

# Religious Pluralism : A Turn to the Holy Spirit

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## Introduction [1](#)

Rightly or wrongly, more often than not, conservative evangelical theologians opt for a restrictivist approach to the salvation of non-Christians and are not inclined to think that God might be redemptively active in the religious life of humanity at large. This is not always true, of course, because other and more voices exist and have existed.[2](#) But the inclination is widespread not to acknowledge much by way of positive divine activity in this sphere. This inclination shows some signs of changing partly because the soteriological problem involved remains so severe. I refer to the unpleasant implications that, under the arrangements God has put in place according to restrictivism, most sinners will have no opportunity to be saved though no fault of their own. How, therefore (people ask), could a just and merciful God consign to hell those whose very providential circumstances prevented them from hearing? Not only is this a painful dilemma intellectually but there exists some considerable hope among our people for a better resolution of this problem.

Two years ago I presented a paper on a wider hope at the Evangelical Theological Society, based on work I had published a decade earlier.[3](#) The perspective was based on the assumption which I share with the Wesleyan/Arminians that God, who wants all to be saved, is likely to be actively wooing sinners on a global scale. It would seem odd if he were not. Did Paul not say, "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more?" (Rom 5:20). Therefore I have put forth considerations which Paul Knitter has called "a wider mercy solution."[4](#) The idea holds that God's grace is at work in some ways among all people, possibly even in the sphere of the religious life. It even entertains the possibility that aspects of religion may play a positive role preparatory to the gospel of Christ, in whom alone the fulness of salvation is to be found. In effect, it places greater emphasis on the "universal" aspect of the universal/particular dialectic of Scripture and hopes that our acknowledgment of the cosmic breadth of the Spirit's work can help us to conceptualise better the universality of grace.

In this paper, I want to explore further the pneumatological dimension of the wider mercy position. Is it possible that God works graciously outside the boundaries of Christianity through the universal presence and activity of the Holy Spirit? It is a question well worth asking as part of theology's unending quest for understanding.[5](#)

## A Turn to the Spirit in Recent Roman Catholic Theology[6](#)

I have always appreciated the Roman Catholic theology of Vatican II when it comes to matters of religious pluralism, and have felt that this approach offers some good leads. We have a lot in common with Catholics in wanting to defend the unique, saving work of Jesus Christ for all humankind, while still doing justice to the universal salvific will of God. I suppose this makes me what Erickson calls a "post-conservative" evangelical, one characteristic of which is the willingness to learn from anyone who brings good ideas to the table, whatever the source.[7](#) This is true and it makes sense too that Catholics would have something to offer on these subjects because they share the same basic agenda with us. Neither of us is inclined to compromise on the finality of Jesus Christ or suffer under the illusion that one religion as good

as any other. We do not need to be convinced about the "otherness" of the world faiths, a premise we both accept without hesitation.

On March 4, 1979, during the first year of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II issued his first encyclical, entitled "Redemptor Hominis," in which he expressed the desire of the Catholic Church to engage in dialogue with members of other religions. This encyclical sounded the note that would characterise his approach to the dialogue: namely, respect for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit among non-Christians, a presence and activity discernible even in their religious life in their practice of virtue, their spirituality, and their prayers. He thinks of such fruit as being "an effect of the Spirit of truth, operating outside the visible confines of the mystical body of Christ." Indeed, he credits to the Spirit everything good that has been brought about in non-Christians.

Two years later, in a radio address given during a visit to Asia, John Paul said: "I have come to Asia to be a witness to the Spirit who is active in the history of peoples and nations" and went on to attribute any praiseworthy elements to the Spirit of God. In 1986, he issued an encyclical letter on the Holy Spirit, entitled "Dominum et Vivificantem," in which he further develops this theme of the universal action of the Spirit. He sees the Spirit always and everywhere active in God's world-embracing plan of redemption. Since Christ died for all, he says, "We ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery." In the same year (1986), in a Christmas address, reflecting on why he had called for a Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, he spoke of all authentic prayer as being under the influence of the Spirit and said: "We maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person." In 1990, in an encyclical on missions, "Redemptoris Missio," having insisted on the unique role of Jesus Christ in salvation as he always does, he writes: "It is the Spirit who sows 'seeds of the word' which are present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for their full maturity in Christ." The pope is committed to dialogue because he respects the gifts of God in people and looks for signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Holy Spirit. In reaching out to people of other faiths, he even asks for forgiveness with regard to church-sponsored abuses of the past.

Although it is true that Vatican II had said this sort of thing (eg *Gaudium et Spes* par. 22 and *Lumen Gentium* par. 16), the difference is that such references by the council to the universal activity of the Spirit, offering grace to every person, were occasional rather than sustained, as with John Paul. With this pope, it has become a principal theme in practically every context in which he has spoken of the non-Christian world. And, whereas the conciliar text spoke only of the working of the Spirit in individuals, this pope is prepared to speak of the activity of the Spirit in non-Christian religions and by so doing he has left a mark on the development of these ideas. Please note that he does not say that the non-Christian religions constitute an ordinary means of salvation nor (as far as I know) has he ever recognised them even as extraordinary means of salvation. He has never suggested that we understand non-Christian religions as mediations of salvation. His whole attitude is balanced, as when he spoke to the Secretariat for Non-Christians in 1987:

There remain many questions which we have to develop and articulate more clearly. How does God work in the lives of people of different religions? How does his saving activity in Jesus Christ effectively extend to those who have not professed faith in him? In the coming years, these questions and others like them will become more and more important for the church in a pluralistic world and pastors with the collaboration of experienced theologians must direct their studious attention to them.<sup>8</sup>

For John Paul, the reason why there are spiritual treasures in the religions of the world, why there is a sense of kinship, and why dialogue is promising, is the reality of the Holy Spirit, who is alive and active in world history, both before and after Christ, and who inspires the searchings of humankind. He believes that, while there are many religions in the world, there is one Spirit seeking to bear fruit in them all. As for the question of whether it would be theologically sound to attribute to non-Christian religions a role of mediation in salvation, I believe that the pontiff would regard it as one of those matter that needs further study before taking a position on it.

One sees the turn to the Spirit in the work of two other prominent Catholic theologians: Gavin D'Costa and Jacques Dupuis. Both follow the lead of Pope John Paul II and make the Holy Spirit the key factor. They see this approach as a way to be faithful to the gospel and (at the same time) be more open to others. Born of Indian parents, raised in Kenya, and educated in England, Gavin D'Costa combines his orthodox Catholic faith with strong multicultural sensitivities. On the one hand, he is opposed to the pluralist agenda which would posit an equality of religions; on the other hand, he wants to draw on the dialogical potential of the Christian faith. The pluralists, he contends, end up mistreating both Christianity and other faiths in their efforts to affirm all religions so that they miss real and important differences. For his part, D'Costa focusses on the Trinity and especially on the Spirit. God is Father, God is Son, and God is also Spirit. That is, God is the source of all, God is the Saviour of all, and God is life giving breath, spreading God's love and pervading the whole world with life-giving energy. On this basis, D'Costa affirms the universal presence of God in all human culture. Though we cannot know in advance exactly which fruits of the Spirit we may find growing on the trees of other cultures, because of our belief in the Spirit we can be predisposed to find such fruit. This spirit of hopefulness gives us an incentive to listen and to learn and to find growth, not only on their side, but perhaps on our side too. All too often, we forget about the Spirit and are not predisposed either to find truth among non-Christians or to engage them in hopeful dialogue. Of course, the Spirit's freedom is not unlimited. D'Costa recognises that the Spirit is linked to the incarnate word, so that what he is found to be teaching in other religions will line up with the gospel. He writes: "The riches of the mystery of God disclosed by the Spirit are measured and discerned by their conformity to and illumination of Christ, who is the normative criterion." So that, while the Spirit reaches beyond Jesus in extent, it does not go beyond Jesus in content. There is no independent revelation through the Spirit, but only applications of the revelation of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

The approach of Jacques Dupuis is similar. A Belgian Jesuit who has spent most of his life in India, he also has a special concern. He does not want to insist that whatever good is found in other religions has to be shown to be fulfilled in Christianity. This would place too much of a limitation on the Spirit, as to what the Spirit may be doing and inspiring. We need, he says, to allow more of a level playing field. In effect, Dupuis is moving beyond the fulfilment model which sees other religions only as stepping stones to Christianity and wants to allow for actually learning from dialogue. Why can't dialogue offer mutual enrichment and transformation on all sides, he asks. Why is there benefit only in one direction? If the Spirit is active in history, what the Spirit is doing could be different from God's word in Jesus – not contradictory to it but different from it. That is, God may have more to say than he has said in the Bible and may say it through Balaam's ass or some other means. In other words, Dupuis believes that there is more truth in the history of God's dealings with humanity than is available simply in Christian traditions. We do not have a monopoly, he insists, on all the truth. At the same time, he believes that the fulness of revelation does come in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, in terms of quantity, it does not exhaust the divine mystery. The fullness of what God wants to make known comes in Jesus but we still have to relate this to what the Spirit is doing in the whole world. And this cannot be done unless we talk to other people. Yet in the end, Christ and not the Spirit is at the very centre of the way to God. I think that Dupuis may represent how far one can go while still remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

### Evangelical Appropriation of the Turn to the Spirit<sup>11</sup>

Is this turn to the Spirit in the context of religious pluralism a move which evangelicals might consider taking? There seems to be at least some plausibility in it. If (on the one hand) we affirm the universal salvific will of God and if (on the other hand) we acknowledge a universal scope to the Spirit's ministry, grounds exist for a wider hope for the salvation of our fallen race. It might help us deal with the soteriological problem of evil more effectively. It could serve a similar role to the one played by the concept of the *logos spermatikos* in the early church fathers, who held that people who lived before Christ could be saved if they responded by faith to the various modes of revelation of the pre-incarnate logos.<sup>12</sup> Before Jesus came, the nation of Israel had to "make do" with an "Old Testament." Sometimes it seems like the nations also had to made do with one.<sup>13</sup>

The main issue theologically would seem to be whether we can recognise a universal presence and activity of the Spirit with redemptive promise. Based on the truth that the Spirit blows where it wills, it

seems both biblical and logical to conclude that God's Spirit is not limited to the Christian sphere. That it would not be a mere "ornament of piety" but the Lord and giver of life, the very principle to whom all creatures owe their very existence and activity. This is the insight one finds in the universal pneumatology of Wolfhart Pannenberg and in the holistic pneumatology of Jurgen Moltmann, of whom the latter writes:

In both Protestant and Catholic theology, there is a tendency to view the Holy Spirit solely as the Spirit of redemption. Its place is in the church and it gives men and women the assurance of eternal blessedness. Thus the redemptive Spirit is cut off both from bodily life and the life of nature. It makes people turn away from this world and hope for a better world beyond. They then seek and experience in the Spirit a power that is different from the divine energy of life which according to the Old Testament interpenetrates all the living.<sup>14</sup>

The ever-present Spirit can surely foster transforming friendships with God anywhere and everywhere. Surely the Spirit meets people not only in religious spheres but everywhere – in the natural world, in the give and take of relationships, in the systems that structure human life. No nook or cranny is untouched by the finger of God. This is a presence and activity which may even make use of other religions in its drawing action. All because of Jesus Christ, who is both the criterion for whatever truth there is in the other religions and the only and final end where this truth can be fulfilled.

Does not the person of the Holy Spirit speak eloquently of universality and particularity? It points to God's activity in the elect community and God's activity beyond it – with all of humanity since the beginning of history and in the definitive events of salvation history. The Holy Spirit, the power of God, was active in creation, hovering over the primeval waters (Gen 1:2) and renews the face of the land (Ps 104:30). Present in all human beings as life giving and present in the creation, the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh and will bring about the new creation. The Spirit is at work among his people and at the same time fills the whole world (Ps 139:7). Free of constraint, the Spirit blows where it wills and is present everywhere in God's creation to effect his will.

An analogous way of arriving at the same scenario is the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace, according to which God offers every human being the possibility of being associated with the mystery of salvation, even if the "how" of this is known only to God.<sup>15</sup> Wesley, recognising that human souls are dead in sin by nature, also held that no one exists in the state of mere nature. Everyone has a greater or lesser measure of prevenient grace which does not depend on humanity's doing. There is a light that enlightens everyone and a prevenience that restores human freedom. The grace of God creates a new possibility for human life to whom God is antecedently and enablingly present. God seeks people out and tracks them down no matter how rebellious they have been. The active love of God, stretched out to humanity, is the presupposition of our own repentance and redemption. Through prevenient grace, God makes possible a human response.<sup>16</sup>

"Preventing" grace like the action of the Spirit is universal in extent and is the source of all that is good in humanity. Everyone has a measure of light and God's grace extends to the whole of human existence, which may have implications for the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. Unlike theories that posit only discontinuity, this more positive assessment enables us to recognise truth and goodness in other religions as a result of prevenient grace. This was the direction of John Wesley's own thought. The later Wesley, more than has been recognised, believed that some who have not heard of Christ may enter into a saving relationship with God.<sup>17</sup> This is reminiscent of what Alister McGrath says: "God is not inhibited from bringing people to faith in him even if that act of hope and trust may lack the fully orb'd character of an informed Christian faith."<sup>18</sup>

On another doctrinal path, according to Celtic Christianity, to say that we are made in the image of God is to say that what is deepest in us is of God. At the heart of who we are is the love of God who is present not only *beside* but *within* the human. Redemption in this model is about recovering the treasure that lies deep in our lives. It is not really strange (is it?) that the famous Celt named Pelagius found fierce critics in Rome when he visited it, at the very time when the Roman tradition was hardening and the world was being viewed as an essentially dark place and when the Celtic mission was emphasising the light that

enlightens us all.<sup>19</sup> Believing leads to seeing. Might it be that, only if Christians expect to encounter the grace of the Spirit will they notice the doors which the Spirit has opened and thus be able see the fruits growing in the gardens of other faiths? Anselm Min wonders if it might not be possible to suppose that the Holy Spirit may be actualising different aspects of the Word in other religions. He remarks:

Even though we do not know how the different religions may be mutually compatible, if at all, the fellowship of Word and Spirit gives us reason to hope that they may be complementary and that, in and through them, the reconciling Spirit may be working to bring the different religions together in its own mysterious way.<sup>20</sup>

Amos Yong puts it these terms: the intuition that religious others are caught up in some way in the truth of Jesus has a pneumatological grounding. Jesus' reference to his other sheep speaks of the Spirit bearing witness, not only to those in non-Christian faiths, but perhaps also through them.<sup>21</sup>

I think this more than an intellectual issue – it is a practical matter too. By opening ourselves to the Spirit's work among people, we are enabled to approach them more lovingly and hopefully and with a better conscience theologically. It can help us be more respectful and genuinely dialogical. I don't think we should be ashamed of showing compassion where there are grounds for it. I understand that we cannot assume God to be more generous than he has already revealed himself to be. But in my reading of it, the gospel is clear that God loves sinners and that Christ died for them. Therefore, our posture toward our neighbours of other faiths has to be the kind of love which bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things. It is unlikely before the parousia that the differences that seem so irreconcilable now among us will be sorted out. It is likely that the nations will worship God in different ways until the end of history. It is not likely that we will persuade every one to abandon their religious commitments and adopt ours. Therefore, let us our witness to Jesus respect the convictions of others as far as we can, and leave it to God to sort things out. Let us be evangelical, not only in the historical but also in the etymological sense of the term.<sup>22</sup>

Footnotes:

1. This essay was first presented as one of several on the topic of "Evangelical Christianity and Other Religions" during the 54<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 20-22, 2002, in Toronto, Ontario.
2. For a historical bibliography of evangelicals who have tended toward a wider hope, see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), part three. As in so many other matters in evangelical theology, there is a range of opinion about this issue: see Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), ch 12.
3. The paper, entitled "Toward a More Inclusive Eschatology," appeared in David W. Baker, ed., *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), ch 17. A few years ago I published *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), which has been evaluated critically, nowhere more extensively than in Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).
4. Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 47-48.
5. I have broached these ideas in *Flame of Love: Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), ch 6.
6. This turn to the Spirit in the context of religious pluralism among Roman Catholics is well documented by Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist, 1992), ch 11, and by Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), part 2.
7. Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 29, 131.
8. Cited by Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* 198.

9. Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).
10. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) and *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).
11. On this theme, many will be watching the work of Amos Yong, who offered a paper at the 2002 ETS meeting entitled "The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth, and the Religions" and who has already produced two volumes on it: *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to a Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000) and *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, March, 2003).
12. Terrance L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelised* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993), 281. We must remember in this context too that the fathers were not conscious of large groups of unevangelised people, which makes their dilemma a little different from ours.
13. Steve Charleston of the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma, "The Old Testament of Native America," in S. B. Thistlethwaite and M. B. Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1990), 49-61.
14. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 8. On these and other leading theologians of the Spirit, I refer the reader to Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), ch 5.
15. John Stott is unsure when it comes to the "how" – he is convinced that the majority of the unevangelised will be saved because of God's great mercy but is agnostic about how God will bring it to pass. Gary Phillips calls him a positive agnostic. See John Stott and David Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 320-23.
16. On prevenience, see Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 32-36.
17. Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 32-34.
18. McGrath in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way? Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 179.
19. J. Philip Newell, *The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1999), xviii, 84, 86.
20. Anselm Min in Bradford E. Hinze and D. Lyle Dabney, eds., *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2001), 440-41.
21. Amos Yong, "The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth and Religions" (ETS, 2002) 22.
22. On this issue, see Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 151-52.