

Naming and Thinking
God in Europe Today
Theology in Global Dialogue

Edited by
Norbert Hintersteiner

CURRENTS OF ENCOUNTER

STUDIES ON THE CONTACT BETWEEN
CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS,
BELIEFS, AND CULTURES

GENERAL EDITORS

JERALD D. GORT
HENRY JANSEN
LOURENS MINNEMA
HENDRIK M. VROOM
ANTON WESSELS

VOL. 32

This publication is sponsored by Österreichisches
Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, and by
the European Commission (Erasmus Socrates Programme)

The article by Robert Cummings Neville "The Role of Concepts
of God in Crosscultural Comparative Theology" is reprinted with
kind permission from J. Hackett and J. Wallulis (eds.), *Philosophy
of Religion for a New Century: Essays in Honour of Eugene
Thomas Lang*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 2004,
243-59.

Copy and Manuscript Editors: Anne Malcolm and Henry Jansen

Cover illustration and design:
Rita Dick & Thomas Stadler
A-5011 Oberndorf
Austria

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of
"ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation - Paper for
documents - Requirements for permanence".

ISBN set volume 1-3: 978-90-420-2204-1

ISBN: 978-90-420-2205-8

©Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2007

Printed in the Netherlands

Ioannis Kourembeles

Christian Monotheism: Exclusivity or Openness to Otherness?

Introduction

These days there is a need for an ecumenical movement that will not have, as its only target, the healing of past schisms through dialogue but will attempt to approach unity through today's multiplicity of religious expressions. In spite of some growing reactions against interconfessional and interreligious dialogue, Christians from all over the world recognize the benefits and importance of dialogue, yet they are still troubled about the varieties of religious expression. Thus, the view that the phenomenon of syncretism is a fact of life in global society that should be taken seriously is heard even from the mouths of Christian theologians who point to the relationship between syncretism and pacifism as an example of their good will in promoting interreligious dialogue.¹

Christianity is now moving toward a dialogue, along with Islam and the Asian religions, that is informed by and has implications for the entire "global world."² It is the world in its entirety that encompasses both *the globalization of our civilizations* and the profoundly insular *variety of our civilizations*. We live in both worlds simultaneously – we live inside them and we experience

¹ See L.M. Dolan, "Development and Spirituality: Personal Reflections of a Catholic," in P. Mische / M. Merklung (eds.), *Global Civilisation? The Contribution of Religions* (New York, 2001), 279: "We need in that congress to ask questions such as: What is syncretism today? Is syncretism a natural consequence of living in a secularized world? Should we see the adoption of different forms of Christianity by indigenous peoples, with their veneration of ancestors and their love of nature, as a form of syncretism? Who is God and who is Jesus? What does Incarnation mean for 6 billion people? What does the fundamental principle put forward at the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, 'to be together to pray but not to pray together', mean in today's stage of interreligious dialogue?"

² Here the meaning given to a future "global ethical system" applies, something that is worth rendering in the words of Robert Muller: "The world is becoming so interdependent, it is like one body. We have a nervous system that is very advanced. We have a global brain. Now we need a global heart and a global soul», which M. Aram complements as follows: "I would add that we also need a global conscience, based on a global ethic" ("Gandhian Values, a Global Ethic, and Global Governance," in Mische / Merklung, *Global Civilisation*, 100).

them as ensconced in and interactive with a multireligious, multicultural society. Society in both of these dimensions also operates on another plane, the plane of "electronic society," since through the Internet it is possible for us to be in touch with all the corners of the Earth.³

It is generally accepted that the most influential social determinants of today are not ideological, political, or financial but rather cultural at a time when religion has the first word in a world that seeks unity on the basis of values.⁴ The history of Europe has proved that we have been influenced by many cultures and that we are constantly in touch with new ones in the multicultural arenas where we live. Additionally, we are all aware of the fact that religion has not always been a factor in creative movement and evolution, and that the terrors of war and human alienation have often motivated religious ideology and organization.⁵ This is an important point, because – without intending to invalidate the distinctions and differences between religions and their cultures – European thought and experience, especially since it has been fermented with the experience of diversity, could work as an antidote against the extreme centralized trends of globalization.⁶

³ Regarding common characteristics for the one world and the changes or problems of the peoples that have emerged with their encounter, see P. Mische, "Toward a Civilization Worthy of the Human Person," in Mische / Merklung, *Global Civilization*, 11f. In this collective volume, the Muslim S. Mahmud-Abedin, in "Islam and Global Governance," 289, expresses himself on this point with the following remarkable words: "However, the increasing heterogeneity created by burgeoning populations and greater geographic mobility, and the sharpened sensitivities toward roots and identities in an increasingly pasteurized and homogenized world at the mercy of the multimedia, make the task of addressing the spiritual and the moral even more challenging. Never in history was there greater awareness of the variety in races and nations, and never before was the vast segment of humanity exposed so graphically to man's inhumanity to man, conveyed vividly in tabloids and on television screens in living rooms across South and East."

⁴ See Mische / Merklung, *Global Civilization*, 2-3, 26: "The question before us, then, is not whether a new world order will emerge in response to new global imperatives, but rather what kind of world order? Based on what worldview? What values? What ethic and ethos? What kind of leadership will guide and shape it? Without religious identity, prospects for global humane governance are without the spiritual character that can mobilize and motivate on a basis that is far more powerful than what the market, secular reason, and varieties of nationalism have to offer."

⁵ See also Mahmoud-Abedin, "Islam," 284.

⁶ See also the interesting criticism of "Dominus Iesus" that Johann Reikersdorfer makes, "Zum Orthodoxieproblem von Dominus Iesus," in M. J. Rainer (ed.), *Dominus Iesus: Anstößige Wahrheit oder anstößige Kirche? Dokumente, Hintergründe, Standpunkte und Folgerungen* (Münster, 2001), 102-11, here 110f.

There are, of course, contemporary thinkers⁷ who merely accept a skeptical pluralism. They are in agreement with each other and claim that the globalization trends, which are favored by economy, standardization, exchange of views, and interests, promote, in their turn, a curiosity for local, idiosyncratic, experimental, and not so generalized expressions of life and are suspicious of every attempt toward unity (unification). It is then considered that every thought of unification, even within the Christian *ecumene*, within the dialogue among religions and the universal right of the movement of human rights, will be finally dismissed within the frame of this logic (in terms of the particular). That is, it will be dismissed as a vain or even as an authoritarian trend.⁸

It seems, however, that the diversity and complexity of the way of life in modern society also leads to *the philosophy of diversity* and of the particular, as well as to the adoration of distinction and variety. Yet if we consider the claim that diversity and pluralism belong to the real, the good, and the substantially nice, we can see that since all these evaluations take place primarily within theoretical dialogue (which favors the development of differences and distinctions), when it comes to observing these ideals in real action, we are confronted with a paradox – how do we observe others in order to evaluate our interactions with them in a manner that is free enough from our culture bound theory so that we are also able to deeply comprehend the diversity of the other in an authentic way? Yet one glance at current events reveals that ultra-conservatism and xenophobia in modern Europe stem from a decrease in and a neglect of familiar religious values, since nothing that comes from outside can harm man (or his culture), more than what comes from inside.⁹

⁷ See T. Ahrens (ed.), *Zwischen Regionalität und Globalisierung* (Hamburg, 1997), 20 and 249 (discussion of W. V. Lindner and S. Kempin on the book by T. Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen: Eine Praktische Hermeneutik* (Göttingen, 1996).

⁸ For our consideration here see also A. Houtepen, "Ökumene und Gottesfrage (Die Bedeutung des Monotheismus in einer multikulturellen Gesellschaft)," in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 50 (2001): 39-54, especially p. 39f.

⁹ See *Christ in der Gegenwart* 52 (2002): 425: "It is not dangerous the outside challenge through a religion that Europe keeps foreign in its core, but rather the leading neglect of religion by the spiritual interior of the majority of the population, a factual ignorance and a conscious reflection of the afterthought 'over the last things'. We are really dealing with a new enemy – an enemy not of many Gods, but rather of one God The fate of Europe hangs decisively, in the future as well, on the shape of spiritual attitudes. It will not be a matter of little interest for the forming of the European Union, whether the question of God will fade out as avoidable private views of the world or whether people will raise it to be the primary thing in their existence, to a fight for a better social, cultural, political life" (in German). See also the article of I.

This raises several questions: In our current, modern global context, how can and should one talk about God and religion? Is it possible for “faith in God” to enter this multireligious / multicultural arena with a competitive disposition, and is it possible that (Christian) monotheism might be found to be the most viable, the most spiritually “useful” faith perspective before all other viewpoints? Can monotheistic faith be a positive unifying factor in globalization, communication, and the eradication of differences within society in a manner that addresses all that is topical while speaking to universal notions and questions about life and death? Can we ignore the fact that Christian monotheism, in spite of its being based on Trinitarian faith, is itself a topic for debate and dialogue within Christian communities? And can we ignore that Muslim theologians, having Christian theology of the West in mind, are critical of Christianity’s distinction between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the mundane, proffering instead that all spheres of life are religious?¹⁰ So, we must ask ourselves, does Christian monotheism have the critical, theological resources within it to extend a dialogical bridge toward its contending interlocutors? Does it have the ability to assume the vanguard toward mutual understanding within interreligious and multicultural discourse in a way that goes beyond words, amounting to genuine social harmony?

We believe it does. The Trinitarian monotheism of Christianity has proved that through the distinction between *hypostasis* and *nature* it can achieve discursive unity-in-otherness as easily as it can achieve otherness-in-unity. In what follows, we will further explore this distinction.

The Comprehension of Trinitarian Monotheism

In the relationship between the faithful and Christ, the faithful’s experience of the Trinitarian God can be clearly seen. For the faithful, the spirit of life is the

Petrou, “Multiculturalism as a Social Fact and Social Demand,” in *Kath’ Oðón* 16 (2000): 5-17, where there is the question of the evolution of communication.

¹⁰ Mahmoud-Abedin, “Islam,” 285, for instance, expresses himself as follows: “All matters of this world, from the most complex to the most mundane, are subject to religious concerns. In that sense, everything is sacred, and religion is part of everyday life and not a ritual confined to specific acts on specific days. Nevertheless, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim maintained that religious phenomena emerge when a separation is made between the sphere of the profane – the realm of everyday utilitarian activity – and the sphere of the sacred: the numinous and the transcendental.”

spirit of Christ and God.¹¹ However, this is not meant dualistically; for in Orthodox Christology, Christ is God. In Moltmann's view, however, duality and division are the distinctive features of this theological expression. In other words, he believes that "in the communion of the faithful with Christ, the God of Christ becomes the God of the faithful."¹²

Here it becomes evident that Trinitarian Theology is not properly correlated with Christology. Moltmann underscores that "the 'Father of Jesus Christ' has nothing to do with the family fathers or the homeland,"¹³ intending, of course, to say that this God is not connected to the patriarchal or political God of ancient religions. Yet there is great validity to the theological truth that Christ himself, as God, reveals in His person a Trinitarian God of love (1. John 4:16). Assuredly, Christianity is the "religion" of "freedom in love." Still, we wouldn't dare to distinguish the term *Christ* from the terms *God* and *the Spirit*, on the basis of their hypostatic distinction without stressing, at the same time, the communion of the divine essence that vouches for monotheism. The expression of Moltmann gives us the impression that Trinitarian Theology and Christology are confused when the common energy of the persons doesn't appear to be based on their "in essence relationship," but rather on an external type of cooperation.¹⁴ And it should be noted that Moltmann himself further on endorses all those elements of terminology that underscore the theological assertion that the meaning of God is connected with Christology, since Jesus, the Son of God, is of one essence with the Father.¹⁵

¹¹ See more in J. Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes: Zur Gotteslehre* (Munich, 1980); *idem*, "Im weiteren Raum der Trinität," in: *idem*, *Erfahrungen theologischen Denkens: Wege und Formen Christlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh, 1999), 266-90.

¹² Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 117: "In der Christusgemeinschaft wird der Gott Christi zum Gott der Glaubenden. Das 'Abba'-Geheimnis Jesu öffnet sich zum 'unser Vater'. Als Jesus das Abba-Geheimnis Gottes und sich selbst darin als den 'geliebten Sohn' entdeckte, verließ er seine Familie und begann, im Kreis der Armen des Volkes (ochlos) zu leben (Mk. 3,31-35)."

¹³ Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 117.

¹⁴ Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 118: "According to the witness of the New Testament, the 'grace of Christ' and 'the love of God' and 'the communion of the Holy Spirit' act in the experience of the redeemed and reborn life together. The persons that act together within are personally different: Christ-God-Spirit, yet they are socially bound together toward the redemption of the created beings, toward the eternal community of God. The new experience of life in Christianity is as liberating as the experience of the Exodus in Israel ..." (translation mine).

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 118: "In the Christian Trinitarian dogma, the Trinitarian experience of God reaches its meaning. This takes place by means of the fact that the

We observe, thus, a confusion in the use and exploitation of common terms in Christian theology, when Christian theologians attempt to enter into dialogue with other religions, in this case, with Islam. And, in this way, Christian monotheism sets itself up for misunderstanding and weakens its eschatological premises.¹⁶ Indeed, Moltmann is of the opinion that “for Christianity the totality and universality of God of Christ belong to eschatology” (*fur die Christenheit gehoren Universalität und Totalität des Gottes Christi in die Eschatologie*).¹⁷ The genitive “des Gottes Christi” does not make clear that Christ is God, and a big question is left unanswered by Moltmann’s eschatological view, which, moreover, overemphasizes the perfection of the *eschata* and doesn’t stress the (soteriological) significance of the incarnated presence of the Divine Word in the world.¹⁸ That’s why the question arises for Moltmann whether Christian monotheism can indeed be characterized as monotheism. Along these lines, the example of Areios provides us a cautionary tale.

Areios considered the Word to be the first creation of God because his intention was to support the monarchy in Trinity. So he turned Christ into a mere teacher of ethics. The Church decided against Areios and in favor of Gr. Athanasios in terms of Trinitarian faith; however Areios found supporters even later: in the years of the Reformation these were the Sokinians, and in the earlier years the Humanists of Christ. In these cases it seems that being a Christian and believing in God were two different things. We emphasize this because the logic of preparing the way for an Islamic understanding of the

meaning of God is bound with Christology. Jesus, ‘the Son of God’ is with the Father and the Spirit of one essence ...” (translation mine).

¹⁶ We stress this point because the most important, we could say, chapter in the Orthodox theology is the union of the divine with the human, a union that has an eschatological dimension. And, of course, this dimension is not a mellontology, but rather a viable historical event in the very face of the Divine Word, who, in His face, turned the “eschatic” emptying, the “eschatic” philanthropy into reality.

¹⁷ See Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 118.

¹⁸ See Moltmann, *Monotheismus*, 119: “Then will the threesome God become only one God and His magnificence will penetrate all things and shed light on them. Then, for the first time, will someone be able to say that God is ‘the reality of everything defined’. (R. Bultmann, W. Pannenberg). Then, for the first time, can one speak of a limitless omnipotence, eternal presence and omniscience of God. But in history these superior qualities of God have been defined, outlined and formed by Christ” (translation mine).

Christian notion of God could in effect be preparing the way for a new type of neo-Arianism.

In keeping with the above, it has become evident that comprehension of Trinitarian monotheism is not taken for granted in Christian theology. That is, in the event that a divergent comprehension of God-Christ emerges within dialogue, Christianity may converse with Islam about Christ as one more prophet,¹⁹ but it cannot demonstrate the evangelical truth that God Himself became human. Yet, it is regarding this truth that Christianity has a debt to the entire world, a debt to declare that the natural relationship among the Trinitarian persons is open for participation to all humans through Christ.

Indeed, one could argue that Christianity's obligation is to view the other from the evangelical prospect that teaches how God takes His stand towards man, and not just how man perceives God. We have thus, an interest in seeing that Christ (God Himself) regards His creation (humankind) as unique and does not wish for this creation to be excluded from the community that God offers. Christology doesn't simply teach that God is one, but also that all of humanity is one with God on the basis of His incarnation²⁰ and His passion for the sake of all men.²¹

¹⁹ J.B. Cobb (ed.), *Christian Faith and Religious Diversity* (Minneapolis, 2002), 31, sums up the contemporary trends as follows: "Many Christians today, however, would share Muhammad's rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity as he understood it. He thought that the doctrine of Trinity denied the unity of God, and he shared with Jews a strong commitment to that unity. In fact, however, classic explanations of the Trinity, especially in the West, insist that the unity of the three persons of the Trinity is to be preserved. One may question the success of some of these formulations in adequately preserving the unity, but the intention is not at odds with Islamic concerns. Christians believe in one God, not three Gods. Muslims (like Jews) also recognize that there are many names for God, highlighting different aspects of the way God relates to the world."

²⁰ This very important element is for Orthodox Christianity one of the outstanding theological issues that can help even the culture of globalized thought and life on the basis that this thought places importance on the commonly accepted point of the oneness of the human family. See on this common point the proposals of R. Falk (in: Mische / Merklein, *Global Civilisation*, 58). It is worth mentioning the sense of unity in many religious views, as well. In Hinduism, for example, we come across the view: "The whole world is to be dwelt in by the Lord, whatever living being there is in the world. So should you eat what has been abandoned; and do not covet anyone's wealth" (P. Olivelle (transl.), *Upanisads* [Oxford, 1996], 249), which has to do with the supporting of justice for all human beings and the harmonious life among them (See K. R. Sundararajan, "Hinduism and Global Society," in Mische / Merklein, *Global Civilisation*, 96-97). Among the values of M. Gandhiji, as well, the question of unity holds good position (the truly noble know all men as one) (see M. Aram,

The Islamic view, which Christian theologians such as Moltmann try to address, finds three gods in Christian Trinitarian theology, and it definitely does not place importance on the *social dimension* of Christian monotheism²² and on the fact that this dimension does not remove monotheism from the interrelation of the divine incarnation and the theosis of man.²³ This perspective offers a compelling invitation to Christian theologians to enter into dialogue

"Gandhian values, a Global Ethic and Global Governance," in Mische / Merckling, *Global Civilisation*, 102, 103) or even in Jain's values of the religious system ("we are all one, all interdependent") (see P.N. Jain, "Way of Life," in: Mische / Merckling, *Global Civilisation*, 112).

- ²¹ We come across the issue of sympathy as a means of man's deliverance from passion in other religions, too, such as Buddhism (see e.g. S. Sivaraksa, "Religion and World Order from a Buddhist Perspective," in Mische / Merckling, *Global Civilisation*, 128-51, here 128f.). However, in the Orthodox Christian teaching it is not just about a moral command but rather about the passion of God Himself, in His flesh, who suffers the same as all men, and the proving of death as being powerless before man's ontological relationship with God.
- ²² Therefore, Christian monotheism is philanthropic *par excellence*. Let's not forget that this prospect gives meaning to God's revelation, as it happens in the Old Testament. Otherwise, there monotheism would face the charge of being misanthropic and atheistic, as was the case with the neighbors of the Jews: "Their imageless worship and their resolute denial of the gods of their neighbors brought upon the Jews the stigma of atheoi, "atheists" or godless. As thoroughgoing monotheists, the Jews disregarded the gods of the heathen as non-existent, or denounced them as *eilim*, nothings, or *sfedin* and *seirim*, demons and satyrs, and as *toebah*, abominations" (see S. Cohon, "The Unity of God: A Study in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Theology," in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 [1995]: 425-79, here 430). In the paradigm of Christ God's personal involvement, the matter of the salvation of man is factually seen.
- ²³ The view, e.g., of Confucianism about unity-oneness of heaven and Earth (oneness between heaven and humanity) (S. Sivaraksa, "Religion and World Order from a Buddhist Perspective," in Mische / Merckling, *Global Civilisation*, 129f.) would have for Christianity a pure philosophical character, since the unity between God and man that it projects has a personal and ontological character. For instance, while M.E. Tucker discusses Confucianism (*idem*, "Working Toward a Shared Global Ethic: Confucian Perspectives," in Mische / Merckling, *Global Civilisation*, 109-11) he observes the following: "Cheng Chung-ying has described the organic naturalism of Confucian cosmology as characterized by 'natural naturalization' and 'human immanentization' in contrast to the emphasis on rationality and transcendence in Western thought. This sense of naturalism and holism is distinguished by the view that there is no Creator God; rather the universe is considered to be a self-generating, organic process. Confucians are traditionally concerned less with theories of origin or concepts of a personal God than with what they perceive as the ongoing reality of this generating, interrelated universe."

with Muslim theologians who assert a central disunity in the Christian model.²⁴

For a Better Understanding of Monotheism

The dilemma that Moltmann puts forward is whether monotheism should be understood exclusively (*exclusiv*) or inclusively (*inclusiv*). Many agree, from a theoretical standpoint, that monotheism is mainly exclusive and that it therefore excludes polytheism. The one God does not *permit* other gods beside Him. Moreover, social reality demonstrates that communities that consider themselves monotheistic are usually not tolerant of the gods of other religions. In the Old Testament, faith in the one God forbids the worship of other gods and such worship is considered gravely sinful. Where this exclusivity extends, however, to the level of violence, and where this violence is justified based on claims of exclusivity, this kind of exclusivity cannot be said to represent God's disposition toward man.

A Christianity that is based on violence could never stand with open eyes before Christ's martyrdom for all people. Therefore, contemporary theological problematics that intend to stand firmly on the issue of monotheism must take into consideration the Christian perspective of the one God in relation to the prospect of salvation for all men. If there is an authentic monotheism from this perspective, it is because every man is able to participate in divinity because one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity has lived incarnated in the world.²⁵ If inclusiveness means we must base our thinking

²⁴ "While, exoterically, the religions of the world are many, esoterically they are one: they arise from and return to a common source, and possess within themselves the resources for an extended epistemology by means of which the unity of existence may be discovered and the human personality transformed" (A.A. Said and N.C. Funk, "Islamic Revivalism: A Global Perspective," in Mische / Merklung, *Global Civilisation*, 308-30, here 330). See also J. Woodall, "Humanity's Coming of Age: The Bahai Faith and World Order," in Mische / Merklung, *Global Civilisation*, 342, 343-4: "What the peoples of the world have thus far denied is the reality of the oneness and wholeness of humanity as the children of one loving Creator."

²⁵ The discussion of the interesting view of A. Gesche, where he makes a distinction between "absolute" and "relative" monotheism in Christianity, does not belong to the limited space of this study. Instead, however, we will submit the summary of his article so that anyone interested can have a general idea and be able to compare it with our own, the above mentioned, view: "The author first of all attempts to establish that the Christian confession of God must simultaneously imply confession of mankind and that without this it simply ceases to exist. Secondly, and more difficult to handle,

on the premise of there being many religions, many Gods, as Moltmann does, then, the next logical step would be to declare Hinduism as the most genuine form of monotheism!²⁶ Thus far, however, the trend has fallen short of this extreme, settling instead on theological pluralism, which we shall discuss further on.

Before humankind can unite, or even peacefully coexist, within global civilization,²⁷ Christianity must soteriologically come to terms with that unity through the person of the Divine Word, since the religious cooperation required of that unity is not abstract, but must rather be based on the resilience of faith. On this basis, what is needed is less a "Christian" monotheism than a "Christocentric" monotheism." By the term "Christocentric," we naturally presuppose soteriology. Here we do not position Christ as a rival against the great prophet of the Islamic religion, and we do not argue by means of an antithetic theology. We merely attempt to extend and broaden the theological significance that the openness of the flesh of the Word has offered throughout the created world, something that becomes a reality in Christ's incarnation. Aside from the intercultural value of this fact, its worth for the unity of humankind is significant, not because human strength is the basis and center of it, as we have seen in nationalism and communism, but rather because it offers the flesh of God as a point of unity for all diverse peoples.

That many Western theologians show great sympathy towards this prospect is not accidental. For instance, (the Catholic) Andreas Malessa says:

Each religion wants to appease God with moral acts and beg Him with personal sacrifices. Jesus, on the contrary, points out: God shouldn't be appeased and is not exorcised; no one can bribe Him with something and make Him his instrument. Why not? Because He has already given away His power for the weakness of a

is the assertion that the very idea of God implies relationship with mankind. Hence the author believes that he can speak of "relative" monotheism as opposed to "absolute" monotheism. Mankind is the finiteness of God, his fortunate finiteness which allows him to be God, that is to say a "God-of" and not a Divinity" [A. Gesche, "Le christianisme comme monotheisme relatif," in: *Revue theologique de Louvain* 33 [2002]: 437-96, here 496].

²⁶ *Monotheism*, 121-22: "Can polytheism, as it is seen in the world of the Hindu God in every hinduistic temple, be monotheistic? It is possible and it is also explained by religious teachers in India. There is, namely, also an inclusive monotheism What we see in the many figures of God is the one divinity Only in the many can the One be shown. That's why the hinduistic polytheism is the real inclusive form of monotheism."

²⁷ See Mische / Merklng, *Global Civilisation*, 3.

defenseless child in the cavern and His dominion for the slavery of a servant who washed the feet (of others). Because He offered Himself as sacrifice instead of asking for one. Incarnation and self-sacrifice, I believe so, happened not out of necessity but out of love.²⁸

Trinitarian Community and Openness of Christians to the World

We are dealing here with an issue that seems to preoccupy many contemporary theologians. Vorgrimler²⁹ raises the topic with regard to those who view the life of the Trinitarian God as an everlasting loving conversation. He, himself, admits the existence of a loving community of men in conversation and communion with God, and he counts (unfortunately) Christ himself among these men,³⁰ yet, he underscores that the main issue concerning Christ is the inter-Trinitarian loving community of persons (*"It is more about the construction of a community of God-persons"*) made possible through him. The fact that Christ is considered human in this example, among men who live in communion with God, is problematic (and according to dogmatic terminology, Nestorian) and shows that the attempt to humanize Christ in this way, so that Hindus and Muslims may understand Christianity to be monotheistic, in effect belittles the identity of the person in Christ.

The use of Western psychology played no small part in the development of the idea that the inter-Trinitarian community of the persons of the Holy

²⁸ "Jede Religion will Gott mit moralischem Wohlverhalten beschwichtigen und mit persönlichen Opfern beschwören. Jesus dagegen zeigt: Gott muß nicht beschwichtigt werden, ist nicht zu beschwören, man kann ihn mit nichts bestechen und für nichts instrumentalisieren. Warum nicht? Weil er seine Allmacht bereits gegen die Ohnmacht eines hilflosen Kindes in der Krippe und seine Herrschaft gegen die Knechtschaft eines Füße-waschenden Dieners getauscht hat. Weil er sich selbst bereits als Opfer hingegeben hat, anstatt Opfer zu fordern. Inkarnation und stellvertretendes Sterben, so glaube ich, geschahen im übrigen nicht aus Notwendigkeit, sondern aus Liebe" (see *Christ in der Gegenwart* 51 [2002]: 424. See also *Christ in der Gegenwart* 1 [2003]: 6, where the "Universality of Christianity" is stressed).-

²⁹ See "Randständiges Dasein des dreieinigen Gottes? Zur praktischen und spirituellen Dimension der Trinitätslehre," in *Stimmen der Zeit* 220 (2002): 547-52, here 550f.

³⁰ "First of all, in order to clear up a misunderstanding, we must stress here that a loving community in God is self-evident for the faithful: Henoah, Moses, Elia, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the man Jesus, Stephan are according to the biblical revelation next to God; the ecclesiastical tradition has counted Mary among them all along" (Vorgrimler, "Randständiges Dasein," 550) (translation mine).

Trinity is a loving one.³¹ That is why today there is an intense effort, through the use of apophatic terminology, to demonstrate that the love of God is not something that can be comprehended through the criteria of human potentials. But this does not mean that we should condemn the love that is conveyed through Western theological thought,³² the Trinitarian community here being understood as a loving one. We simply need to make clarifications.

First of all, it must be stressed that there is currently a tendency to consider as mistaken the expression of the second Vatican Synod, which, through the Trinitarian prospect, attempted to emphasize community, something that it transferred to ecclesiological thought as well.³³ This marks the beginning of what we might call "Communio-Ecclesiology," which sees the ecclesiastical community in the Trinitarian community.³⁴ It is clear that the second Vatican Synod places emphasis on the Trinity as a community of persons.³⁵ This is evident in the way Catholic theologians of today attempt to elucidate this point so that any extremity within Triadology-Ecclesiology might not be misunderstood and dismissed. Hence, as to why this cannot apply for the Church as well, since the one divine essence exists in three persons that form a community, Ratzinger responds to an evangelical theologian as follows:

It grieves me to oppose Mr. Jungel once more. First of all, we have to note that the Church of the West during the transfer of the Trinitarian formula in Latin did not directly adopt the eastern formulation, according to which, God is one essence in

³¹ Saint Augustine, in his effort to show the similarity of the essence of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, was inclined to characterize the Spirit with such names that have to do with the ad extra expression of the persons of the Holy Trinity, such as love and gift of God. With these names he was trying to express the beyond human time relationship of the Trinitarian persons. Thus, one had the basis for the construction of the teaching of the Filioque (see, e.g. *De Trinitate*, PL 42, 1080-1086). For more on this issue see G. Martzelos, *Orthodox Dogma and Theological Reflection*, vol. ii (Thessalonica, 2000), 113ff. (in Greek).

³² H. Vorgrimler mentions as characteristic of the new examples that of P.J. Cordes, *Communio-Utopie oder Programm* (Freiburg, 1993).

³³ *Lumen Gentium* 4 quotes the words of Cyprianos of Carthage that the whole Church appears as the united people through the unity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

³⁴ H. Vorgrimler considers important for this occasion the work of Cordes, *Communio-Utopie*; B. Forte, *La chiesa-icona della trinità* (Brescia, 1984), K. Koch, *Im Glauben an den dreieinen Gott leben* (Fribourg, 2001), 41-63.

³⁵ H. Vorgrimler expresses to the contrary ("Dasein," 551) and says that: "From the reflections on community of the Synod is not necessarily deduced the conclusion that the 2nd Vatican Synod had perceived the Trinity of God as a community of persons" (translation mine).

three hypostaseis (Subsistenzen), but rather the expression "hypostaseis" was translated in the expression "persons", because the term "Subsistenz" in Latin, as such, did not exist and was not fit to express the unity and the distinction among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Above all, I am decisively against the way, which comes into fashion today, of the direct transfer of the Trinitarian mystery into ecclesiology. This can't be. And so we end up having three gods.³⁶

The problem, therefore, is indeed a neo-idealism (Neoidealismus) that is well developed in contemporary Western theology (not that it doesn't happen with contemporary Orthodox theologians, as well), which overemphasizes freedom in each Trinitarian person as a characteristic element of personal composition in order to demonstrate the distinction among the three hypostaseis of the Holy Trinity. The opposition to this tendency is natural and well aimed.³⁷ Still, this itself is not reason to minimize the theological importance of the Trinitarian distinction of the hypostaseis. From an Orthodox point of view, we could underline the theological truth that God is not Trinitarian by virtue of being homoousian but because the common source and root origin of the one Trinitarian divinity is the hypostasis of the Father³⁸ who pre-eternally gives birth to the Son and pre-eternally generates the Holy Spirit. But even on this issue we risk falling into neo-Arianism. As we know, ancient Arians considered the relationship between the Father and the Son as a *relative* and not a *natural* one. Thus, the unity of the Trinitarian persons was considered as similar to the one that the members of the Church have with the Father. They stressed that "*the way of the existence of the Son in the Father can be based*

³⁶ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22.9.2000, 51: "Es betrübt mich, daß ich auch hier Herrn Jüngel widersprechen muß. Zunächst einmal ist schon anzumerken, daß die Kirche des Westens bei der Übertragung der Trinitarischen Formel ins Lateinische nicht die östliche Formulierung direkt übernommen hat, wonach Gott ein Wesen in drei Hypostasen ('Subsistenzen') ist, sondern das Wort Hypostasen wurde mit dem Ausdruck 'Personen' übersetzt, weil der Begriff Subsistenz im Lateinischen als solcher nicht existierte und nicht angemessen wäre, um Einheit und Verschiedenheit von Vater, Sohn und Heiligen Geist zu formulieren. Vor allem aber bin ich ganz entschieden gegen die immer mehr in Mode kommende Art, das trinitarische Geheimnis direkt auf die Kirche zu übertragen. Das geht nicht. Da enden wir in einem Drei-Götter-Glauben."

³⁷ For a thorough dogmatic confrontation of this tendency we refer to C. Stamoulis, *About Light: Personal or Natural Energies? Contribution to the Contemporary Discussion on Holy Trinity Problematics in the Orthodox Field*, (in Greek), (ed. Tó παλιμνηστον) (Thessalonica, 1999) (cf. my book review in *Orthodoxes Forum of the University of Munich* 2 (1999), 218-222).

³⁸ On Christian Triadology in relation to the charges of gnostics for the existence of polytheism in the Old Testament see Cohon, "The Unity of God," 458f.

on an agapology cut off from any natural relationship."³⁹ Here, then, the Son and the Spirit are degraded to the level of created beings. To avoid such a line of reasoning one ought to underline the relationship of the other two Trinitarian persons with the Father, their source, a relationship that is natural and not moral. In this way, the anthropomorphic use of Ecclesiology over Triadology is avoided.

Here, Orthodox theology takes a clear stand, which, by means of a theological paradox, rejects extreme kataphatism and extreme apophatism. Man knows God through the divine actions (energies) in an empirical way and not an intellectualist one, and so he can attribute to Him different kataphatic theonymes, which refer to the diversity of His actions and render representatively God's relation to the world. One could thus say that Trinitarian Theology is developed from Soteriology,⁴⁰ since from what God does, we comprehend His identity.⁴¹ The expression is not aimless that, since the *ad extra* expression of God is Trinitarian, therefore, God is Trinitarian, as well,⁴² or, even better, that the relationships between God and human are patterned on the inter-Trinitarian relationship.⁴³ The names of God, such as Creator and Savior, are without effect unless they are connected to the way in which man receives and regards the actions of the Trinitarian God. In this case, the distinction between the uncreated God and the created world, which we have already

³⁹ See Stamoulis, *Physis and Agape*, (in Greek), (Thessalonica, 1999), 44ff., upon which we draw our argumentation that objects to the contemporary neo-Arian agapology (the study "Physis and Agape" in English see under the title "Physis and Agape: The Application of the Trinitarian Model to the Dialogue on Ecclesiology of the Christian Churches of the Ecumene," in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 [1999]: 451-66).

⁴⁰ In this way, one could also accept the view that "we are able to address God, then, only because God first addresses us, for the same reason that our knowledge of God must follow in the wake of God's knowledge of us" (J. Andrew Fullerton, "God by any other Name?," in *Modern Theology* 18 [2002]: 171-81, here 174).

⁴¹ We could stand positively on the principle of K. Barth: "Where the actuality exists there is also the corresponding possibility." (cf. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 [Edinburgh, 1957], 5).

⁴² The economic Trinity is based on the pre-eternal Trinity and is not irrelevant to it. The severe distinction between eternal (Οἰδία) and economic (οἰκονομικο) Trinity has become an object of criticism by Catherine Mowry Lacugna in her *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York, 1991).

⁴³ What people know of God is irrelevant to God's nature, but rather has to do with His actions; that is, the relationship of God with man is an energetic one (C. Stamoulis, *Physis and Agape*, 47).

mentioned, does not constitute for the Fathers an ontological distinction irrelevant to its connection with gnoseology. That is, although God becomes known to the creation through His actions – in His essence, in nature, and in the manner of expression of His actions, still also in His way of existence as a Trinity of persons – remains transcendental and unreachable. Hence, God is, at the same time, known and unknown, explicit and ineffable, revealed and hidden.⁴⁴

If we keep all the above in mind, then we can understand without misinterpretation the fact that Christ Himself projects the Trinity as a model of society affecting the lives of the faithful (“...so that all become one, as we are one”).⁴⁵ This projection is also relevant to Christ’s urging His disciples to teach in all nations, baptizing in the name of the Trinity. Hence, Christian monotheism is not unsociable, in the sense that God is restricted to His essence and talks only through His prophets. The distinction that Orthodox theology accentuates between the *essence* and *energies* of God denotes that God is not self-restricted. God communicates *energetically* with creation and man, but also directly (hypostatically) everyday with the Church, since the Holy Eucharist provides the possibility for the incarnated Word to be received within us. So here the mobility and sociability of God are stressed, a mobility that does not only refer to the relationship of God with the world and with man, but also to His inter-Trinitarian existence.⁴⁶

In this way, the evangelic word, always mobile, ought to be regarded as always incarnated (in every environment where it is fostered) and coordinated with the morphological elements of cultures it wishes to touch. This was the case in the early Christian years, when the incarnated evangelic word came in contact with the nations,⁴⁷ and this is something that must not change, since

⁴⁴ See on this matter G. Martzelos, *Kataphasis and Apophasis according to Maximus the Confessor*, (in Greek), Offprint from the records of the 22nd Theological Conference with the theme “Saint Maximus the Confessor,” (Thessalonica, 2001), 159-72.

⁴⁵ John 17:21. Christ himself projected the divine unity. According to Mark. 12:29 Jesus referred to Deut. 6:4-5 as an important element and based on it the command of Lev. 19:18 for the due love toward our fellowman. Although the other parallel excerpts Mat. 19:16ff., and 22:34ff. and Luke 18:18-30 do not include this, they insist on the reference to the unity of God that is based on the divine fatherhood (see also Mat. 5-7). See also S.S. Cohon, “The Unity of God,” 451.

⁴⁶ See Martzelos, *Orthodox Dogma*, 92f.

⁴⁷ See Martzelos, “The Incarnation of the Word as a Fundamental Missionary Principle of the Ancient Church,” (in Greek), in *Introductory Lessons of the Theological Circle in the Open University* (in Greek) (Thessalonica, 2002), 281-309, here 285-87.

Christ is not just a historical person, but rather "yesterday and today the One and the same and for ever." (Hebrews 13:8). We stress this point because it seems that in the dialogue among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there is a tendency for a Christian inclination toward *tropical monarchianism (modalism)*, in the effort to convince the others that they, too, are monotheists. What seems to be absent in these cases is the sense of Christ as Man-God, as the *ecclesiastical center* expressing the redeeming power of Christianity and of Christian monotheism.

Rahner, for instance, in his attempt to speak monotheistically about Islam, focuses his theological terminology on Father God. He says that Father God, in the history of God's revelation to the world, is not far from creation, and is revealed to it as the eternal life in truth and as love (in other parts he replaces these words with Word and Spirit).⁴⁸ But how can one perceive the expression that *the one and inconceivable God is close (nahe) to Christ*, when, at the same time, it is underlined that Christ is not just any prophet? If He is not just any prophet, why is it not explicitly stated that He is the second person of the Holy Trinity? It is a fact that Islamic theologians accuse Christianity of having three gods. But is it scholarly, from a Christian point of view, to turn toward *tropical monarchianism* in order to communicate with Islam⁴⁹?

⁴⁸ See H. Vorgrimler, "Dasein," 549. Here we might have an agreement with the view of those who claim that "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" are common names and not simply special names, see A.F. Kimel, "The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith," in A.F. Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, Grand Rapids, 1992, 188-208.

⁴⁹ Besides, on another occasion, K. Rahner supports the view that "(the) 'immanent' Trinity is the necessary condition for the possibility of God's free self-communication" (*The Trinity*, [London, 1970], 102, fn.1). In other parts he expresses himself as follows: "In the revelations, and the fact of the salvation, the faithful had to do with the unspoken mystery of the not tangible, unoriginated God, named Father, who does not exist and remain in a metaphysical distance, but rather the Creator, himself, wants to announce to all His non-conception and dominion and freedom as their eternal life in truth and love. This one and inconceivable God is in an impervious way historically close to man in Jesus Christ, who is not just any prophet in an open line of prophets, but rather the final and impervious self-completion of the one God in history. And this one and same God announces Himself to men as the Holy Spirit, in the very middle of the human existence for the salvation and completion that God Himself is. There are also for the Christian faith two radical and final facts, ways of existence of the one God in the world, which are the provided free from God, final salvation of the world, in history and transcendence. These two facts exist and always succumb to differentiation, when they mutually presuppose each other" (translation mine) (See K. Rahner, "Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit Gottes im Gespräch mit dem Islam," in *Schriften zur Theologie* 13 (Zürich, 1978), 139f.).

Allowing readers to answer the above question for themselves (directly), we attempt to provide an answer (indirectly) for ourselves, through reference to other views of contemporary theologians. At this point, let us refer to the importance that is placed on Christian Trinitarian Theology in relation to modern society. According to Boff, who depicts man in modern society as yearning to belong to a social whole, Trinitarian Theology is a solution, since the Trinitarian communion provides a model for a society that promotes participation as well as individual distinction.⁵⁰ Indeed, it is commonly accepted that the first Christian community attempted to live according the model of the Trinitarian community, while subsequent generations of Christians tended to get carried away by political structures, instead of focusing on the biblical relationship between God and men. What we are talking about here is a relationship that is characterized by “emptying” (κένωση) and “inclusion” (συμπεριχώρηση). “Emptying” in this regard means our giving of ourselves for others for the sake of a common good, as in the emptying of the Word (Philip. 2, 5-11), where the salvation of all men is achieved. The term “inclusion” (συμπεριχώρηση) refers to the acceptance of others, to the simultaneous acceptance of unity and distinction. A model of unity is found in the Trinitarian communion of the essence, while distinctions are rendered with hypostatic particularity. This entire synthesis of unity and distinction could be rendered with the patristic term “inter-inclusion” (συμπεριχώρηση). The ecclesiological Basis for this inclusion is the body of Christ.

As we know, for the heresiarch Areios, the Father is a divine essence, which is distinct from that of the Son; Areios said that only the Father is eternal and uncreated; the Son is a creation, superior to other creations. Arius was really far from the liturgical expression of the Church, which wanted to demonstrate the pre-eternal relationship of the Trinitarian hypostaseis and experienced the ecclesiastical way of life through the (saving) manifestation of the Trinitarian unity in the world. Today, in perspectives such as that held by Boff, we can detect an intense anti-Arian climate, in which there is no underestimation of the Word. Boff stresses that each divine person is asserted from the other divine persons and points out the significance of unity in combination with the otherness of the persons. He considers that community is achieved by means of participation and mutual emptying.⁵¹ In this case, we have the projection of the Trinity as the perfect community, with an under-

⁵⁰ See *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, 2000), XIII.

⁵¹ Boff, *Trinity*, 3.

scoring of the fact that the Trinitarian heresies failed because they did not grasp the importance of the three hypostaseis in unity and the unity of God in the three hypostaseis. Tropical Monarchianism maintained that the One God had three different ways of expression. Three-theism (Tritheismus) spoke of a faith in three different gods and denied a relationship of unity in divinity. Both heresies offered rational simplifications that tried to downgrade the perception of the mystery of the Trinity as a perfect community.⁵² To avoid such pitfalls of reasoning, as we mentioned above, one must honor the relationship of the other two Trinitarian persons with the Father, their source, as natural and not moral. Accordingly then, the trend of contemporary theologians to favor simple expressions of the dogma is very important.

Finally, we must address the theological claim that God is love (1. John. 4, 8). This simple expression is fundamental for Trinitarian teaching. Man knows God as love and as self-given, something that is a challenge for and an invitation to every man (*love each other, as I have loved you* {John. 3, 34}). Yet this has been explicated by modern theologians to mean "*God is the lover, the beloved, and the love between them,*" in reference to the three divine persons. From an Orthodox point of view this rendering cannot be considered scholarly, because it is based on the teaching of *Filioque*,⁵³ and strains of neo-idealism are apparent here as well. Yet emphasizing the understanding of God as love is not something that should be extended to the particularity of the person, but rather to the manifestation of God for people through their common energies.

We can see in the thought of the majority of modern theologians that while some are inclined toward Tropical Monarchianism, others favor the hypostatic distinction and acknowledge the Trinitarian unity as an essential element for the development of social relations in the world, according to the model of the Trinitarian relationship and the ecclesiastical community.⁵⁴ But

⁵² Boff, *Trinity*, 56-57; J. Neuner / J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith* (Staten Island, 1996), 136.

⁵³ See T.J. Scirghi, "The Trinity: A Model for Belonging in Contemporary Society," in *The Ecumenical Review* 54 (2002): 333-42, here 336: "The Spirit, proceeding from both, is the bond of the love between them: "God is the lover, the beloved, and the love between them".

⁵⁴ See Scirghi, "Trinity," 337-38: "The communitarian theory resembles a Trinitarian model in that the individual and the community are viewed as co-existent: there is no being apart from belonging. Furthermore, we are made in the image of God and the image of God is Triune, with the Three existing in an eternal communion of agape, a relationship of mutual giving and receiving The sacrament of baptism in the name

when we speak of Christian openness to the world, we must mean the loving unity that Christianity offers to modern society as a model of social life, a model based on the Trinitarian example of Christ's self-giving to the world, a paradigm of unity that is inclined against contemporary social individualism.⁵⁵

Hence, we wouldn't disagree with the view that the divine community is a mystery of "inclusion," since it is of the nature of the Trinity to open up (*ad extra*) and thus become empirically understood by man. Indeed, the incarnation of the Word introduced the Trinity to human history, with its demonstration that the distinction between *created* (man) and *uncreated* (God) is not a partitioning of these two realities. It is very likely that this Trinitarian model of community was the basic premise for relations in the first Christian communities, among themselves and with the broader world (Prax. 4, 32, 34-35).⁵⁶

Exclusiveness and Pluralism

Among Christians there seem to be two responses to religious differentiation: that of exclusiveness and that of pluralism. The crucial point for the exclusivist perspective is that only the Christian faith is salvific, and that whatever virtues another religion may present, it cannot offer access to the highest truth that is identified with Christ. Christianity maintains that denial of Christ as the one Lord and Savior of all men is denial of the truest of all truths.

From the pluralist perspective, Christ provides a valid route to salvation, but not the only one. Pluralists maintain that one comes to discover other routes to salvation through dialogue and experience with other religious traditions. The criterion for judging a religion here is the degree to which salvation is made accessible to its individual members. What constitutes "salvation,"

of the Triune God is a sign of belonging: the anointed members of the church no longer belong solely to themselves, but to Christ Celebration allows us to enter into a more profound communion with the social groups that define us."

⁵⁵ See Scirghi, "Trinity," 341: "The claim that the Trinity is the basis for human belonging makes a strong political statement, for it insists not only that human beings are social but that the ground of all beings lies in belonging to one another. Moreover, the Trinity provides the deepest foundation possible within the Christian tradition for the rejection of the bias towards individualism"

⁵⁶ See also Scirghi, "Trinity," 336.

however, is a point upon which the pluralists disagree. What they do agree upon is the assertion that all religious traditions share a common goal, and they claim that by holding this understanding, theologians are in a position to view religious traditions outside their own with greater objectivity and impartiality. Upon these grounds, they invite the exclusivists to overcome their introversion.

Although the pluralists' respectful disposition toward other traditions is admirable, it nonetheless lacks critical depth by avoiding a thorough enough analysis of what makes religions and salvific perspectives differ from one another. If pluralism views all perspectives as equal, then the term "pluralism" loses its real meaning. At the outset, it is important to refute the claim that the pluralist approach is primarily triumphalist; that is, that its true agenda is to project universalism with a one-upmanship agenda over and above the universalist claims of rival perspectives. What the pluralists do have to offer us is their willingness to acknowledge common values, and their openness to inter-religious dialogue for the sake of the common good. In this way, Christians must admit to at least this degree of pluralism if indeed they affirm their faith in God's universal love for all His creatures – and this is key – for all His creatures *including those* who do not believe in Him or are His enemies. If Christian monotheism represents this soteriological message of universal love authentically, then it cannot embrace a *fully* exclusivist approach to religious differences.

Exclusiveness of Christianity?

In the social life of our times, we are all aware of the revival of different cultural and religious traditions under the influence of crucial factors, one of which we consider especially noteworthy.⁵⁷ This is the fact that modern man can no longer dispute the truth that there are no superior and inferior civilizations, but must acknowledge rather the various and permissible forms of human expression.⁵⁸ Clearly, Christian theology shares a debt with all other religions to give this issue its fair attention. This acknowledgement not only informs comparisons between Christian and non-Christian religions but even juxtaposes between Eastern and Western Christianity, and of especial sig-

⁵⁷ See on these points Petrou, *Orthodox Theology*, 214-5.

⁵⁸ Petrou, *Orthodox Theology*, 215.

nificance, self-inquiry on the part of Christians searching for spiritual and theological solutions in the ecumenical tradition of the Church, not as a cultural and historical commodity, but rather as a factor of redemption for all men, without exception.⁵⁹ Theology is not completely dependent on conditions of social reality, but it synthesizes these conditions within dialogue as a support to and vehicle of communication, and within that synthesis theology attempts to further its own soteriological message.⁶⁰ And no matter how much a religion modifies its language as an aid to dialogue, it is nonetheless true that each religion generally regards itself as the only possessor of the one truest truth.

What then, could a possible Orthodox stance be regarding this matter? We would dare say that *the flesh of Christ has enough room not only for every man, but for every religion, as well*. In this way, Christianity does not act as a constraint on social development, but rather affects those developments soteriologically. Hence, the moment that man tries to shake off any religious authority, Christianity does not impose one more, but rather suggests the compliance of that authority with the contemporary social demands of religious pluralism. Along these lines, there is another daring assertion regarding terminology as well as essence: We could say that *religious pluralism can assume hypostasis in the hypostasis of the Word* who was incarnated for all His creations, that is, for every man (of every tradition). It seems, herein, that *monotheism does not claim exclusiveness*, but rather lovingly opens up to Christ's sameness of essence with all His creatures. In this way, the evangelical message can be elevated in the modern world, something that represents the sincerest aims of Orthodox theologian-sociologists.

Of course, one could claim that the above expression has the Word as its center of gravity and, consequently, that it declares and underscores the exclusiveness of Christianity. Yet to refute that claim, one must simply acknowledge the importance of the opening up of Christian monotheism to oth-

⁵⁹ We truly believe that for Orthodox theology, speaking to the modern world must not rest on the historical models of the past, but rather on the theological prospect that the theological tradition of the past opens up for its spreading to the modern world, when it is not considered that theology is served by other sciences, but when it serves them to show them off in relation to God. It is a contemporary phenomenon for someone to think that he speaks theologically and like a Christian, when, in the development of the (anthropological) word, Christ and the Redemption offered by God are absent. One thinks today that by talking specifically about man and in the abstract about God, he has grasped the theological word.

⁶⁰ See regarding our thoughts here also Petrou, *Orthodox Theology*, 213.

ers – and this is the key point – the significance of the evangelic exhortation to love even one's enemy. Let us not forget the key passage of the New Testament regarding the criterion upon which God judges men, Matthew 25: 31-46. Here it is clearly stressed that living in accordance with God's will involves helping the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. Besides, if someone reads Paul (Rom. 2:9), he will realize that the apostle stresses God's grace and not mankind's ability to judge. The apostle maintains, of course, that the ones who don't believe lead a sinful life, which denotes a failure to recognize God, yet he does not speak of them in a punishing way.⁶¹ Of course, the evangelic excerpt, upon which one stands with great caution regarding the issue of the exclusiveness of Christianity, is the passage declaring that *nobody approaches the Father without me* (meaning Christ). Surely the subject here is the Divine Word, of whom John speaks in his prologue. In this case, we want to emphasize this fact as a self-obligation on the part of Christians toward openness to others. That is, if the sameness of Christ's essence with that of all men is the bridge here, then that understanding in itself raises all men towards the Father, and therefore we must not interpret the evangelic expression exclusively, but rather pluralistically⁶² or, even better, ecumenically.⁶³

The exclusiveness of Christianity (*Die Absolutheit des Christentums*) is a problem fervently debated by modern scientific theology and one producing a rich bibliography on the subject.⁶⁴ As we know, in the multireligious reality of contemporary multicultural societies, men and women are confident that they can define their own self-hood, yet to claim that multiculturalism is a kind of universal religion and to condemn it on those grounds is common in funda-

⁶¹ Very interesting questions about ecclesiological exclusiveness and openness are found in the article of G. George Florofsky, "The Doctrine of the Church and the Ecumenical Problem," in *The Ecumenical Review* 2 (1950), 152-61.

⁶² Furthermore, since nothing in the world came into existence without the creative intervention of the Word and since the Word is the image of the Father, the expression that through the Word man knows the Father can be understood from this aspect, as well.

⁶³ Here we discern the basic difference of today's ecumenism from the ecumenical spirit of the undivided ancient church. The Orthodox Church underlines the Christological truth, since Christology is the base for the genuine anthropology (see G. Mantzaridis, *Christian Ethics*, (in Greek), vol. I. [Thessalonica, 2002], 277).

⁶⁴ We refer here to the highly remarkable study of Reinhold Bernhard, *Der Absolutheitsanspruch des Christentums. Von der Aufklärung bis zur pluralistischen Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloh, 1991).

mentalist circles and is easy to do. What is most evident in multicultural movements, even where multireligiosity plays a role, is the aim to elevate the status of those formerly relegated to disadvantageous positions of otherness within society, and to resist being defined and ruled by self-appointed authorities. And Christianity, here, since it has as its core the spirit of *diakonia*, is naturally in favor of these multicultural-multireligious aims. Christianity does not regard itself as culturally superior to the religious cultures of others, but it testifies to its soteriological power with a spirit of *diakonia*, a spirit it draws from the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ for the sake of mankind. With this theological approach, Christianity has an "exclusive" goal in response to contemporary "ecumenism" whenever and wherever that leads to religious syncretism, even where this syncretism is understood fundamentally as an attempt at pacifism.⁶⁵ In its theological testimony, Christianity must be "absolute" because "human beings, like the whole of creation, acquire their full dignity within the fellowship or communion of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, where sin and death are abolished."⁶⁶

Conclusion

Within multicultural society, God can be found in many places and in many forms, and the question of God is alive and well in its broad reception as a process of learning and seeking with others. As Christians, we are called to take into consideration the syncretism of our times and the seasonal transformations of our ideas, but also our weakness to fully conceive of God's reality. This means that the exclusion of others, a tendency that increases in direct proportion to the stress we place on social difference, is not in agreement with the Christian spirit. However, in order for us to fully and authentically respond to this call, an understanding of Christian monotheism must be clarified first among Christians themselves, so that their debates with other religions might be based securely on dogmatic theology.

Skepticism has shown itself to be an ineffective stance in interreligious dialogue. Indeed, skepticism can prove dangerous – an attitude provoking conflict rather than understanding. In all cases, the concomitant social and

⁶⁵ See also G. Mantzaridis, *Ethics*, (in Greek), 279-80.

⁶⁶ See N. Matsoukas, "The Economy of the Holy Spirit (the Standpoint of Orthodox Theology)," in *The Ecumenical Review* 41 (1989): 398-405, here 403.

possible political affiliations and crosscurrents that emerge in the self-representations of any religious group within a multicultural society must be taken into serious consideration, particularly where restoration of "original" values and practices becomes a primary concern, as we have seen with some "fundamentalist" groups within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. All too often, the push for this type of "restoration" takes place at the expense of critical thought and open dialogue, as Alain Finkielkraut⁶⁷ has noted, nearly guaranteeing the kind of violence that has already left its bloody traces in European history.

Exclusion and anathema, exile and violence, do not belong to the kingdom of God, because God is, energetically, love. God does not wish for the death of the sinner, but for his repentance and his God-inspired life. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogues are a natural expression of such a hermeneutic viewpoint, and, instead of being disregarded or obstructed, their contribution to theological and dialogical training must be acknowledged, most especially for their power of suasion in civil confrontation with agnostic culture. If, therefore, contemporary, global, multicultural society is in need of a moral religious authority,⁶⁸ then Christianity has a great theological and social responsibility to stress the soteriological power of the Christian message for all of humankind, not only for Christians.

The Christian world faces a crucial question: whether it will successfully respond to the call to spread the evangelical message of salvation within contemporary society. The question may be simplified: Exclusiveness or Inclusiveness? The answer is not irrelevant to Christological soteriology, and looking backward, toward "restoration" in reversion to the Scholastic past, is no alternative, because it is incomprehensible in today's multicultural world.

⁶⁷ A. Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris, 1987).

⁶⁸ Mahmoud-Abedin, "Islam," 305.