

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

A sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church
May 4, 2002

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." So proclaimed the Apostle Paul in front of the supreme tribunal of Athens, the Areopagus, according to this morning's reading from Acts.¹ The traveling Christian missionary from the East, goes on to explain that he had found among the objects of worship in the city an altar with the inscription "To an Unknown God." He uses this as the rhetorical starting place to proclaim his known God, the one and only God, "the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth."²

What are Christians to think of the other religions of the world, especially when we find how extremely religious other people are in every way, without being Christians? Or, are we to challenge those religions directly, proclaiming ours as the only path to salvation? Or, are we to look for what is shared among religious traditions and try to co-exist peacefully by emphasizing our commonalities, even as we know Christianity to be the best path? Or, are we to see God or ultimate truth as well beyond human attempts to encapsulate in any of our religious forms; that

is, are we to respect and appreciate others' approaches, learning from them, as a way of deepening the Christian path to which we are personally committed?

It'll come as no surprise to most of you that I personally adopt the third approach. I also recognize that a number of you present here today, and each week, are not Christians. Everyone is welcome at all Sunday morning University Public Worship services, regardless of your religious tradition or lack thereof.

I hope we demonstrate here, most clearly in our monthly interfaith and multifaith services, that Memorial Church is, as I believe Leland and Jane Stanford intended, a place open to, informed by, and embracing the religions of the world. I'm very proud to share this pulpit with Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann as one of the associate deans for religious life. I hope over the long run that we'll again have another associate dean from a tradition other than Judaism and Christianity, as we did until last summer with Imam Ebrahim Moosa.

Yet, there's no doubt, when you look around yourself at the stained glass and iconography, that this is a Christian church, open as it may be. Today we celebrate a Christian eucharist, as we do here regularly, twice a month. And I stand before you and speak as a committed Christian who personally accepts Jesus Christ

as my Lord and Savior. So the question with which I began remains: What are Christians to think of the other religions of the world? I need a big dose of personal humility when I recognize that many Christians see the Apostle Paul as representing the first approach of challenging other religions directly, proclaiming Christianity to be the only path to salvation. Pope John Paul II, seems to represent the second approach, of finding other religions' commonalities with Christianity, as laid out in a Vatican declaration of less than two years ago.³

The best way of describing these three approaches that I've found is a framework developed by a scholar of comparative religion named Diana Eck. When I delivered a sermon entitled "Jane Stanford's Twenty-first Century Church," here over a year ago, I explained how Professor Eck in her book Encountering God encourages us to distinguish between religious exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism claims that our own religious tradition is the one and only way to truth, excluding all others. Inclusivism admits that there are many religious perspectives, but claims that our own way of seeing things is the culmination of the others, superior to the others, or at least wide enough to include the others under our universal canopy in

our own terms. Pluralism denies that truth is either the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one religious tradition.

Instead, the diversity of visions of God and understandings of the truth are an opportunity for energetic engagement and dialogue with one another. A pluralist approach does not mean giving up our Christian commitments; indeed, we need those commitments if we're to be credible dialogue partners. Instead, a pluralistic approach "means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation."⁴

Diana Eck and I were both students of Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith's at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1970's. He was a Presbyterian minister, a comparative religionist and a scholar of Islam. Regarding the exclusivist approach, I remember him talking about a Christian missionary, Bishop Reginald Heber, who went to India in the early 1800's and condemned Hindus as idolators, bowing down to wood and stone.⁵ Bishop Heber also wrote the great Christian hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" which included the line "Only thou art holy, there is none beside thee." Heber's perspective seems to echo the Apostle Paul's in this morning's reading. In speaking of the altar to an unknown God, Paul tells the Athenians, "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made

by human hands." Paul goes on to explain that "We ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals."⁶

In my divinity school class, though, Professor Smith pointed out that Bishop Heber's Hindus were not bowing down to wood and stone, any more than Christians bow down to a wood or stone when they venerate a cross or the image of the crucified Jesus. Both Hindus and Christians bow down not to wood and stone, but to what they symbolize, to what lies behind them -- namely, God.⁷ While Christians may have a monotheist view of God, Hindus a Pantheist one, and Buddhists may prefer to speak of an impersonal law of Dharma, rather than of a personal God at all, Smith would say that there's one ultimate truth to which all are pointing, partially and incompletely.⁸ Many Jews and Muslims, especially after hearing today's gospel lesson with its trinitarian references to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who each seem to dwell in different places at different times, [such Jews and Muslims] might also question whether Christians aren't in fact bowing down to three gods rather than to one Lord of heaven and earth.

I interpret in a pluralist light what the Apostle Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but

then shall I know fully."⁹ We human beings in this life on this earth are finite, not infinite, so we'll always of necessity have a partial understanding of ultimate reality -- of the Infinite and the Eternal -- which we'll continue to call by many different names. I also see evidence of Paul's moving beyond exclusivism in today's reading from Acts. He's willing to quote pagan Greek poets to the effect that we all "live and move and have our being,"¹⁰ in God, regardless of our particular religion. He sees humanity as one, all descended from one ancestor, but since made to inhabit different parts of the earth, with different boundaries, and presumably, therefore, with different worldviews. Paul explains that God is not far from each one of us, no matter where we live or what our perspective.

So, thus far I've found both exclusivist and pluralist dimensions to Paul's words. How about the third approach that Diana Eck describes, the inclusivist? It provides a kind of middle way between exclusivism and pluralism. At the end of the passage from Acts, Paul speaks about a day of judgment to come and the necessity for all people everywhere to begin to repent now. Paul also explains that God has appointed a specific man named Jesus to do the judging -- with the evidence of his appointment being that he died, and then was raised by God from the dead. So

Jesus takes a central role in judging people for eternal salvation, but Paul doesn't say or even imply in this passage that only Christians will be judged positively by Jesus on that final day. Paul seems to be primarily concerned here about repenting of idolotry -- of bowing down to idols of gold or silver or stone. The inclusivist perspective that Paul may be presenting is this: Jesus may indeed save many people on this earth who don't affirm themselves as Christian, but make no mistake that it's only Jesus who will be judging on that final day and it's only Jesus who can save.

This seems to be the position articulated recently by Pope John Paul II in his "Declaration on the Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ." He quotes from Vatican II to say that "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men."¹¹ Yet, the Pope also insists that "the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation."¹² That means that members of other religions can indeed find salvation without

becoming Christians, but that it's through Christ's mediation alone that others can be saved. There's a warning that "If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation."¹³ On the other hand, not only is there no doubt that "the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God," but also, "some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God."¹⁴

Whether the Apostle Paul is seen as a religious exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist, as he stood before the people of Athens, it's important to note that he began by showing deep respect for them: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way."¹⁵ He understood some of their differing theology, and was willing to cite some of their own poets in finding parallels to his own message. He acknowledged that in all of our searching for God, no matter what our tradition, God is not far from each one of us. Indeed, he affirmed that in God we all "live and move and have our being."¹⁶ I suggest that no matter what Christians think

of the other religions of the world, we must begin with fundamental respect for our fellow human beings. This is picked up in the Pope's recent declaration where he describes equality as a pre-supposition of inter-religious dialogue, referring not to doctrine but to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue.¹⁷

I must admit personally to being compelled by the image of an altar to an unknown god. There will always be a depth of divine mystery, which as the Pope has said "in itself remains transcendent and inexhaustible."¹⁸ There's a mystical dimension to my Christianity which assures me that much of God will always remain unknown to me -- and rightly so for a finite creature contemplating the infinite. I've chosen to be a Christian because I love Jesus and want to follow in his footsteps. I understand God primarily through his incarnation, as the eternal word made flesh. Through Jesus I believe I have unique understandings, which, given my personal history, I'm not sure I could have gained through other world religions -- unique understandings of radical equality, of concern for the poor and the oppressed, of the nature of suffering, and of the meaning of love. Yet, I've learned a lot, and still have much to learn, from other religions which I'm convinced make me a fuller person and ultimately deepen my own

Christian faith -- occasions and pedagogical helps, as the Pope says, in which my heart can be prompted in new ways to be open to the action of God. May there always be an altar to an unknown god somewhere in my life.

NOTES

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1. Acts 17:22-31.
 2. Acts 17:24.
 3. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration 'Dominus Iesus' on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (Rome: The Vatican, August 6, 2000), <http://www.nccbuscc.org/pope/doctrineoffaith.htm>
 4. Diana L. Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey From Bozeman to Banaras (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 168.
 5. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Toward a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 67.
 6. Acts 17:24, 29.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Smith, World Theology, p. 3.
 9. I Corinthians 13:12.
 10. Acts 17:28.
 11. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration 'Dominus Iesus,'" section 2.
 12. Ibid., section 5.
 13. Ibid., section 21.
 14. Ibid., section 20.
 15. Acts 17:22.
 16. Acts 17:28.
 17. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration 'Dominus Iesus,'" section 21.

18. Ibid., section 6.