Although the translation difficulties may not be "hopeless," the "Buddhist terms for memory and remembering, derived for the most part from the Sanskrit root *smr-*, form an uneasy semantic match with English terms for the same phenomenon, and so make understanding difficult; in order for further investigations to be productive it must be acknowledged that very often the semantic range of *smr-* terms is very different from that of Western terms for remembering," p. 109.

[14] Hauerwas explains that Christianity has become mutated because of attempts to translate it into the language of modern society. In *Dispatches from the Front*, Hauerwas explains that if Christians would refuse to allow their language to be translated into the language of modern society, the military would have even more problems with Christians than with members of the gay community. He states that since our modern world assumes traditions can be fully translated into the language of modernity, most Christians assume that because war is seen to be a necessary evil, the Christian church must also accept that evil reality. In a sarcastically amusing tone, Hauerwas paints a vision of what the military would think of Christians if Christians did not assume that their values were the same as the values of society: "Imagine Catholics, adhering closely to just war theory, insisting that war is not about killing but only incapacitating the enemy. They could participate only in wars designed to take prisoners and then, if that is not a possibility, only to wound. Killing the enemy is a last resort. What would military training look like if that were institutionalized?" p. 154. This refusal to translate Christianity into an assumed universal language of modernity is clearly present in Mother Teresa's mission. In *We Do It For Jesus*, Le Joly quotes Mother Teresa as saying the following about her sisters of charity: "Tell them that we are not here for the work, we are here for Jesus. All we do is for Him. We are first of all religious; we are not social workers, not teachers, not nurses or doctors, we are religious Sisters [. . .]. All we do, our prayer, our work, our suffering is for Jesus. Our life has no other reason or motivation. This is a point many people do not understand," p. 12.

claims made by members of rival traditions may be incomprehensible to one another. After all, the communication of these claims may resemble the unlikely communication between Martians and Earthlings in Heilein's novel. How can this potential incommensurability be a reliable basis for trans-traditional discussion? Members of rival traditions may not even be able to recognize that there are conflicts between their doctrinal claims, as their rival claims may be impossible to understand.

After creating such an extensive argument for the importance of apologetics in interreligious discourse, Griffiths does note that there is a problem in that we cannot assume to have "epistemic access to alien religious accounts."[15] For a Christian, the beliefs of other religious people may be "un-knowable" from the standpoint of Christianity. However, he also notes that if apologetics is to be successful, members of religious traditions must find ways to understand one another. Clearly, one of these ways cannot be the so-called "common language" of modernity, accepted as reliable in both the unified-experience and universal-rationality models. However, within a contextual-narrative understanding of the connection between a religious tradition and its claims, Griffiths still shows possible paths of communication between potentially incommensurable religious traditions.

4.2.1 Denaturalizing the Discourse

Although there cannot be an assumed common language "behind" all religious doctrines, Griffiths argues that there is a framework for interreligious understanding among religions because of the way they have historically interacted. Religious intellectuals have created and engaged in, what Griffiths calls, "denaturalized discourse."

In his article "Denaturalizing Discourse: Abhidharmikas, Propositionalists, and the Comparative Study of Religion," Griffiths defines denaturalized discourse as a form of communication which attempts to step outside of the particular context in which claims are made. It is discourse which ideally "shows no evidence of rooting in any sociocultural context; exhibits no essential connections with any natural language; and is completely unambiguous."[16] At first glance, the expression of this form of discourse seems to go against everything that Griffiths has argued for thus far. After all, we have seen that within the contextual-narrative model, we cannot separate religious claims from their context; in other words, we *cannot* denaturalize the discourse. It is thus very important for Griffiths to limit the possibility of denaturalized discourse. He says in no uncertain terms that "it should be stressed that such discourse never in fact occurs."[17] It is, because of the nature of doctrine, impossible to rip doctrine from its context.

Still, this does not negate the reality that historically such an attempt has been made due to the fact that religious believers and non-believers have come into contact with one another, and have attempted to make sense of their respective beliefs. Because members of religious traditions have often concerned themselves with the soteriological aspect of their religion, and their duty toward others in this regard, religious people have historically found ways to communicate with those who do not have the religious basis to grasp their claims. In this way, Griffiths maintains that religious communities typically have wanted to, and still want to, make their doctrines accessible to people outside of their community in order that the soteriological significance of these claims can be comprehended. He says, members of religious traditions want to make their truth

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[15] "Properly," p. 18.
[16] "Denaturalizing Discourse," p. 65.

"available – to refer to it, describe it, remove obstacles to its apprehension – both to their members and to those outside the community."[18] Therefore, although denaturalized discourse is by definition impossible, the attempt at it has been present for centuries, and it has become a possible, yet inherently flawed, basis for interreligious communication.

However, it still may be argued that the attempt at such discourse is limited further, as it is confined to the interaction between Western religious traditions. Here Griffiths insists that denaturalized discourse has been imporant "among elite intellectuals within religious communities both Eastern *and* Western."[19] To show the importance of such an attempt among Eastern religious intellectuals, Griffiths looks at the discourse in Indian Buddhism known as "*abhidharma*." He explains that although this Buddhist discourse is clearly based in a Eastern Buddhist metaphysical context, its function is to make available "what there really is and, in so doing, to make claims about what there really is that are universalizable."[20] Therefore, Griffiths argues that *abhidharma* is formally and functionally a form of denaturalized discourse.

In this way, as religious communities interact, denaturalized discourse, as it has evolved through the history of interreligious discussion, can be useful in the attempt to understand one another's religious claims. As such, Griffiths argues that it "forces itself upon us" as it has been historically embedded in the expression of doctrines found in different religious traditions.[21] Still, we must remember that Griffiths does not want to argue that denaturalized discourse is, in fact, denaturalized; even so-called denaturalized discourse has a context which gives it meaning. Recall that for Griffiths, all discourse is

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 80.
[19] Ibid., p. 69. Italics mine.
[20] Ibid., p. 80. The complete argument is contained in this article on p. 70– 80.

intelligible only from within a particular tradition; there can be no true denaturalized discourse which is universally accessible. Thus, denaturalized discourse is a necessarily flawed attempt at stepping outside cultural and linguistic bounds. Still, although denaturalized discourse does, and must, fail, it gives a basis for comprehension in its attempt to make particular claims into seemingly universal ones. Denaturalized discourse, then, is a useful and important point of departure for religious understanding, but the attempt at understanding must move beyond it.

4.2.2 Learning a Second-First Language

Beyond the already–present denaturalized discourse, there is much work to be done. Griffiths explains that when we move away from an *a priori* position on the interreligious discussion, we find many difficulties in understanding and there must be a determined effort to comprehend another religion's doctrines effectively. He even notes that because of this onerous task there are "relatively few Christian theologians with the knowledge or interest to undertake an a posteriori theology."[22] Thus, a proper Christian response is not something which can be done lightly, solely relying on denaturalized discourse. Griffiths says, "what can be known by Christians about the doctrinal commitments of non-Christians can be known only after a great deal of hard work and intellectual effort."[23] What needs to be done in order to understand the religious beliefs

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[21] Ibid., p. 82.

[22] "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," p. 382. He is responding here to Ogden and DiNoia's attempt at undertaking an *a posteriori* theology which I referred to in the previous chapter.

[23] "Doctrines," p. 41. Here it may be of note to recall that in chapter three we saw that although Griffiths claims that it is a Christian's duty to engage in apologetics, *all* Christians need not be bound to this duty. When we see that the engagement in apologetics is an onerous undertaking, we again can see why Griffiths does not argue that all Christians partake in it. Certain Christians will want to put the time and effort into this duty, while others will want to put the time and effort into other Christian duties. Clearly, if all

of the other, is to somehow get inside the framework which gives those beliefs meaning. In other words, within the contextual-narrative model, in order for the interreligious polemic to work, those who engage in debate must, in a sense, immerse themselves in the other's religious framework.

Again, MacIntyre's work can be helpful here. MacIntyre explains that for a member of a tradition to engage in any kind of polemical argument, he or she must acquire "the language-in-use of whatever rival tradition is in question [. . .] and that in turn requires a work of imagination whereby the individual is able to place him or herself imaginatively within the scheme of belief inhabited by those whose allegiance is to the rival tradition."[24] Thus, in order to understand an alien tradition, one cannot merely match concepts from one's own tradition with alien concepts. Rather, one must learn the alien tradition as an infant learns a language. This learned tradition then becomes, in effect, a second-first language. By acquiring the skills and practices of the foreign religious tradition, the claims of that tradition will be given a context and their meaning will become apparent.[25]

However, as with denaturalized discourse, this task is one that must ultimately fail. The only way in which one can truly be immersed in a religious tradition is for that person to be converted to that religion and fully partake in that religious community. If this were the case, then that person would no longer be able to argue for the religious

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Christians put all their time solely into apologetics, there would be many important aspects of Christianity left undone.

[24] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 394.

[25] In looking back at *Stranger in a Strange Land*, we can see that this was exactly how Smith was able to learn Martian; he learned it as an infant. In commenting on this, Barker notes that "perhaps the solution to communicating with aliens is to provide them with a child to be brought up in contact with both linguistic communities and serve as translator," p. 85. Although I could not envision many volunteers, this creative rendition does exemplify the learning of a second-first language (or maybe a "double-first language" in this case).

account he or she once held.[26] Griffiths again does not deny this failure. In "The Properly Christian Response to Religious Plurality," he explains that his own Christian account still has elements which are shrouded in mystery, and that this lack of complete understanding comes after he has been immersed in the Christian account for over twenty years. Learning a first-first language is difficult enough. As far as alien accounts, Griffiths reflects:

> I have written books on Buddhist thought, have read many Buddhist books, and have had close and continuing relations with many Buddhists. And yet there are features of the Buddhist accounts I study that remain even more deeply shrouded in darkness for me than is my own Christian account.[27]

Thus, even for one's own account, "a lifetime is scarcely enough to begin to understand the shape and the details of a religious account."[28] The learning of an alien religious language in order to interact with its members is clearly a difficult task. Still, the attempt is an important one; it is a fundamental part of Griffiths' interreligious polemics.

A person who wants to become involved in an interreligious discussion, then, must make a serious commitment to enter the context of the other's religious tradition, in order to understand that religion's doctrinal statements. Still, even after this attempt has been made, there is a very real possibility that the foreign religion may remain mysterious. For Griffiths, the attempt at understanding will occasionally lead to "profound puzzlement" of a religion's doctrinal statements.[29] It may be that because of the radically different basis of the alternate account, the beliefs within it are simply incomprehensible. It may be that "different questions are asked, different concerns are

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[26] Remember in chapter two, we saw that in the contextual-narrative model, although bilingualism is possible, bi-religionism is not.
[27] "Properly," p. 18.
[28] Ibid.
[29] "Doctrines," p. 41.

evident, and the overall result can be like the feelings produced in a lover of Bach's organ music by listening to Indian raga: respectful incomprehension."[30] Just as we cannot predetermine the outcome of the argument, we cannot predetermine that the argument itself is possible. There may simply be no possibility of communication.

Griffiths thus calls for "profound modesty" in conclusions about the meaning of another religious account's doctrine.[31] Even when we think we understand alien doctrine, we may not. We must take great care in our conclusions about a foreign religion's doctrine, and recognize that there will be no objective understanding. For example, in "Encountering Buddha Theologically," Griffiths notes that the intellectual discipline in Buddhism which attempts to understand Buddha's significance is "broadly similar" to the Christian discipline of Christology and that this comparison can help Christians comprehend a Buddhist understanding of Buddha.[32] Although upon this understanding of Buddhist practice, it is exciting to find an element of commonality between the two religions, Griffiths highlights that when we notice such a similarity, we are affected by it. The recognition of this similarity carries with it "the danger of inappropriately weighting and warping my understanding."[33] Because we have judged the disciplines to be analogous, we inevitably will miss things in the Buddhist understanding of Buddha that Buddhists see, and "see things that for them are not present."[34] The worst case of such a situation may be in finding that we have completely misconstrued the other religious tradition's beliefs, and therefore, any encounter based on this misconstrual will likely be

[30] "Doctrines," p. 41-42.
[31] "Properly," p. 20.
[32] "Encountering Buddha Theologically," p. 40. Although Griffiths notes the care which must be shown in making such a claim, there are also possibilities of success in this comparison. We will look at these later in this chapter.
[33] Ibid., p. 47.
[34] Ibid.

no encounter at all. Thus, in the attempt to learn another religious worldview as a second-first language, there will surely still be grave errors and biases that will make that understanding incomplete.

4.2.3 The Argument Itself as Heuristic Tool

Even after confronting another religion with its denaturalized discourse, and after attempting to learn its language as a second-first language, we are not done in our quest for understanding. For Griffiths, the argument itself will lead to a reevaluation of the initial understanding and the correction of some of its mistakes. Note that in an *a priori* discussion, all that can happen in the discussion is that the errors become reinforced. The understanding of the other religion preconceived by the technique, pluralist or exclusivist, is assumed to be truthful before, during, and after the encounter. Griffiths metaphorically relates such practice "to the attitude of those nineteenth-century British empire-builders who plundered the world and brought its treasures back to the British Museum to be preserved and meditated upon by the British cultural elite of that day."[35] In this way, beliefs which are meaningful only within a certain context are ripped from that context to be transfigured by members of another religion. Then, in ironic sincerity, these disfigurements are labeled as objectively truthful statements about the meaning of a foreign religion's doctrine. But in Griffiths' project, there is no such assumption. Because apologetical engagement is open to many possibilities, it can further the initial understanding of the participants.

Here Griffiths notes a number of things about the argument which must obtain in order for the argument to be the heuristic tool that he claims it to be. To begin with, the

interlocutors involved in the engagement must have a common basis for the guidelines of the argument. Griffiths explains that "a properly constituted interreligious polemic should deploy as methods of argument and proof only tools that are recognized as authoritative and demonstrative by both sides."[36] They must, in effect, be playing the same game. Clearly, if one side's understanding of what constitutes a truthful argument is entirely different than the other side's understanding, there will be little, if any, possibility of engagement. Both sides could conceivably prove incompatible beliefs to be true at the same time.

There is thus no room for self-guaranteeing sources in the interreligious discussion. Griffiths explains, "if I want to argue with my Gelukpa Buddhist friends, it is of no use to quote the Bible to them as an authoritative text, and hope to get anywhere thereby."[37] In *Apology for Apologetics*, Griffiths explains the importance of this point in more detail. In this book, he defines a self-guaranteeing source as a community-specific authority "taken by some specific religious community or some specific group of such to be productive of sentences that both express doctrines of the community and are true."[38] Because of the community-specific nature of such an authority, it is accepted by only one side of the interreligious discussion. Therefore, it cannot be useful in apologetical reasoning; it proves nothing to the other side; or, in Griffiths' words, it cuts "no apologetical ice."[39]

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[35] "Polemics," p. 32.
[36] Ibid., p. 37.
[37] Ibid., p. 36-37. Griffiths qualifies this point by saying that he could use the Bible if he were "prepared to offer a prior and independent argument as to why the Bible should be regarded as an authoritative text," p. 37.
[38] *Apology*, p. 82.
[39] Ibid., p. 83. Griffiths gives an example: "The Islamic apologist who appeals to the Qur'an to justify all his arguments for the cognitive superiority of Islamic theism over and against some version of Buddhist

However, it must be noted here that Griffiths is not devaluing the role of self-guaranteeing sources in various religious accounts. Remember that the fundamental text for a religion, which would clearly fall in this category as self-guaranteeing, is essential for the training and shaping of those who are holders of the account. Griffiths explains that few religious communities can function without such sources as they are instrumental in the "belief-forming and belief-maintenance habits of properly regulated religious communities."[40] It would be inauthentic for religious traditions to act as if these sources did not exist. The point Griffiths is trying to make is that even though self-guaranteeing sources are important for a religious community, and the members of that religious community may hold beliefs because of them, those types of sources are by and large useless for apologetics, as they subvert the polemical direction of the debate.

Still, Griffiths does draw a caveat to this claim. Self-guaranteeing sources can be used if one of the two following conditions are met.[41] First, the source can be used if it is recognized as authoritative by both sides of the interreligious encounter. For example, Jews and Christians can, in proper apologetical form, debate the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. Second, the source can be used if there are arguments supplied and defended as to why it should be accepted by both sides. Griffiths gives the example of "when Christians try to convince Jews of the status of the New Testament as authority source by appealing to its fulfillment of certain passages in the Hebrew Bible already regarded as authoritative by the Jews."[42] Here Griffiths cautions about the potential circularity which can occur,

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transpolytheism will not get very far; neither will the Buddhist who attempts the same job in reverse by quoting the *Lotus Sutra*."

[40] Ibid.

[41] Griffiths explains these two conditions in ibid., p. 84.

[42] Ibid.

and notes that in such an argument the source in question cannot be used to prove its own authority.

In this way, the argument can become a powerful tool of understanding. However, Griffiths clearly cautions to use great care in the argument so that it does not simply authenticate the claims which either side has brought to the polemical discussion. If we do this, we simply fall into the same predetermined discourse that is found in both exclusivism and pluralism, and we potentially become imperialistic. When we recognize the assumptions that each side has of what constitutes a rational conclusion, and when we take care not to use sources which are not accepted by both sides, the argument can help us move beyond the necessarily flawed denaturalized discourse, and even beyond our undertaking at learning the other religion as a second-first language. In this way, the argument can become a powerful tool for understanding. According to Griffiths, it is through a proper argument that members of religious traditions truly uncover the meaning of their unique and possibly contradictory doctrines.

4.3 Christian-Buddhist Interaction

As we look more carefully at the conditions Griffiths places on a proper interreligious polemical engagement, it becomes clear that it is impossible to continue to speak in abstract or general terms. That is, even as we discuss the appropriate tools to bring to the debate, we find that it is increasingly difficult to classify exactly what those tools are in every instance of interreligious discourse. For instance, as Griffiths makes the claim that there can be no self-guaranteeing sources, he must include a caveat which shows that there are possible cases when this generalization does not obtain. In essence,

the meeting between members of any two unique religious traditions will have different conditions for the possibility of a successful encounter. It is for this reason that we must narrow our outline of Griffiths' project to the possibility of particular interreligious engagements, and clarify what could make that engagement a fruitful enterprise.

It would be quite a feat if after showing the importance of apologetics in general, Griffiths could then show how apologetics work in a number of different interreligious encounters. But this would be almost impossible, and if it were attempted, he would most likely not put the required amount of energy in the attempt to understand the unique claims made by the different religions. Therefore, because the attempt at learning the language of another religion is a demanding task, Griffiths has not made the attempt to describe the particular Christian apologetical response to *all* religions.[43] Rather, he has concentrated on formulating a possible structure for the Christian-Buddhist discussion. It is thus that we now turn to look at some of his work on the particular nature of the interaction between members of these two religions and the response to their respective doctrines. Looking at the particular realm of the Christian-Buddhist interaction will do two things. First of all, it will make it possible to see more clearly what must concern people who are wishing to undertake proper interreligious apologetics. Second, it will give a concrete example of Griffiths' apologetical project in action.

4.3.1 Points of Departure

Although pluralism is a prominent fixture in our modern world, there is a strong non-pluralistic intent among scholars engaged in the Christian-Buddhist interaction. In

"Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory," Griffiths explains that there has been, and continues to be, an apologetical attempt made from both Buddhists and Christians to one another. Unfortunately, he adds, this attempt is of little value because there is no true engagement occurring, since both sides base their arguments on different assumptions and on a different understanding of what form the polemic should take. Whether they would want to admit it our not, both sides are entering the discussion as exclusivists as they have already predetermined not only the result of the discussion, but even the shape of the argument itself. Griffiths illustrates:

> The Christian version often tends to amount to little more than reviling Buddhism because it is not Christianity, which is somewhat like reviling a cat because it is not a dog. The Buddhist version is more likely to begin by denying that Buddhists make any truth-claims in the first place and then to continue by gently criticizing Christians for making truth-claims which are less true than those Buddhists supposedly do not make.[44]

Although this was written in 1982, in his later article "Philosophizing Across Cultures," Griffiths notes a larger, more global problem in the Christian-Buddhist discussion: "these two traditions don't talk to one another, they don't engage one another."[45] This refusal to engage could be because of an exclusivistic stance on the engagement as we saw above, but it could also be caused by a pluralistic stance, where fundamental claims made by both religions are ignored, regardless of the argument. This "philosophical apartheid," as he calls it, is the refusal of Christians and Buddhists to take seriously the philosophical claims and methods used by one another. Unfortunately, in their historical interaction,

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[43] Remember that the learning of a religious account is a lifelong process, and that Griffiths feels that even his own Christian account has mysterious elements in it which he has trouble understanding. See "Properly," p. 18-19.

[44] "Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory," p. 277.

[45] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 11.

Christians have failed to take into account the well-developed Buddhist philosophical tradition.[46]

The exciting thing for Griffiths is that in the communication between Buddhists and Christians this apartheid does not have to exist. There is an excellent basis for discussion between Buddhists and Christians. According to Griffiths, upon coming to an understanding of the rationality embedded in Buddhism, a Christian will find remarkable similarities between the two traditions that can be used to make a debate between members of these two traditions successful.[47] He reflects, "when I had gained sufficient competence in the required languages to feel at home reading the texts of [Buddhism] I immediately felt a great sense of familiarity, of recognition."[48] He found this recognition to be present in two areas. First of all, the Indian philosophical tradition poses many philosophical questions which are similar to ones asked in the Western philosophical tradition. For example, Indian philosophers will question what constitutes knowledge and truth; they will look at the notion of the person, and the relationship between language and reality. Griffiths explains that these are "burning issues" for Indian philosophers just as they are for philosophers in the West.[49] Second, the logic involved in making judgments on these questions has much in common between the two traditions. There is a great stress on the progression from premises to conclusions in both the

[46] Griffiths show his frustrations with the typical Christian responses to Buddhism in his article "Encountering Buddha Theologically." He says, "If I already know that my Buddhist interlocutors are anonymous Christians; or that their faithful appropriation of their tradition relates them to the same transcendent reality as does my appropriation of mine; or that they are part of the *massa perditionis*, outside the elect group of the saved – if I know any of these things before I begin, I will neither be able to hear clearly nor respond theologically to what my interlocutors are saying," p. 39-40.

[47] In speaking about the rationality embedded in Christianity, Griffiths is speaking about the Western philosophical tradition. Note that because of the particularity of the interreligious encounter, Christian communities who do not base their doctrines in Western philosophical rationality may have to find other ways of arguing with Buddhists.

[48] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 11.

Buddhist tradition and in the Christian philosophical tradition; at the end of an argument, the Indian philosopher will often write "*siddham etat* ('that's proved')" which is the "Sanskrit equivalent of QED."[50] Fundamentally, then, the conditions for a good argument in Western philosophy are consistent with the conditions for a good argument in the Buddhist tradition: "the norms of rationality and truth are substantially identical in both cultures."[51] Thus, after his attempt at learning Buddhist thinking as a second-first language, Griffiths has found a basis for argument that is recognized by both sides as authoritative. In this way, Griffiths believes he has found a way in which both Buddhists and Christians can take one another's arguments seriously.[52] Thus, he has much hope for the success of a polemical discussion involving members of Buddhism and members of Christianity.

4.3.2 Academic Doctrinal Criticism

Upon the recognition of this commonality, Christians can go about, in a proper apologetical way, to argue with Buddhists about Buddhist beliefs which are seemingly contradictory to Christian beliefs. Before discussing the possible shape of the Buddhist-Christian interaction, we need to pause here to note that because of the affinity Buddhist philosophy has with Western philosophy, there can be a critical academic engagement

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid. In his article "Why Buddhas can't remember their previous lives," Griffiths notes that there is "a long and honorable tradition of the application of this method in Indian (especially Buddhist) polemical literature," p. 449.

[51] "Philosophizing Across Cultures," p. 14. Remember that Griffiths does not claim that this conclusion could not be proven false. After all, he may be reading his Western tradition into the Indian philosophy. During the course of the argument, Buddhists and Christians still may discover that what they thought they shared in philosophical understanding was merely apparent. We will look how the argument may progress later in this chapter.

between Western philosophers and Buddhist thinkers. Buddhist doctrine can be criticized using the rational framework that is at work in both traditions; we can investigate the consistency of Buddhist claims, and question these claims if this consistency is suspect. Unfortunately, this kind of academic engagement is not the norm as Western thinkers engage Buddhist thought. Instead, Griffiths explains that the work in this area has been largely exegetical in nature.[53] He admits that this exegetical work is important because there is the onerous undertaking of making Buddhist texts accessible to people in the West. However, there is also the need for this work to be critically analyzed. In Griffiths' words, Buddhism has produced "some of the most sophisticated disputation known to human history," yet this philosophical aspect of it is ignored.[54] Griffiths feels that Buddhist claims should be taken seriously in Western academic circles and that there can be positive results from a philosophical criticism of Buddhism. Upon coming to an understanding of the methodology of Buddhist thinking and treating that methodology with philosophical seriousness, Griffiths thus has opened up new avenues of communication between Western thinkers and Buddhists, in essence, giving both the responsibility to critically analyze each other's claims.

Griffiths' article "Why Buddha's can't remember their previous lives" is an example of this form of criticism, and it shows how an academic criticism of a particular Buddhist claim can lead to a greater understanding of that claim and possibly even Buddhism as a whole. In this discussion, Griffiths makes an argument showing that the

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[52] In "Why Buddhas can't remember their previous lives," Griffiths explains that when Christians actually see Buddhists as putting forth philosophical arguments, "the positions argued for in the texts are taken with greater philosophical seriousness," p. 449.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Griffiths makes this commendation of Buddhist philosophy in his discussion with Japanese Buddhists recorded in *Japanese Buddhism: Its Tradition, New Religions and Interaction with Christianity*, p. 190.

claim that Buddhas have memory of their past lives is inconsistent with other essential Buddhist doctrinal claims. To simplify his argument, claims such as "All Buddhas make only true judgments," and "No Buddha can experience a re-presentation that re-presents a moment of experience belonging to a non-Buddha" make it impossible for Buddhas to remember past experiences when they were not Buddhas.[55] Note that in this form of criticism, Griffiths is not making any explicit argument against Buddhist claims because of Christian claims. In such a critical enterprise "no criteria foreign to the system being analyzed are introduced."[56] He is simply looking at the internal philosophical consistency of Buddhist doctrine itself as judged from a rational basis that Buddhism is seen to share with the West. It is even more important to note that his conclusion is not the end of the engagement; it is only the beginning. Griffiths explicitly says that he hopes "that it might lead to further discussion."[57] In fact, he anticipates where he thinks his argument may be challenged, where he may have misrepresented the Buddhist understanding of memory, or where he may have used faulty logic in his argument. He then says, a challenge made by Buddhists in these areas, "fully explored and discussed, could prove fruitful and productive of new knowledge."[58] Thus, in the beginnings of this intrasystematic criticism against the Buddhist understanding of Buddhas, he has hope for further understanding of both Buddhist doctrine and of Buddhist philosophical methods.

Another example of this form of critique is in Griffiths' argument against the Buddhist claim for the possibility of pure unmediated experience. Remember that in the contextual-narrative model, religious experience is possible only from within a particular

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[55] This is a simplistic summary of his argument but I think it captures the essence of his justification. For his more detailed argument see "Why Buddhas can't remember their previous lives," p. 449-450.
[56] *On Being Buddha*, p. 24.
[57] Ibid., p. 449.

religious tradition; there can be no experience *qua* experience. Therefore, with this philosophical stance in mind, Griffiths forms a critical attack against the Buddhist understanding of experience. In his articles "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism" and "What Else Remains in Sunyata?," Griffiths carefully looks at the Buddhist structure of claims which make unmediated experience possible.[59] He comes to the conclusion that "it does not appear likely [. . .] that the position can, in the end, be successfully defended."[60] Again, as in his article on Buddhas' past lives, Griffiths ends by looking at possible responses to his argument by Buddhists. His goal in this kind of academic engagement is not simply victory, but rather a more complete understanding of the issue within both philosophical traditions.

4.4 Apologetics in Action [61]

Still, the criticism that is more important for Griffiths is the criticism which comes out of some rival religious account, a criticism which stems from a deep felt concern that the other tradition is wrong in some substantial way. The important difference between this kind of criticism and academic criticism is that the engagement is *dutifully* entered

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[58] Ibid., p. 451.

[59] "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism" is mainly an attempt to understand the Buddhist notion of a pure unmediated experience, while "What Else Remains in Sunyata?" is a criticism of this notion of experience. Other thinkers have made similar attempts. Bernard Faure, in "Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen," explains that the enlightenment found in Zen is often thought of as an attempt to rid experience from the confines of a linguistic framework. However, he makes the argument that this does not capture the essence of Ch'an. He say, "Despite (or because of) its denial of language, Chan appears first of all as a new 'art of speaking.'," p. 176. Thus, Faure argues that adherents of Ch'an are not involved in an attempt to transcend language, but rather in an attempt to reorient themselves within an alternate language-game, a game which strives to embody a non-conceptual expression of the world. Ch'an, then, does not promote the annihilation of language per se, but rather promotes its own specialized language. In Faure's view, it is not the quest for unmediated experience, but rather the quest to learn a certain way of mediating experience.

[60] "What Else Remains in Sunyata?," p. 21.

[61] I have taken this title from the last chapter in Griffiths' *Apology for Apologetics*. The argument which makes up most of the discussion in this section stems from this chapter.

because the other's doctrine is seen to be contrary to one's own doctrine, and this is seen to be of soteriological importance. In our case, a Christian dutifully criticizes Buddhist doctrines which are seen to be in conflict with Christian ones. Griffiths here calls for "a high degree of methodological self-consciousness and ethical sensitivity on the part of the critic."[62] Remember that proper polemical discourse must remain nonviolent and must be made in a setting of mutual respect. Furthermore, the argument must rely on commonly accepted criteria; the discussion cannot rely on any self-guaranteeing sources. Such criticism, then, will rely on the shared understanding of the framework of an authentic argument as seen in both the Christian and Buddhist traditions. Griffiths believes that it is in this form of criticism that there is the possibility of a successful encounter between Christians and Buddhists.

Griffiths' most illustrative example of the use of this form of critique, and the most useful example in this present study of apologetics, comes in the final chapter of his *Apology for Apologetics*.[63] Here we truly see him as a Christian confronting Buddhist doctrine. In this chapter, Griffiths looks at the Christian and Buddhist notion of the self and what it means to be a person in the two respective religious accounts. The first thing he must do is to acknowledge a limitation in his starting point. He notes that it is an error to assume that there is *the* Christian position or *the* Buddhist position on this question. "Both Buddhism and Christianity are far too complex, internally differentiated, and subtle for anything so straightforward."[64] He therefore claims to be sketching a particular

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[62] *On Being Buddha*, p. 25.
[63] Because of the power of the example in illustrating Griffiths' argument as I have presented it in this thesis, this section will outline this systematic argument in detail. His argument, as found in *Apology for Apologetics*, is a development of ideas which he put forth in his two earlier articles, "Notes Toward a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory" and "Karma and Personal Identity: A Response to Professor White."
[64] *Apology*, p. 85.

Christian position, and a particular Buddhist position on the self, "positions that represent some of the more important trajectories of thought and intellectual strategies visible in the works of the representative intellectuals of each tradition."[65] He admits that such a strategy will produce a level of generality which will likely make the positions he outlines into positions which actually reflect "no single specific Buddhist's or Christian's position on the matter under discussion."[66] However, his purpose here is to show the possibility of a successful apologetical criticism, and he thus needs to make such generalizations on the claims made within religious accounts.

4.4.1 The Buddhist No-Self Doctrine

After realizing the failures inherent in the project itself, Griffiths begins the next task of describing an initial understanding of the Buddhist understanding of the self. According to Griffiths, Buddhists have a "generally reductionist" metaphysic, and their understanding of the self is no exception.[67] By saying this, Griffiths means that Buddhists typically attempt to remove deceptive and illusory notions to arrive at the essential and foundational understanding of the nature of reality. In this way, the Buddhist understanding of the self evolved out of a critical reduction of the Hindu understanding. In Hinduism, "the Self takes on and puts off bodies during the course of its existence just as a man takes on and puts off suits of clothes during the course of a single embodied existence."[68] Thus, there is an essential identity of the self, an

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[65] Ibid., p. 86.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., p. 87. Griffiths explains this example as found in the *Bhagavadgita*.

unchanging metaphysical reality, which exists beyond the temporal nature of human beings. This is *atman*. It is this notion that Buddhist intellectuals reject.

In this rejection of *atman*, Buddhists use allegorical arguments, and Griffiths explains that a commonly used Buddhist analogy for the self is a chariot. He makes reference to a passage between Nagasena, a Buddhist monk, and King Milinda, a monarch who is undergoing training in Buddhism:

> [Nagasena addresses Milinda]
> 'Now, did you come on foot or in a conveyance?'
> 'I, revered sir, did not come on foot, I came in a chariot.'
> 'If you, sire, came by chariot, show me the chariot. Is the pole the chariot, sire?'
> 'O no, revered sir.'
> 'Is the axle the chariot?'
> 'O no, revered sir.'
> 'Are the wheels the chariot?'
> 'O no, revered sir.'
> 'Is the body of the chariot the chariot . . . is the flag-staff of the chariot the chariot . . . is the yoke the chariot . . . are the reins the chariot . . . is the goad the chariot?'
> 'O no revered sir.'
> 'But then, sire, is the chariot the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad?'
> 'O no revered sir.'
> 'But then, sire, is there a chariot apart from the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad?'
> 'O no revered sir.'
> 'Though I, sire, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see the chariot. Chariot is only a sound, sire. For what here is the chariot? You sire, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no chariot.'[69]

Thus, the Buddhist makes the argument that words do not refer to anything. When we refer to a "chariot" we are not referring to a true thing, but merely a composition of parts. Griffiths summarizes the position: "anything composite, anything with parts, does not really exist just because there are more basic constituents that make it up."[70] However, it is not a mistake to use words; the mistake lies in assuming that the words we use actually

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[69] Griffiths quotes this section in ibid., p. 87-88. He has taken it from *Milinda's Questions* as translated by I. B. Horner.

refer to real things. Therefore, the word *atman* does not refer to the true self; it is merely a convention based in usage. The true self, according to Buddhism, is not the same thing as that which we call "the self."

From this conclusion, Griffiths explains that Buddhists have gone in two ontological directions. The first conclusion is that of the *abhidharmikas*, or "metaphysicians" as Griffiths calls them.[71] These Buddhist thinkers begin by rejecting the self; they reject "the unchanging soul (*atman*), declaring it to be a name having a conventional meaning in the context of the empirical."[72] However, in order to capture this "essenceless" human, the *abhidharmikas* create a system in which a human is not a permanent essence, because the self is only a "changing conglomerate of material, mental and psychic factors."[73] Thus, although there is no *atman*, there are essences which make up the self, essences which are real, the only true realities in the universe. These essences are called *dharmas*. In this way, the *abhidharmikas* reduce the self to a combination of five *dharmas* called "aggregates" (*skandha*).[74] Griffiths notes that "as with the chariot, the Self is said not to be identical with any one of these five 'aggregates,' nor with all of them together."[75] Although the self cannot be referred to, we can speak about these aggregates, realizing that we are not speaking about the self as a whole.

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[70] Ibid., p. 88.

[71] Ibid., p. 86. Griffiths explains that for *abhidharmikas* "there is no better translation than 'metaphysician.'"

[72] This quote is taken from T. R. V. Murti's explanation of the *abhidharmika* rejection of *atman* in Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.

[73] Frederick J. Streng explains this *abhidharmika* notion of the essential nature of the self in *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, p. 30.

[74] Griffiths explains these five aggregates in detail in *Apology*, p. 90-92. The five aggregates are: (1) physical form, (2) sensation, (3) conceptualization, (4) volitions, and (5) consciousness.

[75] Ibid., p. 89.

The second conclusion is that of the *sunyavadins* or "advocates of emptiness."[76] This Buddhist school wants no referential language whatsoever. *Sunyavadins* claim that there are no constituents which make up the self, or anything else for that matter: "all attempts to individuate existents one from another, to say 'this is other than that,' are entirely conventional, without reference to any existent things."[77] One of the leading advocates of emptiness and arguably one of the greatest thinkers in Buddhist history, Nagarjuna, makes a detailed argument against the *abhidharmikas* in his *Madhyamakakarikas*.[78] In this work, he effectively shows the problems inherent in saying that anything is real or not real, or a combination or lack of the two.[79] For Nagarjuna, because things cannot be said to be real or unreal, all we can say is that they are *sunya*, empty. He specifically attacks the *abhidharmikas* as he says, "Since there is no *dharma* whatever originating independently/ No *dharma* whatever exists which is not empty."[80] In this understanding, not only can we not talk about the self as it truly exists, we cannot even talk about the things which make up the self as truly existing. Thus, this school criticizes the *abhidharmikas* saying that they are simply substituting the referent "self" with other referents which they call aggregates.[81]

[76] Ibid., p. 86. "Advocates of emptiness" is again Griffiths' attempt at translation.
[77] Ibid., p. 89.
[78] For a translation of this work, and a useful commentary, from which I quoted earlier, see Frederick J. Streng's *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning.*
[79] For the detailed argument see the first chapter of his *Madhyamakakarikas* where he shows that in order for existing things to emerge, they must have originated "(1) from themselves, (2) from something else, (3) from both, or (4) from no cause." Then he goes on to show that all four are theoretically impossible. His argument in summary is as follows. The first case is obviously problematic for how can something exist prior to its existence. The second case is also problematic in that in order to have an "other" thing which exists, that "other" must have its own self-existence which was shown absurd in the first case. Because both the first and second cases are untenable, the third, which is a combination of both, is also problematic. The fourth, which is causation of something from nothing is equally absurd.
[80] In his *Madhyamakakarikas* 24.19 as translated by Streng in *Emptiness.*
[81] These two different directions leading to the doctrine of no-Self are the most prominent directions in Buddhist philosophy. In *Apology*, Griffiths explains that "debates between the metaphysicans and the advocates of emptiness fill the folios of the doxographical and polemical compendia produced by Buddhist

Still, when we look at the fundamental claim regarding the existence of the self, the conclusion is the same in both schools. The self is an illusion. Whether a Buddhist follows the *abhidharmikas* and reduces the self to irreducible *dharmas*, or whether a Buddhist follows the *sunyavadins* and denies even the *dharmas* themselves, the self is like Milinda's chariot; it simply does not exist. By moving through both of these directions, we come to the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of no-Self.

However, it must be noted here that for Buddhists, to deny that there is a self is not to deny that there are persons. A Buddhist will still talk about persons. But the label "person" does not refer to an enduring substance; it is only "a description of a stream of momentary events bound together by causal connections of various kinds."[82] In the *abhidharmika* view, a particular person, say "Pete Rose," does not refer to the eternal

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intellectuals in India and Tibet," p. 86. There has been much written on the debate between the two schools in Western circles. One of the most famous works is T. R. V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, from which I quoted earlier In this work, Murti compares Nagarjuna to one of the foremost Enlightenment thinkers, Immanuel Kant. Murti explains that Nagarjuna's critique of the *abhidharmikas* is similar to Kant's criticism of the philosophy of his day, and to compare the two is very helpful in the understanding of Buddhist philosophy for Western thinkers. Murti says that Kant's *Critique* "shows the futility of all views, of Reason itself, to reveal to us the unconditioned; like the Madhyamika dialectic [Nagarjuna's method], it exposes the pretensions of dogmatic philosophy to give us pure knowledge," p. 213. Murti shows the parallel between Nagarjuna and Kant in Nagarjuna's understanding of the two truths: the world-ensconsed truth (*loksamvrtisatya*) and the truth which is in the highest sense (*paramarthata*). For Murti, these two truths are the same as Kant's two realms: the phenomenal realm and the noumenal realm. *Sunyata*, then, is the noumenal form of truth which is an absolute truth, a truth which exists in itself, a truth which is "incommensurable and inexpressible; it is utterly transcendent to thought," p. 231. Murti sees Nagarjuna's rejection of all views as an explanation of the truth about reality showing reality to be "inaccessible to reason," p. 126. *Sunyata* is the elusive goal of philosophy which is sheltered behind our limiting conceptual frameworks. In this view, Nagarjuna, like Kant, believes that there is absolute reality, but that reality is beyond our mundane conceptualizations. Note here that in attempting to understand the claims made by the Buddhist school, Murti is using the framework of the Western philosophical tradition. Although this can be helpful, remember that it can also read things into the Buddhist claims which are not really there. Another attempt in this vein, which is radically different is Chris Gudmunsen's *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* in which he compares Nagarjuna not to Kant but to Wittgenstein. In Gudmunsen's view, the two truths which Nagarjuna cites are not Kantian realms as Murti would have them. Rather, they are two ways of thinking, two ways of seeing the world. Gudmunsen explains that the two truths do not refer to "different objects of knowledge e.g. the world and ultimate reality. [They] refer, rather, to the manner by which 'things' are perceived," p. 42. Nagarjuna's philosophy is not based on two ontological truths, but on two ways of seeing. In this way, the "world of phenomena" as Murti would call it, is no different than *nirvana*; they are not separate worlds or realms.

[82] *Apology*, p. 90.

essence of "Pete Rose." Rather, it describes "a stream of events of five kinds, corresponding to the five 'aggregates.'"[83] This stream of events which corresponds to the aggregates is all that there is. There is nothing which exists "behind" them; there is no agent which moves them, or thinker which contemplates their course of action. In Buddhist thinking, there is simply no self.

After describing the basis of the Buddhist doctrine of no-Self, Griffiths makes an important note about the process as a whole. In keeping with the common way a religious account operates, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self is not simply an academic enterprise. Rather, the truth embodied in the claim is of utmost soteriological importance for Buddhists.[84] It could be argued that from a Buddhist standpoint, the single most important factor which leads to the problematic human condition is the tendency for human persons to "think that they are themselves centers of continuing identity and importance, to judge that there is some enduring entity referred to by their own proper name."[85] When a person thinks that he or she is an enduring entity, that person will be concerned about the future, and will want to become attached to other persons, whom that person thinks are also enduring entities. In Buddhist thought, these connections to the future and other people can only lead to desire which will lead to suffering.[86] Therefore,

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[83] Ibid.

[84] In the case of Nagarjuna, the purpose of his critique of the *abhidharmikas* is not merely the defense of a philosophical position; it is essentially soteriological. In *Madhyamakakarikas* 18.5, Nagarjuna says that suffering results "from phenomenal extension (*prapanca*); but this phenomenal extension comes to a stop by emptiness." Streng explains that the wisdom (*prajna*) gained from Nagarjuna's writings is a wisdom that is religious, in that it transforms the religious person, and the realization of emptiness is "the *power* for achieving the transformation," p. 156.

[85] *Apology*, p. 93.

[86] In his article "Memory in Classical Indian Yogacara," Griffiths uses the example of how he recalls himself reading in the past: "this strong feeling that the 'I' now remembering the aesthetic pleasure involved in reading Jane Austen for the first time, the feel of the volume – the look of the print, the delights of her remorselessly bitter analysis of motive- am the same person as that fourteen-year-old boy who originally had those experiences, from the Buddhist viewpoint, is a mistake with important negative effects on my possibilities for realizing nirvana in the near future. For this sense of identification [. . .] will

the Buddhist rejection of the self is meant to correct this misguided behaviour, allowing human beings to discard the misconceptions of their existence, and put an end to suffering.

4.4.2 The Christian Belief in a Soul

After his attempt at understanding the Buddhist notion of the self, or of no-self as the case may be, Griffiths spends some time looking at the notion of the self as found in his own Christian account. Here it is important to note that he does not merely look carefully at the Buddhist account, but also looks carefully at his own account so that he can carefully see whether there are incompatibilities between them. After looking closely at both accounts, there is the possibility that there is, in fact, no incompatibility between their notions of the self, and it is of utmost importance to avoid assuming the incompatibility before it has been determined.

In explaining the Christian position, Griffiths notes:

> The representative intellectuals of most Christian religious communities have felt called upon to affirm that human persons do possess permanent souls; they have often also claimed that the identity of any particular human person consists precisely in the possession of the particular soul that one in fact possesses.[87]

According to Griffiths, these representative intellectuals almost always affirm that the soul is non-physical and immortal even though it was created at a particular time by God. It is the essence of a person which is responsible for his or her actions; "in it is located a human person's volitional and intellectual life, as well as character."[88] Hence, we see immediately that there is at least a superficial incompatibility. Whereas Buddhists claim

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involve some degree of asmimana, of 'the conceit "I am",' the constructed idea that I have a continuing identity through time," p. 123.

[87] *Apology*, p. 94.

there is no enduring existent, Christians claim that there is an essence of a human being which exists permanently and is ultimately accountable for its actions.

Before even engaging with the Buddhist claim on this subject, Griffiths must make sure that the doctrine of the soul is in keeping with the basic structure of the Christian account.[89] He makes the argument that such a claim is consistent with fundamental doctrine of Christianity in two important ways. First, the belief in a soul is consistent when we note the relationship between the nature of God and the nature of human beings. Since humans were made in God's image according to the Biblical text, and since a human body cannot be a full image of a bodiless being such as God, there must be an element of the human being which is bodiless in order that we are actually an image of God and a likeness of the creator. This element is the soul, a reality which can exist apart from the body and which is the essence of the human being.[90]

Second, as with the Buddhist claim of no-self, the Christian claim that humans have souls is an essential part of the soteriological function of Christianity as "each person's proper destiny is to maintain a perfectly loving relationship with God for eternity."[91] In this sense, the Christian definition of a "person" is an embodied soul.[92] As

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[88] Ibid., p. 97.

[89] I would argue against Griffiths here in that it is more consistent Biblically to see the self as something which is essentially physical. The dualistic notion of soul/body introduces an understanding which is not a part of the Biblical imagination. An excellent argument in this line of thinking is Cullmann's *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead.* In it, he argues that the dualism of the Greek philosophers is not present in the Bible, and thus, Christians ought not to believe in an eternal soul which survives the death of the body. Rather, the Biblical imagination is in a bodily resurrection at the end times. Cullmann explains, "The teaching of the great philosophers Socrates and Plato can in no way be brought into consonance with that of the New Testament," p. 60. However, for the purposes of this study, it is important to see that the main area of concern in the Christian notion of the self is not in dispute, as even in the understanding of the possibility of bodily resurrection, the self is a particular essence of a person which can ultimately survive death.

[90] This argument is explained in more detail in *Apology*, p. 94-95.

[91] Ibid., p. 95.

[92] In ibid., Griffiths maintains that this statement itself can help Christians make sense of the doctrine of the incarnation, that "the second person of the trinity, the incorporeal logos, becomes embodied for

the soul and body relate dualistically in the form of a person, the soul is both shaped by its embodiedness and, "in its turn, shapes the actions of the embodied person to whom it gives identity."[93] Clearly, this interaction comes to an end in death, but the soul can live apart from the body. Thus, in understanding humans to have souls, the death of the body is not seen to be the death of the person. Because humans are seen to have souls which can exist apart from their bodies, Christians can have hope in eternal life.

4.4.3 A Christian Response to the Buddhist Notion of the Self

After the initial development of both notions of the self, Griffiths' next task is to determine whether the seemingly contradictory statements on the self are in fact substantially in conflict. He begins by summarizing the claims. The Christian claims are noted as C1-C3; the Buddhist claims are noted as B1-B3:

> (C1) The possession of an immortal soul gives every human person identity.
> (C2) The immortal soul is an enduring spiritual substance with a temporal beginning but not temporal end.
> (C3) The immortal soul may exist in an embodied or a disembodied state, preserving all its essential properties in both states.
>
> (B1) All personal proper names refer to causally connected continua of events and to nothing else; an exhaustive analysis of the human person may be given in terms of these continua of events.
> (B2) Intellectual understanding and personal appropriation of the truth of B1 is a necessary condition for the attainment of Nirvana.
> (B3) Assent to any doctrine-expressing sentence contradicting B1 or any entailment thereof will necessarily be productive of suffering.[94]

In summarizing the claims in such a way, Griffiths then can systematically check for any incompatibility between the Christian and Buddhist claims.

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soteriological reasons," p. 95. It should be noted that this Christological claim is also clearly of soteriological significance for Christians.

[93] Ibid., p. 99.

[94] Ibid., p. 101.

To begin with, Griffiths notes that after considering all the claims carefully, we find that both parts of the Buddhist claim B1 are in contradiction with all of the Christian claims. Griffiths argues that if we take C1 and C2 together, there is an implicit claim that a proper name will actual refer to that which gives a person his or her identity, namely the immortal soul which that person possesses. The referent of a proper name is in direct conflict with B1. He uses the example of his own proper name:

> On the Buddhist view my person proper name 'Paul Griffiths' refers, on any given occasion of its utterance, to the set of momentary events that constitutes the five aggregates which in turn constitute the complete continuum of events that constitutes 'me.' On the Christian view 'Paul Griffiths' refers principally to my immortal soul, a soul that happens at the moment to be embodied, but need not necessarily be so.[95]

Griffiths goes on to say that B1 is also in contradiction with C3, because C2 and C3 together make a strong claim that there is an enduring reality which is the basis of the person, a reality which contains the "essential properties" of the person, while B1 makes the claim that there is "nothing else" to the person but causally connected events. Griffiths concludes by saying that as a Christian, he must judge that there is an incompatibility between B1 and the doctrine expressing sentences of the Christian community, C1-C3.

In looking at B2 and B3, Griffiths notes that any incompatibility between these two claims and C1-C3, if it exists, is not nearly as obvious. He thus attempts to look at the hidden assumptions that these Buddhist claims entail. As he looks at B2, he notes that underlying this claim is the assumption that human beings ought to seek Nirvana and that it is desirable. This opens up a whole new aspect of the discussion, as the Christian needs to gain an understanding of Nirvana to see if it is in contradiction with Christian

[95] Ibid., p. 101-102.

claims.[96] Even without going through the details of such an interaction, Griffiths highlights that the questions asked as we engage with the Buddhist understanding of Nirvana are of great heuristic value. Griffiths explains the potential form of this engagement:

> Refinements and advances in both my understanding of what Nirvana is and (equally important) in the understanding of my Buddhist interlocutors on this matter would be bound to follow. More important, these refinements and developments would follow at a pace and with a passion that it is hard to imagine being produced by any other method.[97]

As for B3, even though there is not an obvious contradiction, again, the questions which must be asked in investigating a possible contradiction can lead the members of both religions to a greater understanding of one another's claims. For instance, when a Christian looks at B3, Griffiths notes that he or she must explore "what is meant by 'suffering' in both traditions."[98] On the exploration of this theme, we find some very interesting distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity. It is clear that for Buddhists, suffering is something which ought to be removed, while in Christianity, "suffering, in some senses and on some occasions is to be embraced and welcomed."[99] Taking this distinction deeper would inevitably lead to questions about whether loving God is one of the passionate attachments in Buddhism which causes suffering. Griffiths again notes that such an exploration is clearly of great heuristic value.

However, after looking at the possible heuristically valuable discussions to which B2 and B3 can lead, Griffiths restricts his study in this project to the evident contradiction

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[96] Ibid., p. 103. Griffiths explains that Christians must determine whether the goal of Nirvana is compatible with the Christian attempt to "bring about the kingdom of God."
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., p. 104. If we simply assume, as a pluralist might, that all religions exist to limit suffering, we miss a central aspect of Christianity. Here we see again how in rejecting the predetermined assumptions on

B1 has with C1-C3. Thus, since as a Christian, he believes that C1-C3 are true, he must "regard B1 as it stands, together with its presuppositions and entailments, to be false."[100] It should be noted here that such a judgment comes only after much work has been done. There has been the undertaking of attempting to understand the Buddhist claims as one would understand a second-first language. There has been the recognition that Buddhism and Christianity share a similar rational structure when it comes to their respective arguments. Finally, there has been the carefully constructed analysis which shows B1 to be in conflict with C1-C3. Only after all of this work has been done can the criticism begin.

4.4.4 The Beginning of Apologetical Criticism

Since Griffiths holds, as a Christian, that B1 is false, he is now under the apologetical duty to attempt to prove that such is in fact the case. He notes that such an undertaking is an example of negative apologetics, because if B1 were true, it would put C1-C3 into question. It is not an undertaking in positive apologetics because he is not attempting to prove that C1-C3 are true; he is merely trying to disprove the criticism of C1-C3 that B1 would provide. In his attempt to disprove B1, his first step is in adding an implicit assumption of B1 which he names B4:

> (B4) Any specific continuum of causally connected events conventionally called a human person does not cease with death.[101]

By alluding to this Buddhist belief, the doctrine of rebirth, Griffiths is pointing out that any continuity of identity which passes from one life to another is merely a causal

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the meaning of religious claims, we can potentially find the unique meaning which particular religious accounts possess.

[100] Ibid.

continuity. There is not a "something" which dies and is reborn; there is merely a cause in one life which affects the next.[102] Thus, a reborn person is not the same person as he or she was in the past life; rather, that person is simply an effect of the previous life. An image often used is that of a candle which passes on its flame to another candle and then is extinguished. The second candle is caused by the first, but the flame is clearly not the same flame.

It is here where Griffiths questions the coherence of such a claim. He questions what form of causality can be at work in this doctrine of rebirth. He asks, "suppose we simultaneously light six candles from one original and then extinguish the original. Which is the 'proper' continuation, the closest continuer."[103] According to Griffiths, this example illuminates a major problem in Buddhist metaphysics: "B1 and B4, while tenable in their bare form, become almost completely without philosophical interest since they are close to being contentless"; simply put, there are no criteria to "individuate one continuum from another, either within or across lives."[104] Thus, B1 and B4 explain that all events within a certain continuum do not end with the event of death, but they give no insight into how we can determine whether certain events happen within or outside a certain continuum. In this critique, then, Griffiths argues that these two Buddhist claims, when put side by side, are essentially without meaning.

Here Griffiths notes that Buddhists might simply accept the conclusion that there are no ways to determine what lies within a given continuum; there are no ways to

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[101] Ibid., p. 105.

[102] It is worth noting that this causal connection from one life to the next is the same connection between different events in a single life.

[103] *Apology*, p. 105-106.

[104] Ibid., p. 106.

determine the continuity of a person. However, such an option is a difficult one for them to take because of the importance that Karmic theory plays in Buddhism as a whole:

> It claims to explain why you are neither a worm nor a Buddha, and why worms are different from both Buddhas and you. It claims to explain why some human persons are born prosperous, healthy, and intelligent, while others are born crippled, deformed, and full of hatred. Karmic theory also grounds Buddhist ideas about moral responsibility: it provides the first-order prescriptions and proscriptions of Buddhist ethics [. . .] with their justification and sanction. If you do engage in such activities, you will suffer for them either in this life or a future one, while if you fulfil your duties [. . .], you will have a good rebirth.[105]

When B1 and B4 are accepted as being empty of content, all of these functions of Karmic theory cannot function in the way that the Buddhist tradition wants them to.

4.4.5 Further Possibilities

Thus, Griffiths claims that the Buddhist rejection of souls fails. It is worth noting once again, that his argument showing this failure is based upon a rationality structure that Buddhists accept as authentic. Still, although Griffiths makes this claim, the apologetic is not over. In fact, this is only the beginning of the apologetic. By claiming that the Buddhist claims in this area are false, Griffiths hopes that his claim will be challenged. This challenge can prove to give rise to a stronger understanding of both the Buddhist and Christian religious accounts. He notes that the Buddhist challenge may take two directions. First, Buddhist thinkers could construct a negative apologetic of their own to show that the criticism levied against B1 and B4 is misconstrued. Second, they may want to engage in an apologetic showing the inherent difficulties in C1-C3, constructing "arguments purporting to show that the Christian idea of the soul is

[105] Ibid., p. 106.

incoherent, or that there is not sufficient evidence to affirm its existence."[106] It is thus clear that Griffiths is not simply aiming at victory in his apologetical attempt. Of course, as a Christian, he believes his claims to be true, but it is possible that as the engagement progresses, the Buddhists will show him that C1-C3 need to be revised in some way, just as it is possible that he will show the Buddhists that their claims need to be revised. By taking Buddhist claims seriously and being critical of them, Griffiths is thus creating a setting in which many different possibilities may occur.

Furthermore, there is even the possibility of some "creative borrowing" occurring. In his article "Encountering Buddha Theologically," Griffiths explores this possibility. Recall that in this article, he noticed the similarities in method between Christology and the Buddhist discourse describing the Buddha. In exploring these similarities in method, he finds that fundamental assumptions of the Buddhist understanding conflict with the Christian understanding of Christ and God. Therefore, Griffiths concludes that Christians must pause.[107] As in the conflicting notions of the self, when faced with such incompatibilities, Christians must consider the Buddhist understanding to be false, and thus dutifully go about to attempt to prove its inadequacy. However, in the setting of this apologetic, Griffiths notes that in dealing with these claims, Christians may find that certain aspects of the Buddhist understanding of Buddha challenge Christians in their beliefs. Christians may find that the Buddhist criticism of the Christian understanding of God's knowledge in propositional terms shows it to be flawed. Griffiths explains that

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[106] Ibid., p. 107.

[107] See "Encountering Buddha Theologically," p. 49. I do not want to discuss the incompatibility of these claims in detail. It will suffice to say that in Buddhist thinking, Buddha is great because he is able to escape time, while in Christian thinking, Christ is great because he works within time. For more detail on this, see Griffiths' article: "Buddha and God: A Constrastive Study in Ideas about Maximal Greatness" and the final chapter of *On Being Buddha.*

"exposure to a religious tradition such as the Buddhist may act as a catalyst for the reappropriation and rediscovery of the more traditional model of God's knowledge already present in the Christian tradition."[108] He claims that for Christians to see God's knowledge as Buddhists see Buddha's (as direct awareness) has many advantages over the propositional model. In this way, the encounter can be "theologically nourishing" as Buddhist claims can be appropriated by Christians:

> There is a perfectly proper sense in which Buddha, encountered theologically by Christians, can become an element in Christian theological discourse, a proper contributor to Christian theological thinking. There is also, correspondingly, a sense in which Christ, encountered Buddhologically by Buddhists, can become an element in Buddhist systematic discourse, a proper contributor to Buddhist systematic thinking. But it is for Buddhists to speak to that.[109]

Thus, as the apologetical engagement progresses, there can, and most likely will, be much growth in both religions in the many different possibilities that occur.

4.5 Future Possibilities

We have thus seen how Griffiths' understanding of a proper interreligious polemic manifests itself in the interaction between Buddhists and Christians. Moreover, we have seen how such an encounter can be "a constructively critical enterprise"[110] as members of both religious communities can learn much about the other, and even about themselves. In his discussion with Japanese Buddhists, Griffiths explains that he has hope that the future of the interaction between these two religions can be one in which both sides recognize more fully the soteriological significance of their respective claims, and in which a concerted effort is made to uncover an even stronger common basis for

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[108] "Encountering Buddha Theologically," p. 50.
[109] Ibid., p. 50-51.

understanding and argument.[111] Hence, as far as the Christian encounter with Buddhism is concerned, Griffiths claims that in grounding oneself firmly in the Christian tradition, and in taking Buddhist claims seriously, there can be immense gains made in the engagement.

But this success need not be limited to the Christian-Buddhist interaction. The possibilities for a Christian engagement with other religions are great, but it will take a detailed and careful attempt to make these engagements successful. Just as Griffiths has done in approaching Buddhist claims, the claims of other religions must be taken with equal seriousness. In order for this to happen, there must be much work in determining the basic understanding of the alien claims, as well as in uncovering possible common grounds for discussion and debate. However, such a task is not an impossible one. For instance, Christians may find that the shared monotheistic outlook that they have with Judaism and with Islam gives a strong basis for polemical discourse in the shape that Griffiths has outlined. In fact, such a basis has been a firm foundation for the engagement that these three religions have had in the past.[112] With other religious traditions, the task may be more difficult, but upon seeing the basis for understanding that Griffiths has found between Christianity and Buddhism, there is clearly at least a possibility for discourse between Christianity and any religious tradition.

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[110] Griffiths uses this phrase to describe the engagement between Christians and Buddhists on the differences between their respective understandings of Christ and Buddha in *On Being Buddha*, p. 182.
[111] See "On the Possible Future of the Buddhist-Christian Interaction," p. 158.
[112] For work on this topic which is in keeping with Griffiths' project, see the work of David B. Burrell. In "Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish thinkers," he looks at Aquinas' attitude towards and relation with the Jewish thinker Maimonides and the Muslim thinkers Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. In "Naming the Names of God: Muslims, Jews, Christians," Burrell shows how Christians have profited in their understanding of God "from reflections based on the practices of another," p. 29. In this article, he again looks at Maimonides, but also looks at the great Muslim thinker, al-Ghazali, whose works were influential for Maimonides, whose works, in turn, were influential for Aquinas. For a more specific study of al-Ghazali, also see Burrell's "The Unknowability of God in al-Ghazali," in which he shows that one of the key theological

One thing is certain. Any success gained from the interreligious discussion cannot come out of a predetermined framework for the interaction. A proper Christian theological encounter cannot occur if it has already been decided what the outcome of that encounter will be. Griffiths' work, set within the contextual-narrative model of religion, exposes the fact that "an *a priori* pluralism, just as much as an *a priori* exclusivism, makes genuine encounter of this sort on the intellectual level effectively impossible."[113] Apart from issuing no possibility of intellectual gain, such predetermined understandings are inherently hostile as they force a certain understanding of the encounter on all of the participants. Griffiths' project, on the other hand, allows for many possibilities to emerge from the discussion, and thus does not alienate members of different religious traditions, but rather helps people understand one another. Griffiths' project provides hope that, in a setting of respect, the interreligious encounter can be a place wherein strangers can critically come to know one another in a mutual desire to find the Truth.

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components in al-Ghazali's work, the unknowability of God, lies "at the heart of the inquiry of the Jew, Christian or Muslim seeking after God," p. 171.

[113] "Encountering Buddha Theologically," p. 50.

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