

Religious Pluralism and Knowledge of the True God: Fraternal Reflection and Discussion

The Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary

Religious pluralism finds routine expression in the popular confession: “We all believe in the same God.” The church, therefore, faces a significant erosion of the biblical confession that only those who have faith in Jesus Christ given through the revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures know the true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and have salvation. The impact of religious pluralism upon the church is visible in the position of the Second Vatican Council on the salvation of adherents of other religions (especially Judaism and Islam):

Finally, those who have not received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. There is first, that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom. 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom. 11:29-29). But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day. Nor is God remote from those who in the shadows and images seek the unknown god, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and since the Saviour wills all men to be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.¹

This position, which was controversial when it was adopted in 1964, is now widely accepted among Americans, including many Christians. A recent survey of Americans states: “Three quarters of the public say many religions can lead to eternal life.”² This situation prompts an important question: To what extent do adherents of religions that have perverted the *natural* revelation of God (i.e., His existence and power reflected in creation and placed in conscience) or have even rejected the *special* revelation of God (i.e., His words and deeds recorded in the Holy Scriptures) still have knowledge of the true God?

¹“Lumen Gentium,” 16. This quotation is from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1975), 367. For a more recent expression of this position, see “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” The Consultation of The National Council of Synagogues and The Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (USCCB), http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/interreligious/ncs_usccb120802.htm.

²“Americans Struggle with Religion’s Role at Home and Abroad,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, The Pew Forum on Religions and Public Life, 20 March 2002, or <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=386>. This report also states: “Even the most strongly committed evangelical Christians are evenly divided (48%-48%) over whether their faith [Christianity] is the only route to eternal life or not.”

In contrast to the perspective toward non-Christian religions expressed by Vatican II and reflected in the widely held opinion that various religions have knowledge of the true God, the Holy Scriptures impart a different perspective. The Scriptures distinguish between *knowing about the existence of God* and *knowing who God is* by what He has done through the revelation given to Israel and fulfilled in Christ. The Scriptures teach that God witnesses to Himself in creation and conscience (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19-29, 2:15), yet no one comes to know who the true God is through this witness. According to the extensive testimony of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32, sinful man without the Holy Spirit *always* rejects or perverts this natural revelation of God with the result that idolatry in some form inevitably follows (1:21-24). God placed the revelation of Himself around and even in man, but it was and continues to be rejected: “So they are without excuse; for even though they had known God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their undiscerning hearts were darkened” (1:20b-21). The natural revelation of the true God, which is accessible to all, makes all accountable to God, but each one who remains in bondage to sin “does not see fit to have a knowledge of God” (1:28), is even a “hater of God” (1:30), and is under God’s wrath (1:18). Paul concludes his assessment of man who is in bondage to sin with these poignant quotations of the Old Testament: “No one understands, no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11, quoting Psalms 14 and 53) and “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:18, quoting Psalm 36:1). The multiplicity of religions testifies that the natural revelation of God is accessible to all; their contradictory and largely false contents demonstrate that natural revelation is not sufficient to know who the true God is.

This situation impresses upon us the vital importance of both God’s *special revelation* recorded in the Holy Scriptures and *faith in Christ worked by the Holy Spirit* in order to know who the true God is. God revealed Himself in history by appearing, speaking, and acting in order to preserve and redeem His creation. This revelation shows *who God is*: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who elected Israel (Exodus 3:6). He is YHWH, who led Israel out of Egypt into the promised land (Exodus 3:15). This self-same God in the New Testament reveals Himself ultimately in the person of Jesus of Nazareth through whom we know God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 1:14-18; Matthew 28:19). Jesus suffered for the sin of the world, died, and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). If one rejects Jesus and His death for sin, one is rejecting the God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament, since the Son is the revelation of God throughout the history of Israel and the one in whom the faithful of the Old Testament trusted (John 1:18; 5:39, 45-47; 8:56; Romans 4:1-25). We cannot emphasize enough the utmost importance of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ for knowing who God is and worshiping Him rightly according to His salvific deeds. One can know much information about God and still not know who He is. The Holy Spirit, however, works through the Gospel to create faith in Christ (John 3:3-7; 2 Timothy 3:15). Hence, those who once did not know God, now in Christ know who He is.

The question of the extent to which a religion or an individual has knowledge of the true God is addressed in the language and practice of worship: those who truly know God worship Him rightly by calling Him by His name and praising Him according to His salvific works in Christ. For Paul, therefore, the evidence that people of other religions do not now know God is that they do not worship Him rightly: “for even though they [at one time] *had known* God, they

did not glorify Him as God or give thanks to Him” (Romans 1:20, emphasis added).³ Exclusive worship of God in a polytheistic world is demanded by both the First Commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3), and the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4).⁴ In spite of God graciously revealing Himself in the Exodus from Egypt, through Moses, and then through the other prophets, many Israelites showed that they did not truly know Him by worshiping false gods. The majority of Israel, for example, worshiped the golden calf shortly after being brought out of Egypt (Exodus 32), Ahab and Jezebel led Israel (the Northern Kingdom) to worship Baal and the other Canaanite deities despite confrontation and condemnation by Elijah (1 Kings 17-19), and later many in Judah (the Southern Kingdom) engaged in the worship of Baal in spite of the warnings of several prophets (Jeremiah 10-11, especially 11:13). Those who did not really know God engaged in idolatry. Jesus, in His discussion with the Samaritan woman, affirms the inevitable relationship between knowing God and worshiping Him: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). He immediately goes on to indicate that the worship of God would no longer center in the temple of Jerusalem and its sacrifices: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23).⁵ The Book of Revelation testifies that the worship of God in heaven and on earth is now centered on the Lamb who was sacrificed for sin and stands victorious in the midst of the Divine Throne: Jesus Christ (Revelation 5:6-14; 7:17). Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection is the climactic revelation of God (John 1:51; 12:30-33).

The proof, therefore, that one knows God is that one worships Christ (Philippians 2:9-11). Conversely, those who do not worship Christ prove that they do not really know who the true God is or what He has done for the salvation of the world (1 John 2:22-23). The testimony of the Scriptures is clear: man in the bondage of sin repeatedly rejects and perverts both the natural and special revelation of God with the result that he may know information about God (e.g., anything from the fact that God exists to the full content of the Scriptures) but still not know who God is. Knowing who God is and what He has done comes by the Holy Spirit working faith through the gospel and is evident in the worship of Christ.

The Lutheran Confessions follow this biblical teaching. They acknowledge that there is in fallen man “a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the law” (Solid Declaration II, 9), so that “even the heathen to a certain extent had a knowledge of God from the natural law, although they neither knew Him aright nor glorified [or “honored”] Him aright” (Solid Declaration V, 22). This “dim spark” of knowing the existence of God causes the universality of religion. It does not, however, result in knowing who God is, since it is perverted

³Paul’s use of the aorist participle *gnontej* (“even though they had known”) speaks of action prior to that of the verbs in the aorist tense *edoxasan* and *hucaristhsan* (“they did not glorify . . . or give thanks”). The apostle is stating that natural revelation imparts some knowledge about God, but, because of man’s previous rejection or perversion of this knowledge, he does not know who God is and demonstrates this by both his lack of right worship and by his false worship of the creation (Romans 1:25). Paul summarizes the situation quite bluntly: “they do not see fit to have knowledge of God” (1:28).

⁴Another translation of the Shema may express more clearly its call to the exclusive worship of the one true God: “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”

⁵To “worship the Father in Spirit and truth” signifies worship that is centered in Christ, to whom the Spirit of Truth testifies (John 14:25-26; 15:46; 16:7-15) and in whom the Father is known (John 14:6-11).

by sinful man, so that his religion is “false worship and idolatry” (Large Catechism I, 17). The consequences of original sin, which are shared by all men, are “ignorance of God, contempt for God, being destitute of fear and confidence in God” (Apology II, 9; comparing II, 23). Without special revelation and faith in Christ, man does not know the true God: “For formerly, before we had attained to this, we were altogether of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ” (Large Catechism II, 52).

In contrast to this teaching, some assert that the Lutheran Confessions teach that belief in the one true God can exist apart from faith in Christ. The text used as proof of this aberrant opinion is an inaccurate English translation of Luther’s conclusion to his discussion of the Creed in the Large Catechism (II, 66).⁶ An accurate translation of this text, however, confesses the biblical teaching that people without Christ do not truly know who God is, even if they believe that there is only one God:

These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites — *even though they believe that there is only one true God and worship [him]* — nevertheless they do not know what His attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of His love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illumined and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther is consistent in this position. In explaining the First Commandment, he asserts that “it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol” (Large Catechism I, 2). His understanding of natural revelation and pagan religions is also expressed in his exposition of Jonah 1:5. There Luther emphasizes the biblical distinction between *knowing about God’s existence* and *knowing who God is*:

Thus reason also plays blindman’s buff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. Therefore it rushes in clumsily and assigns the name God and ascribes divine honor to its own idea of God. Thus reason never finds the

⁶The phrase “nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott” in the original German (and “quamquam unum tantum et verum Deum” in the Latin text) is translated properly as “only one true God” in the *Concordia Triglotta*. It is, on the other hand, mistranslated as “only *the* one, true God” in the versions of the Book of Concord edited by Tappert and by Kolb and Wengert: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 419; and *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 440. The German text has no definite article; and the context makes it clear that those who do not believe in Christ do not believe in or worship *the* true God, since they “remain in eternal wrath and condemnation.” Furthermore, the German text has “ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glauben,” which the Latin renders “quamquam unum tantum et verum Deum esse credant.” Luther, then, speaks not of believing *in* someone, but rather of believing *that* something is the case. A correct translation would therefore be: “although they believe that there is only one true God and worship [him].” The meaning is that some people believe that there is only one true God and worship according to this understanding, but still do not know God because they identify Him wrongly.

true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody’s heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.⁷

The rejection of Christ is, for Luther, a rejection of the God revealed in the Old Testament. Luther understood the God who spoke and acted in the Old Testament, including Him who spoke the First Commandment, to be God the Son:

It follows cogently and incontrovertibly that the God who led the children of Israel from Egypt and through the Red Sea, who guided them in the wilderness by means of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, who nourished them with bread from heaven, who performed all the miracles recorded by Moses in his books, again, who brought them into the land of Canaan and there gave them kings and priests and everything, is the very same God, and none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Virgin Mary, whom we Christians call our Lord and God, whom the Jews crucified, and whom they still blaspheme and curse today, as Isaiah 8 (21) declares: “They will be enraged and will curse their King and their God.” Likewise, it is He who gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, saying (Ex. 20:2, 3): “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . You shall have no other gods before Me.” Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, who died for us on the cross, is the God who says in the First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God.”⁸

All non-Christian religions, therefore, sin against the First Commandment by worshiping someone or something other than Christ. These religions know that God exists, and they may contain other elements of revelation, but they do not know who the true God is. They prove this conclusion by not acknowledging His work of redeeming creation through the crucified and risen Christ, whom they refuse to worship.⁹ This refusal is obvious in polytheistic religions such as that of the ancient Greeks or present-day Hinduism and Buddhism, where not even one god who is the creator is worshiped. It is also true of a monotheistic religion such as Islam, which worships only one god. In its origins Islam was explicitly opposed to Christianity and intended to supersede it. The Koran holds Jesus to be a prophet second and subordinate to Mohammed (Sura 112: 1-4; 4: 171). Islam, moreover, rejects Jesus as the Son of God and the Redeemer of

⁷“Lectures on Jonah: The German Text, 1526,” translated by Martin H. Bertram, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition [LW], 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 19:55.

⁸“Treatise on the Last Words of David,” translated by Martin H. Bertram, LW 15: 313-314. Jaroslav Pelikan, in his introduction to this volume, states that the mature Luther wrote this treatise in the summer of 1543 “in order to defend the Christological exegesis of the Old Testament both against Jewish interpreters and against their Christian pupils” (page xi).

⁹This is the long-standing position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. For example, the synodical explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism, which is widely used in congregations of the LCMS, includes the following question and answers: “When do people have other gods? A. when they regard or worship any creature or thing as God; B. when they believe in a god who is not the triune God (see Apostles’ Creed); C. when they fear, love, or trust in any person or thing as they should fear, love, and trust in God alone; D. when they join in the worship of one who is not the triune God.” *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 56.

the world. Islam, because it explicitly rejects the deity of Christ and His redemptive work, does not know or worship the true God.

The question of whether modern Judaism, like Christianity, knows and worships the true God is more widely debated, because both claim the Old Testament as Scripture.¹⁰ Although many of the roots of modern Judaism are in the Old Testament, the decisive question is whether or not Jesus is the Messiah promised by the prophets and awaited by the faithful of Israel. Modern Judaism is a continuation of that Judaism that refused to acknowledge Jesus as the promised and awaited Messiah.¹¹ Christianity, however, arises out of that Judaism that did acknowledge Christ to be the promised and awaited Messiah. Christianity, therefore, understands itself to be the continuation of faithful Israel (Romans 9:6-8). According to the New Testament, it was Jesus Himself who declared that Jews who reject Him do not know God: “You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also” (John 8:19). Jesus emphasizes this same point in His next dialogue with some Jews who were rejecting Him: “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but He sent me. . . . If I tell the truth, why do not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (John 8:42, 46b-47).

Christians, heeding this testimony, should claim no special status for Jews by asserting that they will be saved apart from faith in Christ, as is popularly proclaimed by some.¹² Neither, however, should Christians harbor any hatred toward Jews because of past or current rejection of Christ. The compassionate attitude of the Apostle Paul toward his fellow-Jews, who knew the Old Testament and yet rejected Christ, is a model for Christians of every generation: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness [Christ] that comes from God and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s

¹⁰Modern Judaism, like modern Christianity, is a complex and multi-faceted religion. In addition to the Old Testament, it has roots in the development of Rabbinic Judaism and the “Oral Torah” after the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, as expressed in the Mishnah (circa second/third century A.D.) and expounded in the Talmud (circa third to sixth century A.D.). See further Jacob Neusner, *The Religious World of Contemporary Judaism: Observations and Convictions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); and Isidore Epstein, *Judaism: An Historical Presentation* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959).

¹¹Early evidence of the official rejection of Jesus Christ is found in the twelfth benediction of the *Amidah* (Eighteen Benedictions) used in the early liturgy of the synagogue, which was revised between A.D. 85 and 115 to include this curse: “Let the Nazarenes [Christians] and the Minim [heretics] be destroyed in a moment, and let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous.” For further discussion see J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, second edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 50-60.

¹²Romans 9-11 has often been used as support for the position that the Jews remain God’s elect people, even if they reject Christ. See Charles H. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). The problem arises when “Israel” in Romans 11:26 (“all Israel will be saved”) is interpreted as a reference to a Jewish religious or political entity. Romans 9:6-8, however, makes it clear that “Israel” in these chapters consists in all believers (i.e., the church), whether Jew or Gentile. Furthermore, Romans 10:8-11 affirms, with the earlier chapters of this epistle, that salvation is only through faith in Jesus Christ: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9).

righteousness [Christ]. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified” (Romans 10:14, RSV).

There are also some Christians who assert that adherents of Islam and modern Judaism know God as the Father, even though they reject the Son.¹³ Faith in one God who is the Creator, however, is *not* identical with confessing the First Article of the Creed. To confess God to be the Father arises from the confession that Jesus is His eternal Son. The confession, therefore, that God is the Father necessarily entails that Christ is He through whom all things were made (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16) and that the Father gave Him up for the salvation of the world (John 3:16; Romans 3:25). Those who deny these truths cannot be said to believe in God the Father. What the Apostle John said about the heretics of his time applies also to them: “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). It is, therefore, wrong to state that the adherents of Islam or modern Judaism believe in the Father, even though they reject the Son and the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Trinity means that whoever rejects one person, rejects also the other persons and, thus, the true God.

Recognizing the differences between Christianity and other religions is sometimes seen as intolerance. This characterization is simply not true. Quite to the contrary, tolerance supports the freedom of religion that allows us to confess the truth of Christianity over against all other religions. We both respect the right of other citizens to believe and worship differently, and reject attempts by any religion to impose itself on other citizens with the help of the government.¹⁴ As Christians we know that faith comes by hearing the Gospel, not through external force (Romans 10:11-14).

Freedom of religion in the civic realm allows the missionary proclamation of the Gospel. Christians are called to present the Gospel to non-Christians in a truthful and loving way. We should not, therefore, identify the one true God with a god who is a conglomerate of truth and error. To confess that “we all believe in the same God” confuses the faithful and seriously impedes the mission of the church, since it confirms non-Christians in their unbelief. Missionary proclamation is always a preaching of Law and Gospel that calls sinners to repentance, in order that man turn away from false gods and believe in Christ as the true God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Some will take offense at such preaching. This reaction has always been the unavoidable scandal of the Gospel: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). In our mission to all nations, we

¹³Further discussion may be found in Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Mohammed? Understanding the Difference Between Christianity and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002).

¹⁴Despite widespread acknowledgment of the existence of “God” and the importance of religion to the government of the United States (e.g., the motto “In God We Trust” inscribed on money, the use of “one nation, under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, and the frequent use of “God bless America” in political speeches), the definition of this “God” is relegated to the individual citizens of the nation. Christians confess as the only God, also when referenced in the civic realm, the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, even though we know that many other citizens define “God” in different and false ways. Discussion of the challenges posed by “civil religion” may be found in David L. Adams, “The Church in the Public Square in a Pluralistic Society,” *Concordia Journal* 28 (2002):364-390.

are to keep the words of Jesus central: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Since “there is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:12), we are to bring this Jesus to lost mankind and by Him bring people to fellowship with the Triune God. It is the mission of the church to proclaim Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation in our religiously pluralistic world, even as it has always been since Pentecost.

To God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—be glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary

Respectfully submitted,
Douglas McC. L. Judisch,
Secretary of the Faculty

A special committee of the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary was appointed in March of 2003 to propose a response to a number of queries relating to the natural knowledge of God. The proposals of this committee were discussed and extensively revised in the course of three succeeding meetings of the faculty and numerous less formal interchanges during the months of April and May. The exposition of “Religious Pluralism and Knowledge of the True God” printed here was, in the end, adopted by unanimous vote in the meeting of the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary which convened on 22 May in the year of our Lord 2003.
D. McC. L. Judisch, Secretary.